

KRACEK

A Novel

VITO TOMASINO

Books by Vito Tomasino

Non-fiction

Sabre the Journey

Close Calls and Other Neat Stories

Fiction

Kracek



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CONTENTS

| Chap | Title | Page |
|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | Map of South Vietnam | 4 |
| 1 | Dual in a Rice Paddy | 10 |
| 2 | Tactical Approach | 32 |
| 3 | Renee | 46 |
| 4 | Commander's Meeting | 56 |
| 5 | Whitfield's Revelations | 63 |
| 6 | Bien Hoa Hospital | 79 |
| 7 | Incident at the 'O' Club | 90 |
| 8 | Reflections of War | 114 |
| 9 | Dinner with Renee | 131 |
| 10 | First Kiss | 148 |
| 11 | Commander's Reprimand | 151 |
| 12 | Whitfield's Advice | 155 |
| 13 | The Pilot's Lounge | 177 |
| 14 | Flight Briefing | 185 |

| | | |
|----|-----------------------|-----|
| 15 | The Mig Kills | 197 |
| 16 | A Hero's Welcome | 212 |
| 17 | General's Debrief | 223 |
| 18 | Tan San Nhut Terminal | 233 |
| 19 | A Day to Remember | 237 |
| 20 | Departing Saigon | 254 |
| 21 | Pan Am Flight 816 | 264 |
| 22 | Once a Marine | 292 |
| 23 | Guam Coffee Shop | 308 |
| 24 | Hawaii Leg | 317 |
| 25 | L.A. International | 322 |
| 26 | Washington D.C. | 327 |
| 27 | The Jefferson Hotel | 342 |
| 28 | Joint Session | 348 |
| 29 | The Oval Office | 372 |
| 30 | Dinner with Anil | 385 |
| 31 | A Fateful Decision | 412 |
| 32 | New York - Vietnam | 414 |
| 33 | The Capture | 456 |
| 34 | The Waldorf | 461 |
| 35 | Not My Enemy | 465 |
| 36 | Face of the Enemy | 479 |
| 37 | Pentagon Briefing | 496 |

Kracek by Vito Tomasino

| | | |
|----|--------------------|-----|
| 38 | Kracek's Surprise | 509 |
| 39 | The Rescue | 524 |
| 40 | Formation Recovery | 549 |

KRACEK

1

Dual in a Rice Paddy

Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam, 11Dec1965 Pre-dawn

Weapons personnel load fighter aircraft with bombs and rockets under the watchful eyes of their crew chiefs, blue maintenance vans, carrying parts and specialists, shuttle from one airplane to another; a scene repeated again and again, as Bien Hoa Air Base awakens to a new day. In a small alert trailer perched on the edge of the hectic flight-line activity two men calmly study the chess board between them.

“Your move, Viktor.”

“Patience, Bert, I’m still new at this game, and I learned very quickly that, if I wanted to win I had to slow down the pace.

“What pace? You haven’t made a move in forty minutes. I’m falling asleep here.”

“I wouldn’t do that. The last guy who did woke up to find himself in checkmate.” Kracek noticed something scurrying under the lounge chair. “What was that!”

“What?”

“Looked like a spider, a big hairy spider!

“Oh, that’s Tula, our resident Tarantula. She’s harmless. They found her in here a few days ago and keep her around for pest control.”

“Pest control? Jesus, Garelli, you should have told me.”

I just found out about it myself...thought I was the only one who didn’t know.

“Well, I didn’t and, harmless or not, she’s...” His words were drowned out by the blare of a klaxon horn, that sent the two men springing to their feet in automatic response, toppling the chess board between them. Kings, Queens, Bishops, and Pawns alike were left unceremoniously tumbling in their wake, as they burst through the trailer door into the fading darkness of the jungle night. They hit the tarmac running, matching each other stride for stride in the fifty yard dash to their aircraft.

Kracek cleared the first two rungs of the ladder from a dead run and practically vaulted into the cockpit. He tapped the engine start button before settling completely into the ejection seat, keeping one eye on the RPM gage as he slipped into his parachute harness and seat belt.

As the needle approached ten percent he urged the throttle “around the horn” into idle detent, igniting the raw fuel that was already pouring into the combustion chambers of the F-100’s powerful Pratt and Whitney jet engine, creating an explosion of raw energy that radiated through man and machine, bonding them in its fire.

He saw Garelli’s Crew Chief pull the chocks from his aircraft, and made his call: “Falcon, check in.”

“Falcon Two.”

“Tower, this is Falcon, scramble two.”

“Roger Falcon, cleared immediate takeoff, runway two seven, winds two-five-zero degrees at five knots,” Lt. Lafitte replied.

“Is that who I think it is, Donnelly?” Major Thompson asked.

“Captain Kracek? Yes sir...can’t mistake his voice. Unusually calm for a man about to fly into the dark to hit a target he would know almost nothing about until he got there.”

“I couldn’t have put it better, Sarge. I’ve sent many a pilot off into the black of night on missions that would challenge their flying skills in day operations. You can feel the added tension in their voices. He, on the other hand, makes it seem routine.”

“Yes sir, I know what you mean.”

“Did I ever tell you about the night he brought in a flight of three F-100’s to a partially lighted airfield with little more than fumes left in their fuel tanks?”

“Many times, Major, but I don’t believe Lieutenant Lafitte has had that privilege.”

Thompson looked at her, but thought better of it. “I’m afraid it will take more time than we’ve got. But, I will say this. That was the night I understood, for the first time, why I was in Vietnam. After his flight was safely on the ground, and before he cut his engine, he said: ‘Thanks, Tower. No one does it better.’

“Those few words—spoken by a man who had just saved a U.S. Army convoy from certain annihilation, then led his fuel-starved flight through a wall of thunderstorms to a safe recovery on a barely visible runway—reminded us of our role in this war, and gave it the meaning and purpose it had been missing.

“Notwithstanding the rhetoric mouthed by self-serving, agenda-driven politicians of the need to stop the spread of communism, or to defend an ally; disregarding the unpopularity of the war and its naïve young protestors in the states, I knew then why I needed to be here. It was to help guys like Kracek make it back—on that night, and every other night they put their lives on the line.

"That’s the man we are getting ready to send off now, on a mission not unlike the one I just described, the high risk yet meaningful kind he prefers. The Cong don’t know it yet, but they picked the wrong time to hit another one of our convoys. This has all the makings of another Kracek moment.

“So put the cards away people; no one will be playing gin rummy on this watch, not until Falcon is safely in the nest. Everyone clear

on that?”

“As a bell,” Donnelly said.

“1Lt. Renee Lafitte echoed Donnelly. Although it was her first combat shift, she was performing like a seasoned veteran; which didn’t surprise Thompson. He read her file and knew that she came highly recommended out of Barksdale. And, while the leap from the relatively slow moving operation of a B-52 base in Louisiana to the fast paced combat flying of one of the busiest airfields in the world was a stretch, she was proving equal to the challenge.

“Tower, Falcon is on the roll.”

“Roger, turn left after takeoff and fly a southwesterly heading until clear of Saigon. Upon intercepting the outbound course you’ll be cleared to Paris Control.” Lafitte turned to look at Major Thompson, who nodded his approval.

Established on course, Kracek switched to channel six and made his call. “Paris, this is Falcon, how do you read?”

“Loud and clear Falcon. We have you five miles southwest of Bien Hoa; maintain heading and continue climb to 12,000 feet.”

The radio exchange with Paris Control sounded so routine that Garelli had to remind himself he was on a combat mission. *They told me about this guy before I left Cannon. Hell, every fighter jock who knew him had a story to tell. They all respected his flying skills, but it was his calm under pressure that set him apart.*

Kracek interrupted Garelli's musing. "Falcon Two, go manual, 281.3."

"Falcon Two."

"Bird Dog this is Falcon, flight of two F-100's, how do you read, over?"

"Like music to my ears, Falcon. Say position."

"We're about three minutes out. What've you got?"

"An ambushed convoy in desperate need of the firepower you're carrying. But we have no flare-ship, and I'm all you've got for a Forward Air Controller."

"No problem, just tell us where you want it."

"Do you see the tracers coming from the gun positions on both sides of the convoy?"

"Hard to miss."

"Take them out first."

"Roger that. Falcon Two, set switches for bombs and take the southeast target. Don't press your release altitude."

The light of a full moon reflecting off the wet delta marshland provided all the illumination they needed to visually acquire the targets. With a little help from Bird Dog they could even sort out the good guys from the bad. The 750 pound bombs from both aircraft found their mark. The tracers stopped.

As they repositioned for a second pass, the embattled convoy commander had a chance to regroup his men. “Tanaka, concentrate your fire to the left; I’ve got the right,” Garrett shouted, then turned to his radio operator. “Tell Bird Dog to have the fighters strafe the trees on both sides of the road.”

Saldona called Bird Dog, who relayed the message to Falcon. “The guns are no longer a factor, but our guys are still under intense small arms fire. We need you to strafe both sides of the road as close to the convoy as you can get it.”

“Roger that, Bird Dog.”

Kracek and Garelli fired a barrage of high explosive cannon shells into the trees, so close to the road the beleaguered convoy was showered with thousands of pieces of torn up jungle. The Vietcong were forced to pull back, and Garrett wasted no time. “McQueen, White, take some men and get that lead truck off the road. The rest of you help the wounded into the good vehicles and mount up. We have to get out of here before they can regroup.”

Meanwhile, Falcon Two was hit by anti-aircraft fire as he pulled off his last strafing pass. “Falcon One, I’m hit!”

“Roger, two, head for home.” Kracek had already rolled in on Garelli’s shooters and wasn’t about to let them go unpunished. The enemy AAA crew heard him coming in and swung their guns around in a desperate attempt to ward off their inevitable fate. They bracketed his airplane with tracer rounds as he dove straight down the barrel of their gun. They missed...he didn’t.

Ignoring the display of fiery cannon shells that streaked by his canopy in apparent slow motion, Kracek never blinked. Not until his gun sight was dead on the target, and all release parameters were locked in, did he drop his last bomb. It found its mark like it had eyes, turning the offending gun into a smoldering wreck, and permanently retiring its crew.

Momentarily distracted from his own troubles, Garelli cheered when he saw the bomb hit. “Thanks, Lead. I don’t feel so bad now. I’m at your ten o’clock high. Instruments are reading normal, but I’m picking up some engine vibration.”

“I’ve got you...joining on your left wing.”

“Bird Dog, this is Falcon, my wingman’s been hit and we’re heading back to base.”

“Roger, Falcon, and thanks. If you didn’t show when you did I doubt we would be having this conversation.”

“Just doing our job, Dog.”

“Yeah, I know, and we’ll do ours...safe return, Falcon.”

“Same to you, my friend.”

Kracek pulled up on Two’s left wing to look him over, while Garelli dialed in the frequency for Bien Hoa’s Tacan. “I can’t get a lock on Bien Hoa.”

“That’s because one of the rounds took out your TACAN antenna. Say your airspeed.”

“I’m holding two ninety...no, make that three forty. Hell, it’s all over the place.”

“Set your throttle at ninety percent.” Kracek moved in closer. “I see a jagged tear where your pitot static port used to be. That explains the erratic airspeed.” He crossed under Garelli’s airplane to his right wing. “I’ll give you the bad news first. The hit to the afterburner section blew away half your eyelids; another shell went through the right wing tip, taking your nav light with it, and...”

“Jesus, Lead, is that all?”

“You didn’t let me finish. You’ve got a hole in your horizontal stabilizer big enough to crawl through, and your tail hook is down, probably jarred loose by the same round that clobbered the afterburner.”

“What’s the good news?”

“I never said there was any, but since you ask: you’re flying one of the best damned airplanes ever built, and we’re only twenty minutes away from a cold beer.”

“Enough small talk, I’m taking the lead.” Kracek nudged his throttle forward to slowly pass Garelli—pointing to himself and holding up one finger as he did. “Paris, this is Falcon, how do you read?”

“Loud and clear, Falcon. You’re eighty miles southwest of the field. Turn right heading zero-three-five degrees to set up for an approach to runway zero-nine. Weather is clear...winds calm.”

“Copy that. Falcon is declaring an emergency. My wingman’s aircraft is badly damaged. Request a straight-in formation approach.”

“Roger, Bird Dog called it in earlier. Bien Hoa has been alerted and the crash crew is in position. You’re cleared for a straight in approach.”

“Falcon Two, say fuel and status.”

“I’ve got about 2500 pounds, but my airspeed is still erratic, and the engine vibrations are beginning to sound like Beethoven’s worst nightmare. Aside from that, I’m doing great.”

“At least your sense of humor ain’t broke. But, you’ve got another problem. You’re a thousand pounds light. One of those triple “A” rounds must have punctured a fuel cell. I’m throttling back to reduce the flow. Keep your eye on the gauge.”

“Paris, this is Falcon. My wingman is losing fuel rapidly. If he can’t make it back to base he’ll need a ride home. Request a rescue chopper and fighter cover.”

“The chopper is already in the air, Falcon, but there are no fighters available. Everything we have is already committed.”

Kracek still had about half of his 20mm ammo left and wasn't going to leave Garelli until he could be picked up. “Roger, Paris. I'll provide the cover, you just get the chopper here.”

“Falcon Two, how's your fuel?”

“Fifteen hundred pounds and dropping fast.”

“It doesn't look good. You may have to get out and walk.”

“Just make sure my cab is waiting.”

“We've got that covered, partner.”

“Okay, Bert,” Garelli told himself, “you've never done this before, but you couldn't have a better man to lead you through it.” He wasn't through reassuring himself, when he saw the needle on his fuel gauge fall below eight hundred pounds. “Falcon One, my fuel just dropped below eight hundred.”

“Roger, there's no way you can make it home. We've got to find you a place to eject. Paris, we need a vector to the nearest clear area.”

“Turn left twenty degrees, Falcon. There's a section of rice paddies four miles ahead of you.”

“Falcon Two, Lead is slowing to two hundred and fifty knots and descending to three thousand feet. Paris, say position of rescue aircraft.”

“Five minutes out, heading straight for you.”

“Tell him to ‘firewall’ it. Two, the clearing is less than two miles dead ahead. Do you have it?”

“I think so, but if it’s that ‘postage stamp’ in the middle of those trees, it doesn’t look big enough.”

“It never does from up here,” Kracek quipped, trying to keep Garelli’s mind focused on what he had to do. “Take the lead, Two. Leave the power where it is and maintain altitude. When that ‘postage stamp’ disappears under your nose, eject.”

“I can’t do that, Lead.”

“Why not?”

“I just flamed out.”

“Jesus, Garelli! That’s it then, pull the handles and go.”

Falcon Lead moved up line abreast of his wingman to avoid being hit by the canopy, but it didn’t jettison. “What’s he waiting for?” Kracek asked himself. “Falcon Two, if you read me, eject now...that’s an order. Get the hell out of there, Bert!”

Still no reply from Garelli, yet he looked okay. He was about to call again when he saw the canopy separate from the crippled aircraft, followed by Garelli a second later. Kracek watched his chute deploy and circled to keep him in sight until he was safely on the ground.

“Paris, this is Falcon One, my wingman has ejected and is down in the southern third of the clearing. His position off the Bien Hoa Tacan is two-five-eight degrees at twenty three miles.”

Garelli checked in on his emergency radio. “Falcon One, this is Two, do you read?”

“Loud and clear...you okay?”

“Pretty much...a small gash in my left leg, but the bleeding’s stopped and nothing’s broken. Must’ve cut it on the way out. Where’s my cab?”

“A few minutes out...he’ll be here.”

“Good.” Garelli quickly scanned the area and realized that he was all alone in big open rice field. “Falcon One, I feel kinda exposed out here. I’m moving into the trees east of me.”

“Negative, Two, you could be running straight into our VC friends. Roll up your chute and get behind the nearest embankment before you’re spotted.”

“Roger that.” Garelli breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn’t afford any mistakes and welcomed any help he could get. But, before he could gather his chute, he heard the sound of automatic weapons and saw the water around him come alive from the impacting bullets. He and his chute hit the ground at the same time. “Christ! This is getting serious. Those guys are trying to kill me.”

“Falcon One, they’re shooting at me. I thought you said they were our friends.”

“Did I? I meant distant cousins. What’s their position?”

“The muzzle flashes came from the trees east of me.”

“That was their first mistake; they won’t live long enough to make another. Keep your head down, I’m coming in.”

Garelli wasn’t about to miss the action. He watched his leader roll into a diving left turn parallel to the trees and attack with all four 20mm cannons blazing away. At six thousand rounds a minute (every fifth one a tracer) it appeared as though a huge laser beam was slicing a path through the jungle with the precision of a surgeon’s scalpel. “Son of a bitch! That should get their attention.”

Kracek stopped them, but only momentarily. They would be back, and he would be there to greet them. He pulled up into a hard, ninety degree climbing right turn, then reversed left 270 degrees to realign himself with the target from the opposite direction—a maneuver the Thunderbirds used to keep the show close to the crowd.

“Lead, your pass took out the first group, but I’m still taking fire from the tree-line about fifty yards north of your last strike.”

“Copy that,” Kracek replied, as he “walked” another devastating volley through the trees.

The hail of bullets keeping Garelli pinned down suddenly stopped, but he was so engrossed in the enfolding drama that, if the pain in his cut leg hadn’t reminded him, he would have jumped up to cheer his leader on. “I think that finished them.”

“Don’t kid yourself, ‘Charlie’ doesn’t give up that easily. While they’re regrouping try to make it to the west edge of the clearing. If they start shooting again get back in the mud and stay there.”

“Roger, I’m on the move. Where’s that chopper?”

“Falcon flight, this is Chicago...someone call for a cab?”

“Chicago, Falcon One, glad you could make it. Your ‘fare’ can be picked up in a rice field, bearing two-five-eight degrees, twenty three miles off the Bien Hoa Tacan. What’s your position?”

“We’re two miles out, approaching from the northwest. We have the clearing in sight.”

“Falcon Two is about one hundred yards north of the south edge of the field, and he’s moving west. He’ll mark his position with smoke when he hears you coming in.”

“Roger on the smoke.”

“Falcon Two, Lead, did you copy that?”

“Roger. I’ve seen all the rice I want for a while. I’m ready for a steak and a cold beer at the ‘O’ Club.” As Garelli ended his call, he heard the familiar sound of AK-47’s, and dove behind the nearest embankment—but not fast enough. “God damn it! Falcon One, I’ve been hit.”

“How bad is it, Bert?”

“The bullet went clean through my left shoulder. It’s bleeding some, but doesn’t hurt. That’s the good news. The bad news is our ‘cousins’ have moved out of the woods, and they’re headed straight for me. Looks like a whole damn platoon of them.”

“I’m on it. Toss that smoke grenade and stay put. Chicago will be in to pick you up before I complete this pass.”

Garelli pulled the pin on the metal canister and tossed it as far as he could to the north of his position, hoping it would draw the fire away from him. Then he took out his .45 caliber automatic and chambered a round. He wasn’t just scared, he was pissed. “If I have to buy it here some of those bastards are coming with me.”

“Falcon One, this is Two, I’m thirty yards south of my smoke. The VC are a hundred yards east and moving in.”

“Not for long. Keep your head down.”

Garelli's pursuers looked up just in time to have the fear frozen on their faces as the Super Sabre's 20mm cannon shells tore into their bodies. Those that weren't killed outright tried to bury themselves in the water filled rice paddy.

Meanwhile, Chicago landed fifty yards west of Garelli's position near the edge of the trees. He made a run for it while the Vietcong were still eating mud, but covered only half the distance before he was hit again in the right leg. He went down hard. "Jesus, don't those guys know when to quit?"

"Sarge, he's been hit," the door gunner shouted.

"I saw it O'brien. Keep them busy. I'm going after him." His words trailed off behind him, as Chief Master Sergeant Jose Vasquez leaped into the rice field. Despite his size (six foot, 240 pounds) he was at Garelli's side in seconds and pulled him to his feet. When he saw that he wasn't able to walk, he hoisted him onto his back in a fireman's carry and sprinted back to the chopper, literally throwing him into O'Brien's arms. Diving in after him, he bellowed, "Get us out of here, Captain."

Johnson would have been happy to oblige, but he needed at least seventy five feet of altitude to clear the jungle canopy and move out of the line of fire. "O'brien, can you buy us some time?"

"I'm doing my best sir, but they keep coming."

Vasquez finished applying the tourniquet to Garelli's leg, grabbed his M-16, and joined O'Brien at the door. Bullets whizzed past their ears, tearing into the metal panels of the helicopter.

"Falcon, Chicago here, we've got your wingman. He's okay, but we're taking heavy fire...can't lift off."

"On my way, Chicago." Kracek rolled out of his turn, fixed what was left of the Vietcong platoon in his sight, and squeezed the trigger...nothing, only silence. His guns were jammed, and there was no time to set up for another pass. He pushed the nose down and headed straight for the advancing enemy. Using his aircraft as a weapon, he would either force them into the mud, or take their god-damned heads off. *The choice is theirs*, he thought, *but they aren't getting to that chopper*. "Chicago, tell your door gunner to hold fire until I'm clear."

"You got it, Falcon."

Kracek came in so low that the blast from his jet exhaust lifted the rice paddy water into a gigantic plume of muddy spray that towered above his aircraft. To the Vietcong, it seemed as though the angry fire breathing dragon had swooped down from the sky to crush them under an avalanche of water.

Despite their bold attempt to capture an American pilot, the terrifying sight of a sixteen ton metal monster coming at them at eyeball level with a mountain of water in tow, was more than they could cope with. Raw fear and the instinct to survive forced them to dive for cover.

But their leader—so enraged at being thwarted again from capturing the American pilot—defiantly stood his ground and emptied his AK-47 in a desperate attempt to shoot his antagonist down. For Lieutenant Than it wasn't just a war anymore, it was personal. Staring into the face of certain death, he saw his short tragic-filled life flash before him like a moving picture.

From the pitch black darkness of the earthen womb his father, mother and brother had created to protect him, he heard and felt the explosions of the South Vietnamese A1E fighter planes. He emerged from the improvised bomb shelter they made for him into a scene of death and destruction, the lone survivor of his village. No tears were shed that day. An intense hatred of the men that slaughtered his family and friends overwhelmed all other emotions. He knew what he had to do. He buried his family, gathered a small supply of food from the same storage hole that saved his life and strode into the jungle. He would find the Vietcong, help them in their struggle for a unified Vietnam, and exact his revenge.

Three days ago—seven years after the attack that killed his parents and brother—his beautiful wife and baby daughter were killed by the bombs of American F-100's, just like the one he was facing now. Thus, he had nothing to lose. The war, the reunification of North and South Vietnam, life itself, no longer held any meaning for him. Everyone he loved most was mercilessly taken from him. “If my life must end let it be here,” he heard himself say. The words echoed in his tortured mind as he lowered his spent weapon and awaited his imminent death.

“What’s he doing,” a bewildered O’Brien asked. “It’s like...like he’s resigned himself to his fate.”

“I don’t know,” Vasquez said, “but I think my Aztec ancestors would.”

Kracek saw the man confronting him as a true warrior, one ready to make the ultimate sacrifice in a final courageous stand—a kindred soul, whose life he could not take. “No my friend, not today, not by my hand.” He pulled up sharply, missing him by inches, but the tremendous force of the trailing water slammed into the Vietcong Leader and tossed him across the rice paddy like a child’s doll.

Though badly shaken, Than was on his feet in time to watch his reluctant executioner fly off. “Why?” He asked. “Why did you spare my life?”

Before the spray and mist of the man made tsunami had settled,

the rescue chopper cleared the jungle canopy and was out of harm's way. The American pilot had won. Than was left to ponder his own question.

He called in his men. "It's over; they have escaped. Now, we must tend to the wounded and bury our dead. Today you fought with courage and honor and I am proud to be your commander. Tomorrow...tomorrow we will fight again."

Most of the distraught faces that stared back at him as he spoke were even younger than his, but his words filled them with pride. No longer spoken with anger and impatience, they reflected a wisdom beyond his years. They saw the miraculous change in their young leader and now, more than ever, would follow him wherever he led.

2

Tactical Approach

Kracek flew over the rescue helicopter to check for damage before heading back to Bien Hoa. “Chicago, Falcon One, say status.”

“Falcon, Chicago, except for a dozen new ventilation holes we’re in pretty good shape. We can say the same for your wingman.”

“You guys earned your pay today, Chicago...drinks are on me.”

That got a rise out of Garelli, who was listening in on a spare headset. “No way, Lead, this is my party and I’m buying.”

“He doesn’t quit,” Kracek told himself. “We’re going to hold you to that, partner. See you on the ground, Chicago.”

“Roger, Falcon. We’ll be about twenty minutes behind you.”

Kracek switched over to Paris Control. “Paris, Falcon One, over.”

“Falcon, this is Paris, we have you eighteen miles south of the field. Steer zero-five-zero degrees and descend to five thousand feet.”

“Copy, Falcon descending to five thousand.”

“We’re setting you up for an approach to runway zero-nine. You are cleared to tower frequency.”

“Copy that, Paris.” Minutes later. “Bien Hoa, Falcon One turning a five mile initial for runway zero-nine.”

“Roger, Falcon, call the break.”

“Tower, Falcon requests clearance for a tactical approach.”

“Tactical approach? What’s that?” Lafitte asked.

“Haven’t got time to explain now, Lieutenant,” Major Thompson said. “Just clear him and watch.”

“Yes sir. Falcon, you’re cleared tactical approach for a full stop landing. Call base with gear down.”

“Will do, tower.” Kracek descended to about fifty feet above the ground and accelerated to 450 knots, aligning himself with the grassy area between the tower and the left side of the runway. If something should go wrong—such as an external fuel tank coming off—the infield would absorb it without serious damage. As he passed the runway’s end, he pulled up sharply, executed an aileron roll, then a hard 180 degree climbing left turn to downwind, rolling out at pattern altitude and airspeed—an impressive maneuver even without the roll.

Lt. Lafitte couldn’t believe her eyes. The B-52’s at Barksdale never maneuvered like that. “Major, is that what you call a tactical approach?”

“No, not me Lieutenant, him. You won’t see anyone else doing it.”

She was interrupted by Kracek before she could ask another question.

“Falcon One turning base with ‘three in the green,’ full stop.”

Lafitte never took her eyes off him as he completed a tight turn to final and deployed his drag chute before his main wheels touched the runway—another technique she had not seen before. He could have cleared the active at midfield, but continued to the end of the runway for de-arming. She turned to Major Thompson with a look on her face that seemed to ask him to explain what she had just witnessed. He just smiled.

Kracek taxied back to the alert area where he was guided into the parking slot by his crew chief, who quickly chocked the wheels and reset all safety pins. After cutting the engine, he and the Chief completed a post flight inspection and filled out the Aircraft Maintenance Form. Everything was okay, but Kracek had one more item to take care of. “Looks good, Brax...fill her up and reload. She’ll be going again before the day’s over. I could use a lift to the helicopter pad.”

“Yes sir, but what happened out there? We heard that Falcon Two was hit and had to eject. Did Lt. Garelli get out okay? Did they pick him up?”

Before Kracek could answer, Garelli’s crew chief, Airman First Class Tyrone Chandler had been waiting patiently while they completed the post flight checks and could no longer contain himself. “Jesus Christ, Captain, what happened to my pilot?”

“Sorry, gents. I should have known that you’d be as worried about him as I am. Lt. Garelli took a few rounds from an AK-47, but he’s going to be all right. The rescue chopper is bringing him in now.

Airman Chandler, who didn’t know the Captain as well as his friend, was surprised by his response. Officers don’t usually apologize to enlisted men, and it made him uneasy, even a little guilty, about asking questions that may have sounded more like demands. *Brax was right about this guy, he thought. My demand for information bordered on insubordination. Any other officer would have quickly put me in my place.*

No apologies needed, sir,” Brax replied. “We were out of line to press you for answers, particularly after what you’ve just been through.”

“That’s right sir,” Chandler quickly added.

Kracek smiled and put the two men at ease. “If you hadn’t asked, I would not only have been disappointed, I would have been worried.”

“Thanks, Captain,” a relieved Brax said. “Then you wouldn’t mind filling us in on the details while we flag down your ride?”

“Of course not. We were scrambled to provide close air support for a special forces convoy that had been ambushed by the Vietcong. They were outnumbered and pinned down by automatic weapons, which we took out on our first bomb runs, but their anti-aircraft gun didn’t open up until Garelli pulled off his second strafing pass. They kept it hidden until they thought we had expended all of our bombs, a tactic I saw them use on a previous mission. This time, though, I saved one of my bombs.”

“Did you get the bastards, sir?” Airman Chandler asked, excitedly.

“Damned sure did. That gun and crew will never fire another shot in anger. Unfortunately, they had already done their damage. Garelli’s plane was badly crippled, and we were forced to leave the target area early; but not before giving our guys enough breathing room to regroup the convoy.

Kracek described the multiple hits to Garelli’s airplane, and his ejection. He also told them what happened in the rice paddy, but his version left out all of the superlatives that would be used by others to describe what turned out to be a very memorable Delta sunrise. Yet, he spared no praise for the skill and bravery of the rescue crew, his wingman, the troops in the convoy, and the Army pilot. “I’ve never witnessed, first hand, the kind of courage they displayed out there this morning.

“What’s more, that Vietcong platoon leader and his men were no less courageous in their efforts to capture Lt. Garelli. We won this round, but they’ll be back.”

“Did you say the Vietcong are courageous, sir?” Brax asked, thinking he may not have heard him correctly.

“I did, and if you had been there you’d know why. We think of the Vietcong as our enemy—as we would anyone who happened to be on the opposing side in a war—but they are really no different from you and me. Like us, they were put into a lousy situation not of their own making, and were just trying to do their jobs. Does that make them less human?”

“I see what you mean, sir,” Braxton said. “I never thought about it that way.”

Airman Chandler was listening with special interest. Born and raised in East L.A., he knew from personal experience about racial prejudice, how it can rob people of their dignity and alienate whole communities. He hated it and what it did to his family and friends. Even he didn’t realize, until he heard the Captain’s words, that maybe he did see the enemy as something other than human. *Am I guilty of prejudice?* He silently wondered.

Before Braxton could flag down a maintenance vehicle, a blue four door pickup truck pulled in. It was Lt. Col Whitfield, the 429th Squadron Commander, and Major Pitts, his Operations Officer. “Viktor.” Whitfield called.

Kracek turned at the sound of his name, walked over to the driver’s side of the vehicle, and saluted.

Whitfield returned the salute. “How are you?”

“Couldn’t be better, sir. It’s Bert I’m worried about.”

“So are we. Hop in. We were heading over to the rescue choppers and thought you might need a ride.”

Viktor put his chute and helmet in the bed of the pickup and climbed into the back seat. Before he could get comfortable, he was verbally attacked by the Major.

Pitts was assigned to Vietnam after spending the last three years buried behind a desk in some obscure Pentagon office. He was good at staff work, and did a credible job of flight scheduling, but he had little knowledge of combat operations, and his flying skill in the F-100 was undistinguished at best. However, he was smart enough to recognize his shortcomings, and only scheduled himself for low risk, daytime missions.

As for dealing with real fighter pilots, he didn't have a clue. "Captain Kracek, what you did out there was way out of line. It violated every regulation in the book. I want a full written report on my desk by 1600 hours this afternoon."

"You'll have your report, Major, but can you be more specific? Which 'out there' are you referring to, the air support mission itself, or the successful rescue of a brave fighter pilot who damn near gave his own life to save our army friends?"

Kracek knew Pitts was referring to his tactical landing. It was the only thing about the mission he could even begin to critique. But, he wasn't in a tolerant mood. The only thing that concerned him was his wingman.

"Kracek!" Pitts' voice suddenly jumped to higher pitch. "Your remarks border on insubordination and I won't..."

Whitfield cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "Gentlemen, this isn't the time or the place. Emotions are running high, and things might be said now that will be regretted later. Viktor, you will have that written report on my desk by 0800 hours tomorrow morning and provide a copy for the Major. I'll need a verbal debrief from you as soon as we get back to squadron ops."

The Colonel's use of Kracek's first name was not lost on Pitts, and he had to wonder about his own position. His political instincts cautioned him to back off. In a feeble attempt to salvage a few points for himself he said: "You're absolutely right, sir. Things will be seen in a clearer perspective after we've had some time to reflect upon them."

Whitfield gave him a look that registered his displeasure, if not disgust, then turned his attention back to the crowded parking ramp. He didn't like the Major very much. He saw him as just another Pentagon spawned bureaucrat with little understanding and no appreciation of what goes on in the trenches; nor any idea of what real fighting men are all about. His primary objective was to get his "war ticket" punched. Whitfield simply wanted to get the job done. For that, he needed all the Kracek's and Garelli's he could get. Pitts, on the other hand, could disappear tomorrow and he wouldn't be missed. Hell, things would run better without him.

Lt. Col. Bill Whitfield was one of the last of a dying breed of commanders who understood these things all too well. His entire military career (twenty three years and counting) was spent in fighter aircraft, and encompassed three major conflicts.

During World War II, as a 2nd Lieutenant flying P-51's out of England and France, he shot down twenty eight German aircraft—including the Me-262, the world's first operational jet fighter. With five of them stenciled on the side of his P-51 he became the first Army Air Corps pilot to become an "Ace" against jet aircraft, and the only one to have accomplished the feat in a prop-driven airplane.

Seven years later, Captain Whitfield, flying the new U.S. Air Force F-86 Sabre Jet, became a triple "Ace," racking up seventeen kills against North Korean MIG 15's and 17's. Thus, if his place in fighter pilot history wasn't already established by his record in World War II, his Mig tally in Korea ensured his place at the 'Table of Eagles.'

He commanded the respect of every fighter pilot that knew him. But, Kracek was his own man, already recognized by his peers as "Top Gun." He didn't earn that level of respect by being in awe of anyone.

And—as you might expect from a man like Whitfield—that's what he liked best about his young protégé. In him, he saw a man who loved to fly, who continually pushed the limits of the envelope to perfect his flying skills; a man who wanted not only to do the job, but do it better. Indeed, he saw himself twenty years ago.

Nevertheless he was concerned, that because of his single-minded focus on mission accomplishment, Kracek would not always be understood or appreciated by his peers, and even less so by some of his supervisors and commanders. Major Pitts is just one of many that he will have to be wary of in his Air Force career.

The rescue helicopter carrying Lt. Garelli was touching down as they pulled up. Whitfield stopped the pickup short of the landing pad near the awaiting ambulance. They got out, but waited until Captain Johnson cut the engine before walking in a half crouch under the rotating blades to the open side door of the H-43. Sgt. Vasquez was helping Garelli onto the stretcher when he saw them approaching. He saluted sharply.

Whitfield returned his salute. "Carry on Sergeant. After what you did this day I should be saluting you."

He stood aside while Vasquez, O'Brien, and two of the medics lifted the wounded man onto the stretcher and started an IV. Garelli protested weakly, mumbling something about being able to make it under his own power, but no one took him seriously.

"Just let them do their work, son; they've done a fair job of it so far."

"Good point, Colonel. The pain killer the Chief gave me must have clouded my judgment."

“I doubt it, Bert, but it’s good to see that the one thing the Vietcong couldn’t damage is your sense of humor.”

Garelli smiled. “Not a chance sir.”

“How’re you doin’ partner?” Kracek asked.

“I’ve had better days, Lead. But, thanks to you and the Chicago gang, I’m still here to talk about it. It’s gonna make one helluva war story.”

Kracek shook his head, smiling. “Yeah, I can’t wait to hear it myself.”

“Sir, if it’s okay with you, I’ll ride in the ambulance.”

“You go ahead, Viktor, we’ll meet you at the hospital.”

Whitfield and Pitts walked back to their vehicle, as the medics closed the ambulance doors and drove off with lights flashing. Pitts started to climb into the passenger side of the pickup.

“Hold on Major, we’ve got some unfinished business here. Come with me.” He and Pitts walked back to the rescue chopper. Captain Johnson, Chief Master Sergeant Vasquez, and Staff Sergeant O’Brien were watching the ambulance drive across the tarmac, and did not see Whitfield and Pitts approach from behind. “You did good men,” Johnson said. “We can all be proud of this one.”

“Allow me to second that, Captain.”

They turned to see the Colonel and the Major, snapped to attention and saluted.

“At ease, gentlemen. I wanted thank you for saving one of my pilots, and to get your version of events while they’re still fresh in your minds. I know that there was nothing routine about this mission, and I want to hear about it from your perspective.”

3

Renee

Kracek was on his feet before the alarm could ring a second time—a conditioned reflex drilled into him during his three years with the Marines, and reinforced by another ten in the Air Force. Vietnam, and the challenge of combat flying, kept his reflexes at a razors edge.

He stretched briefly, then walked across the small nondescript room to its only window, where he was greeted by yet another sunrise. He had seen many, but the infinite variety of its displays never ceased to fascinate him. The light of the slowly rising golden orb swept across the jungle landscape into his room, bathing his muscular physique in its glow.

The ancient Greeks' belief in the need to maintain a sound mind and a sound body was adopted by Kracek when he was only a boy, and he kept himself in top physical condition with the same dedication he devoted to his flying. He was also aware of the practical benefits of it improving the odds of survival if he ever had to walk home. Thus, his exercise regimen was as necessary to him as breathing, and he constantly strove to improve it by taking the best of what he learned over the years from the martial arts, yoga, and calisthenics to fashion his own unique system.

He looked forward to the mornings. They not only revitalized him physically, but reaffirmed his belief that the world is still a good place to be, despite the senseless damage we do to it. *No matter how many sunrises I see, no matter the country or setting, it's always the same*, he mused. *Today it's Vietnam, a country torn apart by a war that nobody seems to understand, or want. I doubt that Ho Chi Minh is as uncertain in his purpose as we are.*

The guerilla leader I faced in that rice paddy demonstrated a level of commitment and bravery I've seen in few other men. If there are many more like him out there we're in for a long hard battle.

Despite the tired rhetoric of our generals and politicians, who profess to see "the light at the end of the tunnel," all I see is more tunnel.

Kracek interrupted his own thoughts. “No time for this... too much to do today.” He stepped back from the window and eased into a Kung Fu “horse stance” to begin his exercise routine. A tiny gecko, perched in the same corner of the room as the day before, watched.

After a shave and shower he put on a clean flying suit and stepped out of the quarters he had called home for the past three months. The early morning air was humid, but not as uncomfortably warm as it would be in a few hours. It smelled clean and fresh, and seemed to energize every cell in his body with each breath he took. He looked forward to breakfast and a good cup of coffee.

Another day, and I'm still here to enjoy it. I'm either doing something right, or nobody up there wants me. I'd like to think it's the former, but either one is acceptable. His self-effacing humor evoked an involuntary smile that was still there when he saw her—a striking, raven haired figure in Air Force blues. She carried herself with the self assurance of a woman who had earned her place in a predominantly male world, compromising nothing.

As they drew closer, he saw that she wore her hair in a bun. However, neither that, nor the less than flattering uniform she wore, could hide her feminine beauty. He took note of her high cheek bones, perfectly formed nose and mouth, and wide set eyes. Their color...too far away to tell.

Lafitte had noticed him first, and made her own appraisal: handsome, brown hair, deep set eyes—the color of which she couldn't quite make out—a nose that had probably been broken at one time, and a mouth that not only complimented his other features, but is smiling. *Interesting*, she thought. *Any man who can smile while walking alone at this hour of the morning, in a country half a world removed from his own, has got to have something going for him.*

Nearing the entrance to the club she noted the athletic body under the loose fitting flying suit he was wearing, and the confidence in his step. “Good morning sir,” she said, saluting. *Brown, his eyes are light brown. No, not brown, more of a hazel color, encircled by a light, gray-green outer rim. Unusual, like the man, perhaps.*

“Good morning, Lieutenant.” Her voice sounded familiar. *Yes, she was in the tower*, he recalled. “How are you this fine Vietnam morning?”

That voice, I've heard it before...Falcon One. “I'm fine, sir. How are you, Captain Kracek?”

“Couldn't be better, but how did you...?”

“Know your name? We met yesterday.” She was pleasantly surprised by his almost boyish reaction at hearing his name from a perfect stranger.

“Yesterday? Did I miss something?” Kracek played along. He had already placed her voice, but didn’t want to spoil her apparent delight at beating him in the voice recognition game.

“I don’t think so. I was in the tower yesterday morning when Falcon flight was scrambled. We merely exchanged a few innocent transmissions.”

“Right. I wasn’t expecting a woman’s voice. I thought Major Thompson had either been drinking too much coffee, or was a little anxious about seeing me off again.”

She laughed aloud. *A sense of humor too*, she mused. “Yes, I know. He told me about you.”

Her spontaneous laughter at his less than inspired humor was refreshing. It awakened feelings within him that he hadn’t felt in a long time, and he found himself drawn to her.

Before he could ask, she extended her hand. “Renee Lafitte.” She didn’t include her rank because it was obvious, and she disliked redundancy.

“Viktor,” he said, taking her hand. “But you already know that.” Her hand was soft, but her grip was firm. “Join me for breakfast?”

“Why not? You look harmless enough without your airplane.”

He reached to open the door. “After you, Lieutenant.”

To her surprise, she didn’t hesitate, but smiled and stepped inside. “Thank you, Captain.”

Although she never considered herself a feminist, she believed in their cause, if not their method. Still, she had not allowed a man to open a door for her in a long time; nor could she remember the last time one had offered. Most of the men she knew were put off by the feminist movement, even threatened by it.

Obviously comfortable in his own skin, this man's simple act of courtesy was without pretense. To refuse it—it seemed to her—would have been rude. None of this was lost on Kracek, whose attraction to her increased with each new exchange.

At the restaurant they are met by the hostess. “Good morning monsieur, mademoiselle.”

“Good morning, Mai,” he said.

Mai was a petite young Vietnamese woman with long straight black hair, dark haunting eyes, and the exquisite face of a porcelain doll. She was wearing a pink, sheer, full-length, long-sleeved silk gown, fitted with a high neck collar and slit to the waist on both sides—the traditional costume of her country. Worn underneath is what can best be described as a pair of white silk pajamas. The outer dress itself is usually white, but may also be seen in light pastel colors.

Whether the girl who wore the Ao Dai was riding a bike, or strolling down a sidewalk, to Kracek, it exuded femininity and was the perfect complement to the exotic beauty and sensuality of the Vietnamese woman. Watching Mai lead them to their table, brought to mind the life-sized nude statue of a young girl he had seen in a Saigon art exhibition. *She could have been the model*, he mused.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Renee asked.

“What? Oh...sorry Lieutenant; I didn’t mean to be rude. My mind just wandered off for a minute.”

Renee was naturally curious, but didn’t think it proper to ask what it was that distracted him.

“This table do, sir?” Mai asked, in heavily accented English.

Kracek nodded his approval and thanked her.

As they seated themselves in the padded wicker chairs she handed them menus. “I send waiter...hope you enjoy breakfast,” she said, smiling demurely. Warmed by her smile, Kracek looked into her usually deflected eyes. It brought a blush to her face that she was unable to hide before turning to walk away.

“Why, Captain Kracek, I think she likes you,” Renee observed.

“Mai? I don’t think so. She’s very shy, and very young...only twenty one.”

“I’d say that’s old enough, wouldn’t you?” Renee was enjoying his embarrassment. She found it refreshing. “I’ve heard a lot about your flying skills since I arrived at Bien Hoa, Captain, but no one ever mentioned your talent with the ladies.”

Kracek wasn’t expecting her to be so direct. After all, they just met. Nonetheless, her candor and perceptiveness made her even more appealing. *I’ll have to be a bit more guarded*, he mused. “Renee...” He paused deliberately. “May I call you Renee?”

The disarmingly innocent question, delivered with pretended modesty, left her momentarily speechless, and gave him back the advantage in their friendly tête-à-tête. The look on her face was his reward.

“My friends call me Viktor. And, now that we’re properly introduced, there’s no reason to be so formal, at least not off duty.”

“But, Captain Kracek, I...do you think...I mean...”

“He interrupted before she could find the words. “Yes, I do think it would be all right, but if it makes you uncomfortable...”

“Not at all,” she replied, quickly regaining her composure.

“Then it’s settled, Renee.” He repeated her name with emphasis and offered his hand to seal the agreement.

“Yes it is, Viktor,” she said, as she shook his hand—already wondering what the future held for them.

When they finished breakfast, Kracek didn't try to pick up the check, realizing she might not be comfortable with it. She was grateful he didn't, not wanting a silly debate over who should pay for breakfast, to spoil what she secretly hoped would be the start of a budding relationship.

He left several dollars in script on the table. "I hate to rush off, but I've got an eight o'clock meeting with the Commander. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"No thanks, Sergeant Donnelly will be picking me up."

"Then I'd better be going."

"What about your wingman?"

"My wingman?"

"How is he doing?"

"Bert? Well, except for a cut leg, a flesh wound to the left shoulder, and a bullet through the right leg, he's doing great. He was in good spirits when I left him last night. The round in his thigh took a small chip out of the femur, which grounded him for a few weeks, but the flight surgeon expects him to make a full recovery."

"I'd like to meet him."

"You will." He starts to leave, then stops and turns back.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

“For asking, and for your company. It’s been a long time since I shared breakfast with a beautiful woman.”

Renee felt herself blush, but, curiously, wasn’t embarrassed. Normally, she would have been annoyed with her reaction. On this morning, however, she felt as though she had rediscovered a part of her female side that she hadn’t been in touch with since high school. She was afraid, that four years of LSU ROTC, and her rather strict military training, had buried it forever, and was pleasantly surprised to find that it was still intact. *This is all your fault, Viktor Kracek.* The thought brought a smile to her lips.

Regaining her composure, she said: “I was right, you are a charmer. Have a nice day, Captain.”

He was grateful she let him off the hook so easily, but he couldn’t leave without first knowing when, or if, he would see her again. “Will I see you again?”

“It’s a small base,” she replied.

“How about tonight...dinner?”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“The club at nineteen hundred hours?”

“I’ll be there.”

4

Commander's Meeting

The door was open but Kracek, observing military protocol, knocked on its wooden frame before walking in.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Viktor.” Whitfield said, returning his salute. “Close the door behind you and sit down. Coffee?”

“No thanks, Colonel, I just had breakfast.”

The Commander's office was small, sparsely furnished, with a window that gave him a view of the flight line. A map of Vietnam was displayed on the wall behind him and an electric fan stood in the rear corner of the room.

On his desk was a picture of his wife and a model of the F-86—the plane he flew in Korea. Kracek handed him the report and sat himself in one of the two chairs in front of the desk.

Whitfield was a handsome, distinguished looking man in his early forties, with brown hair, graying at the temples, and piercing blue eyes. Looking into them one could easily imagine how he became one of our greatest fighter aces. He leafed through a few pages of the report and laid it down. "I'll go through this later. First, I'd like to hear it again from you, this time with all the details you couldn't get into yesterday when we were interrupted by General Simmons' call.

Kracek had anticipated Whitfield's request. "It was about 0520 hours when we were scrambled and..."

"No, not from the beginning. What interests me more is your encounter with that Vietcong platoon leader. What really happened out there?"

He began again. “Well sir, when Sergeant Vasquez carried Garelli back to the chopper Chicago became the primary target, and the combined fire power of the door gunner and the Chief’s M16 wasn’t enough to stop the “Cong.” They were probably more afraid of their leader than they were of taking a bullet.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no short answer, but maybe it will become clear as I tell the story.”

Whitfield settles back in his gray swivel chair.

“I rolled in for another pass thinking that, fear or no fear, there was no way they were going to walk through the wall of steel the “Hun” can lay down with all four cannons firing at once. But, when I squeezed the trigger nothing happened. My overheated guns were jammed and there was no time to come back around on the chance they might cool down enough to finish the job.

“Chicago was about to be overrun and needed less than ten seconds to clear the area. If I could force the VC to worry more about me then them I could buy the time they needed. So, I dropped down to eyeball level and flew straight at the men in the field, hoping it would distract them long to allow the rescue chopper to make good its escape.”

“You knew, of course,” Whitfield interjected, “that if your impromptu little stunt itself didn’t kill you, hitting any of the men in that rice paddy would have brought you down with them.”

“I didn’t have time to think about that, Colonel.”

Whitfield smiled. “No, I guess you didn’t. Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“It worked.”

“Yes, it did. However, I talked to the chopper pilot, Captain Johnson, after you drove off in the ambulance with Garelli.”

Whitfield paused to get Kracek’s reaction. He got none. *This guy is good*, he thought. *He’s cool even when he’s not getting shot at.*

The story I got from him and his crew was far more interesting than yours.”

“From where they were sitting, it may have appeared more hairy than it really was, Colonel.”

Whitfield couldn't help smiling again, anticipating his reaction, but he wasn't going to let him off so easily. "Viktor, I'm well aware of your penchant for understatement, for treating every mission as though it were routine; but this time there were too many witnesses. Johnson told me he had never seen anything like it in all his years of flying. He said you were so low on that final pass, that the blast from your jet exhaust whipped the rice paddy into a towering rooster tail of mud and water; that it looked as if you were going to fly right through the Vietcong platoon. That true?"

"It was an option, sir. I was hoping they'd duck first, and they did—all but their leader."

"Yes, he said that too. Did he really square off against you with nothing more than an AK-47?"

"He did, sir...gutsiest thing I've ever seen."

Kracek's words, and the apparent respect he held for his antagonist did not go unnoticed by Whitfield. He had always known him to be a thinking man's fighter pilot, but attributed it to his in depth knowledge of weapons and tactics, and his ongoing effort to perfect the latter. This was different. It revealed a philosophical side to him he had not seen before. *Any man who can see his enemy not as a faceless killer, but as a fellow human being, possesses qualities rarely seen on or off the battlefield.* "Go on."

“I don’t think I can add much more to what you’ve already heard, sir.”

“Viktor!”

Kracek saw that the Colonel’s patience was wearing thin and quickly relented. “Yes, if necessary, I would have I flown straight through them if they hadn’t buried themselves in that rice paddy. Their leader, however, stood his ground, firing his weapon at me. I tried to imagine how it may have appeared to him, and envisioned a huge flying dragon descending from the sky with its tail dragging through the flooded rice paddies.”

“I believe he was so filled with rage over his inability to reach Garelli that his anger was stronger than his fear. I can’t explain it, but I could feel it in the cockpit.” He paused, replaying the scene in his mind.

Whitfield waited for him to continue.

“I was as mad as he was, ready to fly right through him, and his body language was telling me that that is exactly what I would have to do to stop him. Had I done so, he probably would have taken me down with him. Any part of him going through my engine would have destroyed it. At that point I didn’t care anymore than he did. The strange part is he suddenly stopped firing, lowered his weapon, and waited.”

“Waited? For what?”

“I don’t know, for me, I guess...his executioner. Yet, despite how it might have looked to others, it wasn’t simply an act of a defeated man, frustrated over his failure to capture an American pilot; nor was it an act of defiance.”

“How could you know that?”

“I can’t explain, sir, but it was the way he stood there, as if all of his anger had been suddenly drained away. He...he seemed at peace.”

“At peace? How could you possibly see all that? You were coming at him at more than five hundred miles an hour, no more than five feet above the ground.”

“The sun was well above the horizon by then, but I was ‘seeing’ him on a level that had nothing to do with the lighting conditions.”

“It still doesn’t explain how you...”

“Yes sir, I know. There’s no logical explanation, but, crazy as it sounds, I could sense what he was feeling, and it was clearer to me than what my eyes were seeing. The instant he lowered his weapon I knew I couldn’t kill him. I pulled up in time to miss him, but he may have been injured by the jet blast and impact of the water trailing behind me.”

“He wasn’t,” Whitfield was grateful he could provide some information to ease his concern. “The Chicago crew had the best seat in the house, and they told me your ‘friend’ never wavered. He was blown across the rice paddy by your jet blast and trailing water, but was on his feet in time to watch you fly away.

“The way Chicago described it, it was as though no one in that field existed but you and that Vietcong commander. It’s the most remarkable story I have heard come out of this war. What do you make of it?”

“I haven’t figured that one out yet, sir, but whatever it was that transpired between us was a good thing.” Kracek paused for a moment, then added: “We both lived to fight another day. More than that I’m not prepared to say.”

5

Whitfield's Revelations

Whitfield pondered Kracek's last remark before speaking.

“Viktor, what I'm about to tell you is something I haven't told anyone but my wife and a few close friends. I want you to hear it now. It involves an encounter I had with a MIG-15 pilot during the Korean War.

“We were three four ship flights of F-86 Sabre Jets, on a fighter sweep of the airspace known as MIG Alley, just south of the Yalu River. Leading our group was none other than Col. Frank J. Petkowski, the top American ace of World War II, and already a Korean ace. I was leading the second flight, still looking for my fifth kill. The third flight was led by 1Lt. David Bell, an outstanding young fighter pilot, who was also looking for his fifth.

“Bell was first to spot the MIGs at two o’clock high. They outnumbered us four to one, but weren’t looking for a fight that day. They knew that we were under orders not to engage them north of the Yalu and were content to watch us from their ‘safe haven.’ Well, they may have been content, but Petkowski didn’t become the greatest living ace in Air Force history by waiting for something to happen. He made it happen.

“Turning north, he pulled us straight up into that huge formation of MIGs, scattering them all over the sky. His unexpected attack took them—and us—by surprise, and effectively neutralized their numerical advantage.

“On that day, Petkowski added three more enemy aircraft to his total; Bell and I each got two. Our group chalked up a total of thirteen confirmed kills, with five damaged. The remainder of the Mig’s escaped to the north, but not before they did some damage of their own.

“We lost two F-86’s. One of them was Bell. He was hit...smoke was trailing from his burning aircraft. I broke off the MIG I was tracking to cover him if he had to bail out and, if he did, make sure he made it safely to the ground. As I moved in closer I could see that the fire was about to engulf the cockpit and told him to eject. He didn’t answer, but turned south trying to make it across the border into South Korea.

His canopy was shattered and covered with blood...so much blood. Yet, despite his wounds, he was still conscious and able to control the aircraft until it flamed out. Seconds later I saw him slump against the canopy. He never got out, but he made it back into South Korea before going down with his aircraft.

“I tried to stay with him to get a radio fix on the crash site, but the MIG-15 pilot I let escape earlier had apparently followed me, and was rapidly closing within gun range. With my airspeed reduced to stay with Bell, I would have been an easy kill. If there was ever a time to try a new evasive tactic I had been working on, that was it.

“I slammed the throttle forward and I pushed over into a negative ‘g’ condition, allowing me to quickly regain maneuvering speed, while making it difficult for the Mig pilot to track and shoot. Before he could adjust to that condition, I pulled up into a rolling vertical climb. Then, while still inverted with good flying speed, I pulled back down to a point just below the horizon. Anyone trying to follow me would assume I was going to continue pulling positive ‘g’s’ and complete a classic ‘Split S.’

That’s what the Mig pilot thought, but he was always a step behind. I waited for him to commit, then, while still inverted, momentarily pushed the stick forward into a negative ‘g’ condition, and abruptly transitioned into a ‘High G Barrel Roll, forcing him to overshoot.

“As he slid out in front of me I opened up with all six fifty caliber guns. The burst tore off his right wing and his plane exploded in a ball of fire. The pilot got out, but the wind would decide on which side of the Yalu his chute would take him.”

Viktor, hung on Whitfield's every word, trying to form a mental picture of the maneuver he was describing. He didn't want to interrupt, but couldn't contain himself. "Christ, Colonel, that was your third kill!"

"Yes, and it was costly. I was so close when I fired I couldn't pull up in time to avoid the debris from his aircraft. Some of it went through my intake and destroyed enough turbine blades to make it all but impossible to make it back to Osan Air Base. As it turned out, that was the least of my problems.

"Barely able to hold minimum flying speed, and with my engine about to quit, I was like a ship dead in the water. Before I had a chance to worry about it, my world literally exploded around me. The next thing I remember is falling through the sky, still strapped to my ejection seat. Instinctively, I unbuckled the lap belt, kicked free of the seat, and pulled the ripcord.

"The good news was, that the chute opened and I was over South Korea. The bad news was that the explosion was caused by multiple hits from the 23mm cannon shells of a Mig-15, the same one circling me as I floated helplessly to the ground—the wingman of the pilot I had just shot down.

“While his leader and I were going at it, he wisely stayed high to see how things played out before getting back into the fight. It was obvious that he wanted more than just another F-86 kill to his credit, he wanted me, and he was coming in to finish the job. In what I thought would be my last act, I took out my .45 automatic and waited. He was coming straight at me. One burst from his cannons and I would have been history, but he didn’t fire. Instead, he pulled up just in time to miss me, but close enough to partially collapse my chute with his jet exhaust. It was unintentional.”

“Why would you think that, sir?”

“Because as I struggled to re-inflate my chute he came back, this time crossing level in front of me, far enough away to avoid spilling my chute again, yet close enough to where I could see him in the cockpit. He looked straight at me and saluted. I returned his salute and watched him turn north across the Yalu. It was the strangest encounter I ever had in that war, or any other I’ve been in. I’ll never forget it or, more importantly, what I learned from it.”

Kracek observed Whitfield’s face as he was speaking and saw his expression change from that of a gutsy young fighter pilot reliving a life and death air battle, to that of a wiser, more mature man who, given his life, came away from the experience with more questions about war, and the so-called enemy, than answers. Neither is as black and white as our political leaders would have us believe.

“That’s an amazing story, sir. The similarities between our experiences in two different wars is amazing.”

“That’s why I wanted you to hear it, Viktor. What happened between you and that Vietcong platoon leader was as real and as significant as what happened between me and that MIG pilot. The situations were reversed, but the outcomes were the same. In both cases, warrior instincts were tempered by an even stronger humanity. As a result, we all lived to fight again—hopefully for a more noble cause.”

Viktor could hardly believe what he was hearing from a man he held in the highest regard. He wanted nothing more in his career than to achieve the same level of flying excellence as he. These new revelations by his mentor magnified his stature in his eyes. Until that moment he had only known him as a legendary fighter pilot and leader. “Thanks for sharing your story, Colonel. It means a lot to me.”

“I knew it would. I’ve told others, but not in the same detail, and without revealing my personal feelings. You’re one of only two people to hear the full account. My wife was is the other. You understand why.”

“I do, sir, but few others would. My report also leaves out my personal feelings about the incident.”

“Good. I had to be sure of that before Major Pitts got hold of it, and before sending a copy to 7th Air Force.”

“7th Air Force?”

“Yes. Your mission wasn’t exactly routine. I doubt that it will stop there. You’ve already built quite a reputation for yourself in this war, and you can be assured that every time your name is seen on the flying schedule posted at headquarters it’s given special attention.”

“I’m just trying to do my job, sir.”

“I know. However, most of the sorties we fly in this war are almost as routine as going out to the gunnery range at home. You seem to get more than your share of the other kind. They’ll probably have to rewrite the text book for this one. I almost forgot, how is that coming?”

“Fine, sir. Much of what I put in my report will be going into the study. It will also be going into the weekly bulletin. I hope to complete it before we leave Vietnam, so that the squadron replacing us won’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

“It’s an ambitious project, but if anyone can do it I’m sure you can. Now, there’s another matter I’d like to discuss with you, Garelli.”

“Garelli?” Kracek’s face reflected both surprise and relief. He thought the Colonel was about to ask him to explain his tactical approach.

“Yes. I talked to the flight surgeon just before you got here and he told me that he would be grounded for about a month. It would take that long for his wounds to fully heal. If I know Bert he’s not going to be easy to live with if he can’t fly. I think it best for him, and us, that he spend that time with his wife and kids. They’ll be worried sick about him when they hear what happened, and they need to see he’s going to be just fine.”

Deep in thought, Kracek’s response was noticeably slow. “Sorry, sir. I was just thinking about what you said. I couldn’t agree more.”

“Good. There is one more item. How would you feel about sending him to the Fighter Weapons School at Nellis Air Force Base, your alma mater?”

The smile on Kracek’s face said it all.

“I thought you’d like the idea.”

“Yes sir, so will Bert. He’ll be competing against the top fighter jocks in the Air Force, in the toughest flying school out there, but he’s one of our best young pilots and more than up to the challenge. It wouldn’t surprise me if he brought back the ‘Top Gun’ trophy.”

“Your endorsement is all I needed. We’ll get him into the January class, right after his home leave.”

Whitfield paused deliberately. "Oh, I almost forgot...about yesterday's approach and landing. Major Thompson described it to me. It didn't sound like the standard tactical approach flown in today's Air Force."

"No sir, it wasn't an approved maneuver. I added an extra twist."

"Yes, I know about the unsanctioned aileron rolls. Care to explain?"

"Well sir, I could tell you that after the mission the adrenalin was still running high and I needed something to bring me down. For me, acrobatics works better than a pill. But that wasn't it."

"I'm listening."

"Three reasons: one, to celebrate the success of our mission, in which we not only prevented our guys from being overrun by the Vietcong, but kept a damn good man from falling into their hands; two, for the crew chiefs tower operators, armament crews, supply personnel, and all the others we depend on to do our jobs who are too often taken for granted; three, tradition, one honored by fighter pilots since World War I. But I don't have to tell you that, you practically invented it."

Whitfield smiled. “I didn’t, but you’re right. In World War II—that’s as far back as I go, by the way—and in Korea, we all did similar stunts over the field after returning from a mission, for the same reasons you just stated. We called them ‘Victory Rolls.’ Your innovative flying style would have fit right in. Unfortunately, those days are behind us.

“Back then the commander might have called you in to critique your low level acrobatic technique and even offer some pointers. Today, he’d be compelled to ground you and take some form of disciplinary action. I don’t ever want to be put in that position.

“Viktor, you’re one of the best young fighter pilots I’ve seen come along since my good friend David Bell. Your reputation as a professional officer and pilot have already established you as a leader among your peers, and this is just the beginning. You’ve got a bright, rewarding future ahead of you, and I for one would like to see you fulfill that potential.

“But, this is a new Air Force. Some of the people you encounter in your career may not be as understanding, or as appreciative of your talent. They may even see you as a threat, particularly if they’re not secure in their own position. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I do sir, though I will admit I didn’t realize things were as bleak as you paint them.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t. Your focus has always been on improving your flying skills and getting the job done. It’s what enabled you to do what you did in that rice paddy yesterday morning. But, the politics of a Air Force career are very real. To ignore them is to risk losing all that you’ve worked so hard to achieve. You have too much to offer to let that happen...for us to let that happen.”

Kracek was visibly moved by the Colonel’s words. Never before had anyone of his stature taken the time to explain the political hazards of a military career—though he was aware of them. It was often a subject of conversation among the guys at the bar. Fighter pilots, however, are not known for their political acumen, and he never took anything they had to say seriously, especially over a few beers. From this man, however, a man who epitomized the fighter pilot he hoped to become, they take on a whole new meaning.

“Viktor.”

“Yes sir...I...”

“You seemed deep in thought.”

“You’ve given me a lot to think about. I was certainly aware of the politics of a military career, but I just never had it spelled it out to me the way you just did. I don’t know what to say, except, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, about your reasons for yesterday’s one man air show. The first explanation you gave me will be the official one, agreed?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. If headquarters does have any questions about it, I’m sure this simple, honest answer will be enough to ease their concern. In fact, they’ll be looking for a reason—any reason—to drop the matter.”

“Why is that, sir?”

“That’s a good question. Consider this your first lesson in Air Force politics. As you know, this war is highly controversial. The U.S. Congress is divided on the issue and it does not have the majority support of the American public.”

“Yes sir, but what does it have to do with...”

“Hear me out. A little background history is necessary to make my point.”

Kracek looked at him, then settled back into his chair.

Whitfield continued: “The ‘hawks’ in Congress, encouraged by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, convinced President Johnson, McNamara, and others in the executive branch, that we had to get into the war with a full commitment of air and ground forces or lose South Vietnam to the communists.

“The still prevailing theory in Washington—originally put forth by President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles—was that, if Vietnam fell to communism, all of South East Asia would follow...the so-called ‘Domino Theory.’ Regardless of its questionable premise, no president was willing to put it to the test, certainly not Johnson, who has stated publicly that he did not want to go down in history as the first American president to lose a war.

“By the summer of 1964, we were no longer fighting Vietcong guerillas in small skirmishes, but North Vietnamese regulars of battalion, and even regiment size. The 25,000 advisors we had here at the time weren’t nearly enough. The generals won their argument. They got their war, but they never convinced the majority of our people, not to mention Congress, that it was the right thing to do. Now, in the middle of fighting the war, they must continually find ways to justify it.

“For the most part, they relied on clever rhetoric and statistical sleight of hand to do it. But, how many times can you use tired old phrases like, ‘We can see the light at the end of tunnel,’ before the American people see it for the bureaucratic smokescreen it is? No, the general’s needed something more tangible, more universally accepted as a positive. They needed heroes.”

“Heroes?”

“You bet. There is nothing Americans love more than their heroes, and you, my friend, fit that bill. I’m not surprised that you don’t see anything you do as heroic, it’s not your style. Nevertheless a lot of other people do, including myself. You not only prevented the almost certain annihilation of one of our convoys, you saved your wingman from being captured—not to mention the rescue crew that risked their lives to pull him out of that rice paddy.”

“They’re the real heroes, Colonel.”

“They are, and they will be recognized for their actions. You and I know, that no other group in Vietnam is more deserving of the title ‘hero’ than Search and Rescue. Nevertheless, there are too many witnesses to your most recent exploit to dismiss it so lightly. I can assure you that, in their reports, the generals will not.

“They have their hero, one they didn’t have to manufacture; whose deeds need not even be embellished for the media. Hell, they may have trouble just trying to sell the truth. That’ll be a switch.

“I’m not sure how they’ll use this bit of good fortune, but you can bet they will. I’m almost sorry to be the one to tell you, because I know you’d prefer be left alone to do your job. Unfortunately, that’s not going to happen. Your whole world is about to change. You should prepare yourself for it.

“On the positive side, this is a rare opportunity, one that will open doors that can further your career and enable you to accomplish even more. It’s one of those rare instances when the politics of the situation are actually working for you. My advice, if you don’t mind my offering, is to take full advantage of it. Timing is just as important in the political arena as it is in our business. This is your time.”

The Colonel finished what he wanted to say, but Kracek was still trying to assimilate all that he had just heard. “Obviously, I wasn’t expecting anything like this. I’m going to need more time to digest it. But, if I read you correctly, time is a luxury I don’t have. I’ll have to trust my instincts, and your advice, which tell me to go with it, whatever *it* is.”

“Viktor, if you had reacted in any other way, I would have been disappointed. We’ll talk about this again. For now, it’s time we paid a visit to your wingman.”

Whitfield got out of his chair and started for the door, then stopped. “That new maneuver you added to the tactical landing pattern...think you could show it to me sometime?”

“My pleasure, Colonel.”

6

Bien Hoa Hospital

Bien Hoa Hospital is a tiled roof, single story, wooden structure built by the French colonialists before the Japanese occupation of World War II, and rebuilt again in the mid fifties by the French with some interesting innovations.

An aerial view of the original hospital would reveal four long narrow buildings joined together in the shape of a perfect square. In its center was a courtyard filled with tropical flora native to Vietnam, with the exception of its southwest section. It is home to a beautiful rose garden—no doubt imported from France. Tall palm trees, strategically placed within the yard, provide welcome shade against the hot tropical sun.

Stones pathways wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair wind their way through a multitude of exotic colors and scents, and radiate out from a circular walk that once surrounded a large octagonal wooden gazebo in the center of the yard—its top crowned with the same red tiles used for the main building. The courtyard gave patients, staff, and visitors a place of refuge where the beauty of nature could calm their minds—a Zen approach to healing.

At the end of World War II and the expulsion of the Japanese, another war was brought to the fore—one in progress even before the other had ended, the French/Indo-China War. Ho Chi Minh was more determined than ever to see that the French colonialists met the same fate as the Japanese in his quest to reunite North and South Vietnam. As a result the patient load increased, requiring additional hospital facilities.

With no external room to expand on the existing structure the French were forced to use part of the courtyard area. Thus, the gazebo, walkways, and much of the tropical gardens were sacrificed to make room for the new addition, which was built in the center of the courtyard and connected to the original hospital by enclosed corridors on all four sides.

Central to the new structure were four state of the art operating theaters. Its outer rooms faced smaller, but still beautiful gardens, and housed intensive care patients, x-ray, lab, and other surgical support facilities. The rose garden remained, as did the four large palm trees. The architectural changes blended in so perfectly with the old, that anyone who didn't know its history would believe it to be part of the original design.

Whitfield and Kracek walked up to the reception desk, where a pretty Vietnamese nurse and a U.S. Air Force medic were engaged in a one-sided conversation, with the airman doing all the talking. The girl was obviously uncomfortable with it.

“Airman,” Whitfield snapped, “is this your assigned duty station?”

“Er...no sir, I...I'm on a break.”

“Airman Earnhart, is it?” The name tag sewn over the right shirt pocket of the young man's green fatigues told him as much.

“Yes sir!” He said sharply, as he snapped to attention. “Airman First Class John W. Earnhart, sir!”

“Well, Airman, I suggest you take your break somewhere else and let this young lady to do her job.”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry, sir...I...” Sensing the futility of trying to explain his actions with words that kept failing him, Earnhart saluted sharply, did an abrupt about face, and walked away as fast as his legs could carry him.

Kracek was impressed with how the Colonel handled the situation. Except for a bruised ego, no damage was done.

“Nurse we’re looking for Lt. Garelli. Can you tell us what room he’s in?” Whitfield asked.

“Yes sir. He put in intensive care after surgery. Room number 110.”

“How do we get there?”

“I know where it is sir,” Kracek said.

“Of course. Thank you, Miss, and I apologize for the Airman’s conduct. If he bothers you again please let me know.”

“Oh, no sir, I thank you. He not bad man. I not want make trouble for him.” She was grateful for his concern, but even more worried that she may have gotten the airman in trouble.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I think he got my message.”

They went around the reception desk and into the connecting corridor that led through the courtyard into the central building. Both men had been in the new addition before, but never really took notice of the gardens surrounding it. They were struck by the contrasts in vegetation.

On the left was a display of roses in every imaginable color; so beautiful, one could believe they were transplanted from the famous gardens of Vitelle, France. Given that Vietnam was once a French colony, it's quite possible they were. To their right, in dramatic contrast to the "Vitelle Corner," was a infinite variety of native flowers and green leafed plants, arranged by the hands of a master gardener. Huge orchids, wet with dew, glistened in the early morning sun.

"We take a left here, sir. Garelli's room is two doors down."

His door was open. The room had two beds, each with its own window looking out into the rose garden. Bert was sitting up in the bed on the right, immersed in the view outside and didn't see them come in.

"Good morning, Bert," Whitfield said, as they entered the room.

Garelli turned with a surprised look on his face. He wasn't expecting visitors so early. "Good morning Colonel, Viktor. How are you?"

“We’re fine,” Whitfield answered. “More importantly, how are you?”

“Much better sir, now that they’ve taken all the lead out of me. Have you seen my scars?”

“No, but I think that can wait until the bandages come off, don’t you?”

“You’re right, it would be more effective if I unveiled it at beer call at the Officer’s Club. I’d have a much bigger audience.”

They laughed. For Bert, getting someone to laugh was like self-prescribed medicine.

Sounds like you’ve been using the time here to polish your stand-up comedy routine,” Kracek quipped. “How the hell are you, Bert?”

“Guess I can’t help myself, partner. Except for a few new holes here and there I’m doing good. The ‘doc’ told me I was lucky to be alive.”

“He doesn’t know how lucky.”

“Yeah, he wasn’t there. But he did say, that if the round I took in the leg had been just a few centimeters off it could have severed a major artery. If it had, Sergeant Vasquez might have risked his life for a dead man. As it is, I’ll be walking with a slight limp for awhile, but barring complications he’ll release me in a day or two. I’m ready now.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Whitfield said, “but the doctor knows what he’s doing. Resting in here awhile longer, soaking up all that beautiful scenery out there, is probably the best therapy for you right now.”

“It’s something else, isn’t it sir? Reminds me of my wedding day. Did you know you that Nancey and I were married in a rose garden?”

“No, I didn’t, but I’d like to hear about it?” Whitfield had a knack for getting people to relax, to draw them out. By putting them at ease they revealed things to him that they would be reluctant to tell anyone else. As a commander he often found this kind of information to be very useful. However, it took time and patience. The patience he had in abundance...the time, well, he made the time.

“It was her idea. Nancey loves roses and when she saw this little park in town, she knew it was where would be married. The roses surrounded the top of a large grassy mound and were in different shades of reds, pinks, and whites.”

They listened politely as Bert, never at loss for words, filled them in on all the details. “... set amidst rolling hills of green grass were several old oak trees and a creek that wound its way through the area. Then, losing himself in his memories, he fell silent for a moment.

“Now I understand why you were so preoccupied with the view outside your window,” Whitfield said.

“Yes, sir. I’ve never seen Nancey so happy.”

“And how is that beautiful wife of yours?”

“She’s good, sir, thank you...talked to her just last week. She told me that the kids keep her so busy she doesn’t have time to think about me much.” Garelli thought about that for a moment. His face took on a worried expression. “Think that’s true, Colonel?”

“Not a chance. But, if Bert junior is anything like his dad, I’m sure he’s providing her with a healthy amount of distraction; tempered, perhaps, by Carolyn’s quiet nature. How are those kids?”

Garelli was surprised that the Colonel remembered the names of his children. He couldn’t remember talking to him about his family before, but given his propensity to talk about his kids at the slightest excuse he supposed he had. “They’re both fine, sir. Thanks for asking. Carolyn is already two, and little Bert will be celebrating his fourth birthday in ten days. Nancey wants to give him a surprise party. I’m sorry I’ll have to miss it.”

“You won’t.”

“I won’t? But... ”

“You’re going home as soon as you’ve been given a clean bill of health by the flight surgeon.”

Garelli was about to say something, but Whitfield cut him off. “Don’t bother to protest, it’s all settled. You’ll be grounded for several weeks in any case, and not much use to us here. Captain Kracek and I agree that it would be time better spent with your family. So, it looks like little Bert will have an even bigger surprise than the one Nancey is planning for him.”

Garelli was going to say something about being in Vietnam less than thirty days, but he thought better of it. Besides, how could he turn down a chance to be with his family on his son’s birthday?

“Bert...Bert,” Whitfield repeated to jar him out of his reverie.

“Sorry, sir. It’s just that I wasn’t expecting anything like this, not so soon after arriving in country. I was just getting used to the place.”

“No need to worry about that. It’ll still be here when you get back; so will this war.” The somber tone of Whitfield’s voice did not go unnoticed.

“You’re right, sir.” Garelli had his own unanswered questions about the war, but decided it was not the time to engage in that conversation.

“We haven’t told you all the good news yet,” Whitfield added.

“There’s more? I mean you’re sending me home to my wife and kids to be there for my son’s birthday. How much better can it get?”

“I wouldn’t say it was better, but how does an assignment to the Fighter Weapons School sound?”

“The Fighter Weapons School?” Garelli wasn’t sure he could believe what he had just heard.

“That’s right. You’re scheduled to attend the next class at Nellis after your leave is over. They’re cutting your orders now. What do you think?”

“What do I think? It’s great. But, am I eligible? There must be ten other guys in the squadron with seniority over me. Viktor, did you have anything to do with this?”

“You bet he did.” Whitfield said. “There are other pilots senior to you, but given the special circumstances, and Viktor’s solid endorsement, I moved you to the top of the list. The others will understand.” He realized as soon as the words left his mouth that it wasn’t exactly true. Major Pitts was against it. He had his own favorites.

“Colonel, I don’t know how to thank you...to thank the both of you.”

“Just do the same job there as you’ve been doing here,” Kracek said. “The rest will take care of itself.”

Garelli looked at the two men without speaking for several long seconds, trying to think of something more to say than, “I will, sir.” It was enough.

Kracek and Whitfield drove directly back to squadron, pleased with how everything went, and happy in the knowledge that Bert would make a full recovery.

“Bert looks good, doesn’t he Viktor? He was in good spirits when we got there, and I think the news we brought him raised them a bit higher.”

“I agree, sir. I’ve never known anyone with a more positive attitude than Bert. He’s a good man. We’ll miss him.”

“He’ll be back...better than ever. As for you, take the rest of the day off. You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks, Colonel. But, if it’s all the same with you I’ve got some research to do for my tactics study and I need to see some of the classified material we keep at the squadron.”

“Suit yourself, but only the morning. I don’t know how much of a grace period you’ll have before the generals cash in on their good fortune, so take advantage of the free time you have now.”

“What about Major Pitts, sir?”

“You leave him to me.”

7

Incident at the "O" Club

Kracek didn't stop working until late in the afternoon. As usual, his research led him into areas he hadn't anticipated. He looked at his watch...three thirty. *Enough of this*, he thought. He gathered up the classified documents, put them back in the safe, closed the heavy reinforced steel door and gave the dial a final spin. He left the squadron building—hoping he wouldn't run into Whitfield on the way out. He didn't.

Back in his quarters—his mind still preoccupied with the classified data he had been immersed in all day—he showered and shaved, and was about to put on a clean flying suit when he remembered his date with Renee. He went back to the closet and took his tan summer uniform off the rack. Although he hadn't worn it since he left the states, it looked to be in good shape—wings, ribbons, and emblems all in place. Dusting off his black dress shoes, he saw that the “spit shine” he gave them more than two months ago could still reflect his image.

It was 1730 hours when he walked into a very busy Officer's Club. “Happy Hour” was in full swing. The half priced drinks always brought an early crowd—not that any added incentive is needed in Vietnam. Mai was standing in the entrance to the dining room on the left side of the foyer.

“Hello, Mai, how's my favorite hostess this evening?”

“Oh, Captain Kracek, hello,” she said, blushing. Despite her shy nature she was always pleased to see him. Lafitte was right, she did like him. *He is a kind man, and so handsome.* She blushed at her own thoughts and the warm sensation that rose within her.. No other man made her feel these things.

She dared not believe that there could ever be more than a casual relationship between them, but was, nonetheless, grateful for his attention. He not only made her feel special, but safe. Perhaps it was that, more than anything else, that drew her to him. “I am well, thank you. And how are you, sir?”

As they exchanged greetings a constant stream of people passed by on their way to the bar. Most were Air Force fighter pilots in flying suits discussing the day’s missions and using their hands to describe the action. Some were wearing the same tan summer uniform as Kracek—probably non-flyers.

Air Force uniforms weren’t the only ones seen at the club. The U.S. Army were always well represented, as were the Green Berets, the Aussies, the Vietnamese Army and Air Force, and others. Not many women, but enough to keep things interesting.

“Fine, Mai. This is one night I’m really looking forward to.”

“This special occasion for you?”

“Sort of. Please reserve your best table for me and a guest?”

“Yes sir, what time?”

“Seven.”

“Very well, Captain. I look forward to greet you and your friend.”

Something in the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes told him that she was more than a little curious about who his guest might be. He was about to tell her, but decided the mystery would help keep her occupied until the “Happy Hour” crowd started filing into the restaurant for dinner. Mai, however, had already deduced that it could only be the same beautiful Lieutenant that was with him at breakfast.

Though her emotions were mixed, she was happy he found someone who could take his mind off the war. She was even happy for Lt. Lafitte—whom she liked—but sad for herself. *Why do I have these feelings?* She silently asked herself. *I know he will never see me as anything more than a hostess...a friend perhaps. For me, that must be enough.*

Kracek sensed that something was bothering her and took her hand in his. “Thank you, Mai.” They had never touched before, and it generated an electricity between them that neither anticipated. After what only seemed like a long time, he let her go and entered the bar.

It was packed. The people that had passed them in the foyer were the late comers. He looked for an empty seat, but the large horseshoe shaped mahogany bar had so many pairs of legs pressing against it you couldn't see the brass rail that circled its base. People were standing three deep trying to get one of the overworked bartenders to take their orders. All the tables were taken.

This was not good. The smoke was as bad as the noise. A quiet beer at Mai's place would suit him better. He started to walk out when somebody grabbed his arm.

"Viktor, where are you going? You just got here."

"Bert! For crying out loud, when did they let you out?"

"This afternoon, just in time for happy hour."

"It's good to see you on your feet again."

"Yeah. The "doc" couldn't take any more of my jokes. He practically kicked me out of his hospital."

Kracek smiled at the thought. "I can sympathize with him."

Bert winked. "Don't worry he'll get over it." He pointed with his cane to a table on the other side of the room. It had five chairs around it, only three were occupied.

As they approached, Kracek recognized the two pilots from the squadron, Lieutenants Harvey Towlan and Carl Monzone. They were classmates of Garelli and, like him, lived to fly. What they lacked in experience was more than offset by their youthful energy and willingness to do anything asked of them. He didn't know the third man, but the green beret laying on the table told him what he was.

“Viktor, you know Harvey and Carl.”

“Of course. How's it going Carl...Harvey?”

“Fine sir,” they replied in unison.

A tall, gangly blond, with boyish good looks and pale complexion, Harvey Towlan looked as though a strong wind could blow him away, but his cobalt blue eyes revealed the quiet strength of a man born and raised on the Montana prairie. He knew about hardship, and took life, and his job, very seriously.

Monzone, on the other hand, was about five six, with a powerfully built body a hurricane couldn't move. Already showing a receding hair line, his ruggedly handsome features and love of life reflect his Italian heritage; though he is quick to tell you that he is not Italian, but Sicilian. All the more reason for the other to jocks kid him about his Mafia roots.

Who can blame them. He could have stepped right out of an Al Capone movie, scar and all—though his is much smaller, and runs from the outer corner of his left eye to the middle of the left cheekbone. Carl takes the kidding in stride, but does it in a way that always leaves them wondering if he really does have a “God-Father” in Palermo.

They are good men—the kind you can count on when things get tough.

“You can drop the ‘sir’ here, gents, Viktor will do fine.”

“Yes, s...” They almost repeated their same mistake.

He held up his hand to stop them from breaking the ground rule he just established, then offered it as handshake to seal the agreement.

Harvey took his hand. “Viktor it is.” Gesturing to Monzone, he said: “This is my buddy, Al.”

“Al?” Kracek wasn’t expecting humor from the usually reserved Towlan.

“Yeah, Al Capone,” he said with a wink that earned him a scowl from his friend.

Kracek played along. In his best mobster accent, he said: “Big Al, how ya doin? I hoid youse was in town, but didn’t tink to have the pleasure of meetin’ ya.” No one was more surprised than he at how easily he slipped into the mobster persona.

Seeing the laughs it was getting from everyone, Carl couldn't resist doing his impersonation of a Mafia Don from an old movie he saw. He took Kracek's hand in a vice-like grip and, in the same raspy voice used by the actor in that film, said, "Sure, I know you, you're Kracek, Viktor Kracek, the Eastern Assassin, from the Bataglia family in New York. Your reputation precedes you. Don Vincente is a trusted friend. Anything I can do to make your stay in our fair city more enjoyable you have only to ask."

He unlocked his grip of Kracek's hand and briefly considered turning his palm down exposing his class ring from the Air Force Academy, but thought it might be taking things too far.

The impromptu skit drew laughs from everyone, especially Bert. He also saw a side of his friend that he didn't know existed, and that pleased him even more. "Viktor, you never cease to amaze me. This may even top what you did over that rice paddy."

"I doubt that." The fifth man at the table said. His words, spoken in dead seriousness, changed the tone of the conversation.

"And you are...?" Kracek asked.

"He is 1st Lt 'Bat' Garrett, Army Special Forces," Bert said.

Garrett stood up to shake Kracek's hand. Over six foot tall, and two hundred pounds plus of solid muscle, he looked like he could have played line-backer for any number of pro football teams. His ruddy good looks, short-cropped red hair, and gray-green eyes left little doubt as to his Irish roots. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir!"

Kracek started to correct him, but realized from the tone of his words and body language, that this soldier was too well indoctrinated in military discipline and tradition to allow himself to address a senior officer as anything other than "sir" under any circumstance. "And I you, Lieutenant. Welcome to our club. I haven't seen you in here before."

"This is my first time, sir. When I got to Nam six months ago we landed at Bien Hoa, but only stayed long enough to change aircraft. They flew us right out in Huey's."

"Where are you based?"

"In the Delta, near Can Tho...the Third Special Forces."

"Can Tho?"

Kracek was about to make the connection when Garelli interrupted again. "Viktor, this is the guy who was in charge of that ambushed convoy."

“That’s right sir.” Garrett cut him off before he had a chance to preempt what he came to say personally. “I came here to thank you and Lt. Garelli for saving our lives. If you hadn’t gotten there when you did, I doubt I’d be standing here now, shaking your hand.”

“You’re giving us too much credit, Lieutenant. From what I’ve seen of the ‘Green Berets,’ I’d never count them out in any fire fight.”

“Thanks, Captain, neither would I. Even so, I’ve been in other ambushes. But, in this one the Vietcong split our convoy in half. We were out gunned and out manned. Without air support to even the odds, the chances of making it out of there were slim to none. By knocking out their automatic weapons, and killing a bunch more with your guns, you and Bert evened the odds. It was enough to give us the edge we needed to drive them back and regroup the convoy. The ‘Cong’ that survived your attack faded into the jungle before the next set of fighters arrived.”

“Bird Dog gets a lot of the credit for that,” Kracek added. “He spotted the targets for us as good as any Forward Air Controller I’ve ever worked with.”

“Yes sir. That was Lt. Col. “Joe” Martin, the most highly decorated soldier in the U.S. Army. His awards include the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross, and...”

“The Navy Cross?” Kracek asked.

“Yes. It was awarded to him by the U.S. Marines for his actions at the Chosen Reservoir in Korea. He earned the CMH in World War II. Add to that, three Silver Stars and a chest full of other decorations and campaign ribbons. Two of the Silver’s were earned since coming to Nam over a year ago. You may have heard of him.”

“Who hasn’t? He’s practically a legend in Vietnam. I’m honored to know that we worked together. I’d like to meet him.”

“He said as much about you, Captain, and asked me to tell you that he regretted that he was unable to be here to thank you and Lt. Garelli personally. He promised to make it another time.”

“I’ll look forward to it. By the way, Lieutenant, how did everything turn out?”

“We lost two vehicles, with only three casualties. Two were treated for superficial wounds and released, the third was air lifted to the hospital at Tan San Nhut. I saw him earlier today. He’s going to be fine, but his war is over.”

“That’s good to hear. You know, most of our missions don’t amount to much more than blindly dropping our bombs into a heavily wooded area where enemy troop concentrations, or arms caches are reported to be. Sometimes they’re there, sometimes they’re not. The FAC turns in his damage assessment report listing the number of enemy killed, but the only thing we see for our efforts is a section of torn up jungle and a lot of splintered trees. We refer to them as ‘toothpick missions.’

“Every so often, though not nearly often enough, we get a true close air support mission with a genuine purpose, the protection of our own troops. For a fighter pilot there is nothing more rewarding. One mission like that, especially when it turns out as well as yours, makes it all worthwhile.”

“Here, here,” Bert said, lifting his glass. “I couldn’t have said it better, partner.”

“I’ll second that,” Harvey said.

“Amen,” Monzone added.

All five men raised their glasses in toast and emptied them before putting them down.

“Gentlemen,” Garrett announced, “from this point on the drinks are on Colonel Martin and the 3rd Special Forces Company.”

“That won’t be necessary, Bat, we...”

“I’m sorry sir, but I’ll have to insist. I was given strict orders by the Colonel and every man in the convoy that you, Bert, and all those with you tonight are not to pay for a single drink.” Garrett added the last part, for the benefit of Harvey and Carl. “You understand, I can’t go back and tell him I failed to carry out his orders.”

“Well, when you put it that way...thank him for us, and let him know that anytime he or any of his men come to Bien Hoa they will be received as honored guests of the 429th Tactical Fighter Squadron.”

Almost on cue, a barmaid appeared at their table to take their order. Garrett had caught her attention while Kracek was talking. “Four beers and a coke please, mam,” he said to the strikingly attractive Vietnamese girl that took his order. The coke was for him. He was a Morman.

“Thank you, sir. When she spoke their eyes met, but she didn’t turn away demurely as most Asian girls would do. She was as taken with him as he was with her. She touched him in a way that he hadn’t experienced since his high school sweetheart agreed to go to the senior prom with him. “What’s your name, miss?”

“Mariko,” she said with a smile.

“Mariko? But, that’s not Vietnamese.”

“No sir. Father Japanese, mother, Vietnamese. I born Vietnam.”

“I see. My name is Samuel. These are my friends.”

“Don’t bother with introductions, Bat. Mariko knows just about everyone in the bar except you.”

“Captain Kracek right, Samuel-san. Now, I know you too.”

She turned to walk away. Garrett couldn’t take his eyes off her as she gracefully maneuvered her way through the crowded tables carrying a tray full of empty beer bottles and glasses. He was entranced by the beautiful straight black hair that reached below her tiny waistline, and followed her until she was out of sight—aware of no one else in the room.

Kracek watched him watching her. To get his attention he had to repeat his name twice, as though he were a hypnotist awakening his subject from a deep trance. “Bat...Bat.”

“Sorry sir, I didn’t...”

“No need to apologize, she’s a pretty girl. She apparently likes you. Half the guys in this room have made moves on her at one time or another, but as far as I know she has shot them all down. I never saw her this comfortable talking with a man until you.”

“You mean she doesn’t have a boyfriend?”

“Nope. Why? You interested?”

“Me? Well, I ... I was just asking.” Garrett’s face turned the same color as his hair.

Seeing his discomfort, Kracek changed the subject. “I am curious about something, though. You told Mariko your name was Samuel. Where did ‘Bat’ come from?”

“From my father, Samuel Garrett. Bat is short for Bataan, the middle name that he tacked on me after his return.”

“Let me guess. Your father is General Samuel R. Garrett, U.S. Army Vice Chief of Staff, a survivor of the infamous Bataan Death March.

“Yes sir. How did you know?”

“The connection wasn’t hard to make. I was only a boy at the time, but old enough to remember the newsreel images of it, and so many other tragedies and triumphs of World War II: Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Marines raising ‘old glory’ on Iwo Jima, MacArthur’s return to the Philippines, Hitler’s crowd stirring propaganda speeches at the Reichstag, B-17’s dropping thousands of bombs over Nazi Germany, braving flak so heavy you could walk on it, the Normandy Invasion, Dresden in flames, VJ Day. These, and countless other pictures like them were shown in every movie theater in the country, and were indelibly etched in my memory.”

Garrett politely waited for him to finish. “After his ordeal on Bataan, my Dad wanted to insure he would always be reminded of how fortunate he was, and that those who didn’t make it back would never be forgotten. What better way to do that than to name your son after the infamous event.”

“From what I know of your father, it sounds like something he’d do.”

“Mom argued against it. She didn’t want me saddled with that kind of baggage, but Dad had already made up his mind. So, Bataan became my middle name, which—after I joined the Army—soon took precedence. Most people don’t even know my first name.”

“Mariko does,” Carl pointed out.”

“Yes,” he said, wistfully. Thinking of her brought a smile to his usually taciturn face.

“Gentlemen,” Kracek offered, “a toast to all the brave men and women of the Bataan Death March, those who survived, and those who didn’t.”

“Here, here,” they responded, raising their glasses.

“Viktor Kracek, or should I say ‘The Great Kracek,’ fighter pilot extraordinaire. Or is it Captain America? Hell, they tell me you practically saved the goddamned planet yesterday.”

Kracek stood to face his bellicose antagonist. “I don’t know what you heard John, or who you heard it from, but its sounds like you got an exaggerated version of the story”

Captain John Brown and he had been rivals since their Aviation Cadet days, finishing one and two in their class, with Kracek taking the top spot. After advanced fighter training, in which he not only maintained his edge over Brown, but won the coveted ‘Top Gun’ trophy, the not so friendly competition between them was firmly established.

However, their perceived rivalry was one-sided. Kracek welcomed the challenge because it pushed him to a higher skill level, but he never saw it as the life and death struggle that Brown did. For him it was just a game, nothing personal. Ironically, it was probably his more casual attitude about the rivalry that gave him a psychological edge over his opponent, allowing him to compete without the added pressure of having to win every time out.

Not so for John Brown. For him it was very personal. Winning was everything. His father made that painfully clear to him by the time he was five years old, and to this day continues to remind him of it. “No son of mine will ever be satisfied with second place,” he would say. John Jr. was a naturally gifted athlete, who loved sports and would have excelled in anything he chose to play, but his father wanted more. His son had to be number one. Anything less made him a loser. That was unacceptable.

Brown starred in football, basketball, and track, setting state records in all three sports. The national high school record for the one hundred yard dash still belongs to him. Thus, he accomplished everything his father demanded of him, but at what cost? The little boy in him who loved sports for the pure fun of it was taken away, replaced by the man to whom winning was the only result from which he could derive any satisfaction.

John Sr. succeeded in making his son a champion, but, in the process, turned him into the same embittered man that he allowed himself to become, when at age eighteen he was struck down by polio, ending his own promising athletic career.

“I don’t think so, Kracek,” Brown retorted. “I think the version I got is right on, especially the part about you shining your ass over the field. What the hell did you think you were doing?”

One look at Major Pitts, who came in with Brown, told Kracek which version of the story Brown had gotten. He could also see that he had a few too many drinks and—his inhibitions sufficiently compromised—was in a confrontational mood. Given their history he wasn't surprised, but he had no intention of letting things get out of hand.

“Now is not a good time to discuss this, John...we have a guest with us. Why don't we talk about it tomorrow, at the squadron?”

“Don't patronize me, Kracek, I'm not drunk. I know what you're trying to do and I don't like it. What's more, I don't like you!”

Brown was visibly angered, and the threatening tone of his voice made it clear that he was looking for more than an exchange of words. By now, everyone in the bar had turned their attention to the commotion at Kracek's table, anticipating a fight.

Garrett had enough of the obnoxious drunk who dared insult the man who saved his life. He sprung to his feet. If Brown had made the slightest move toward Kracek it would have been his last. The fierceness of Garrett's stare and his imposing physical stature gave Brown reason to pause, but only momentarily.

“Well, well, Kracek, who is this, your bodyguard?”

Attempting to calm the situation, he ignored Brown's sarcasm and offered him a graceful way to back out of the hole he was digging for himself. "No, but he is a friend. I'd like you to meet Lt. Bat Garrett, Army Special Forces. Bat, this is Captain John Brown."

Realizing what Kracek was trying to do, Garrett gritted his teeth and extended his hand. But Brown was in no mood to accept a peace offering.

"What do you know, a real live Green Beret," Brown said, ignoring Garrett's outstretched hand. When did they start letting you gorillas out of your barbed wire cages?"

That did it. Nobody maligns the Green Berets. If he wasn't physically restrained by Garelli and Towlan it would have been all over for Brown.

Kracek held his hand out to stop him. "It's okay, Bat, I'll handle this. Captain Brown has had a little too much to drink. By tomorrow morning, he'll be sorry he ever said these things." He couldn't know how prophetic his words were.

"John, before you leave, I suggest you apologize to Lt. Garrett for your ill-considered remarks." Kracek's unsettling calm in the face of Brown's mounting rage, and now his demand for an apology, sent Brown over the edge.

“Apologize? You gotta be kidding. Fuck you and the goddamned Green Berets!” He followed his colorful epithet with a sneak right hand to Kracek’s jaw, but he wasn’t fast enough.

Kracek deflected it with his left forearm in a short circular movement and countered with a quick right to Brown’s exposed midsection. It was a sharp jab-like strike to the solar plexus with all of its energy channeled through the extended middle knuckle of his clenched fist. Delivered with lightning speed, it traveled less than ten inches and was all but unseen, even to those nearest the action. Its effect, however, was very visible.

Brown doubled up in pain, gasping for air from lungs that would no longer respond. Eyes wide with fear and disbelief, he was still trying to fathom what had happened to him as he dropped to his knees, then to all fours—his face drained of all color.

Those who saw what happened up close were still in shock, unable to comprehend what they had just witnessed. While they were still trying to sort it out in their minds, Kracek quickly stepped behind the man on the floor and pulled him into the kneeling position. With the heel of his right hand, he then delivered another precisely struck blow of equal force to a point on his back just opposite the solar plexus, reversing the respiratory paralysis and restoring lung function.

Able to breathe again Brown's facial color returned. The fear in his eyes changed to overwhelming relief at knowing he wasn't going to die.

Kracek kept a hand on his shoulder to encourage him to stay down until his breathing returned to normal, but it wasn't necessary. Brown was in no hurry to get up. When he did get to his feet, it wasn't gratitude reflected in his eyes as he glared at his old nemesis, but a hatred that went beyond anything Kracek had ever seen before.

They stared at each other without speaking for several long seconds, a silence only broken by Brown's labored breathing. The tension between them was raised to a new level. It seemed to all watching that they could easily come to blows again. But Brown knew when he was beaten.

Without a word he turned and walked out of the bar, shoulders squared and grim-faced, eyes peering into a world that only he could see, oblivious to everyone and everything around him, consumed by his own anger and thoughts of revenge.

During the exchange of words and blows between Kracek and Brown the room had gone totally quiet. Suddenly, it was abuzz again—this time not with idle chatter.

Pitts didn't leave with Brown. He was still in shock, trying to collect his wits. He was closer to the action than anyone, but even he could not see how it happened. "Kracek," he said, his voice trembling, "I don't know what you did, or how you did it, but you damned near killed a man tonight, and you'll be made to answer for it."

His instincts still in fight mode a grim-faced Kracek looked straight into Pitt's eyes with the intensity of a laser beam and, in a carefully measured tone said: "If I am, Major, you will be my key witness."

"The hell I will!"

"The hell you won't! No one saw more clearly what happened. I acted in self defense, and you would have no choice but to confirm that fact under oath. Furthermore, the man you claimed I almost killed just walked out of here under his own power with nothing more to show for his ordeal than a bruised ego. That's hardly life threatening."

"Captain, if you need another witness, you've got one," Bat said, his eyes fixed squarely on Pitts to insure he didn't miss the point.

"Count me in," Bert said. "Brown came in here looking for a fight, and when he saw that Viktor couldn't be provoked he threw the first punch. Big mistake!"

“That’s exactly the way it went down,” Monzone confirmed.

“I’ll second that,” Towlan said.

“So will I...and I...and I...” came a chorus of voices from the nearby tables.

Humiliated by his pathetic attempt to intimidate Kracek with such a ridiculous charge, Pitts desperately looked for a graceful exit. There was none. All eyes in the room were now on him.

Nervous and flustered, he said: “You think you’re so damn smart Kracek, but you haven’t heard the last of this.” It didn’t come out the way he intended. It was supposed to be more forceful, authoritative, if you will. He knew, however, that even if he could have taken it back, he had nothing better to offer. It wasn’t in him.

To everyone watching he came across as the insecure little man that he is. He seemed to grow even smaller in stature as he turned to walk out following the same path Brown had taken and, like him, studiously avoided eye contact with everyone in the room until he cleared the entrance to the bar.

8

Reflections of War

“Viktor, you have a real talent for bringing out the best in people.”

“You think so, Bert. I doubt that Mr. Carnegie would agree.” He knew what his friend was trying to do, but he was too keyed up to see the humor in it. He knew that Brown and Pitts disliked him, but, until now, he had no idea how deep their hatred went. It troubled him, not because he was afraid of anything they might do, but because he would have to divert more of his time and energy toward insuring they didn’t succeed.

Whitfield’s words played back in his mind: *“Some of the people you encounter in your career may not be as understanding, or as appreciative of your talent. They may even see you as a threat.”*

“Captain Kracek...sir...sir!” Garrett said, turning up the volume with each sir.

“Sorry, Bat...got lost in my thoughts.”

“Doing some after action analysis,” Bert suggested.

“Yeah, something like that,” Kracek said, his voice trailing off, his mind still preoccupied with what had just happened.

Before he could slip away again, Garrett asked: “What was that, sir?”

“What?”

“The technique you just used on Captain Brown. I never saw anything like it, and my Special Forces training included several different martial arts forms. With what looked like nothing more than a flick of your wrist you put the Captain on his knees, gasping for air. If you hadn’t acted as quickly as you did to counteract its effects he’d be dead.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry it happened. Unfortunately for him he caught me off guard and I reacted instinctively to defend myself. It’s a skill I learned from a Korean Hapkido master. Until now, I never had to use it in a real situation.”

“Hapkido?” Lt. Towlan asked.

“It’s one of the lesser known Korean martial arts forms. I had a chance to study it while I was stationed there.”

“You were in Korea?” Garrett asked.

“Yes, but I wasn’t flying then. I was with the U.S. Marines.”

“The Marines?” Monzone asked. “You were a Marine?”

“I sure was, Carl, and proud of it.”

“But...I mean...how did you...?”

“Wind up in the Air Force? “The war ended. More correctly, the truce was signed on July 27, 1953, just a few weeks after I got there. The DMZ was established at the 38th parallel, and we spent the next thirteen months digging new trench lines, building new bunkers and fighting positions, and laying miles of concertina barbed wire. There was training, of course, but even with all that I had time to learn a new martial art.

“What outfit were you in?” Monzone asked, excitedly.

“Able Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.”

“Jesus, that was my Dad’s outfit. Did you know him?”

“What’s his name?”

“Joseph, Staff Sergeant Joseph Monzone.”

“Was he a wiry little guy, about 130 pounds?”

“Yes sir, he was...still is.”

“Joe Monzone. Yeah, I did know him, he was our ace gunner. A few months before I got there, the 7th Regiment was involved in one of the bloodiest battles of the war. While a truce agreement was being hammered out in Panmunjom, the Chinese threw two divisions at us in an attempt to push us further south to reestablish the lines of demarcation and enhance their bargaining position.

The 7th Regiment was outnumbered and outgunned, but thanks to the heroic efforts of Marines like your father, they held. They say he fought like a man possessed. Wave after wave of Chinese regulars attacked his position throughout the night, but, despite his own wounds, he beat them all back.

“The next morning the Marines were still there, and the bodies of the enemy dead were strewn across the front line in the hundreds...thousands maybe. It was estimated that your father accounted for more than a hundred of them himself. He was hit a few times, himself, but only after the Chinese were beaten back for good did he allow someone to relieve him so his wounds could be treated. He was awarded the Navy Cross for conspicuous gallantry in action.”

“Christ, he never told me any of this.”

“I’ll bet there’s something else he didn’t tell you about, Carl.”

“What’s that?”

“Back then, your Dad really loved beer...drank a case a day. But he never gained an ounce, and I never saw him drunk. They used to kid him about having a hollow leg. As I heard the story, he didn't think he should be singled out for what he did and told his Commander, that unless every man in the company was given an extra ration of beer for the month he wouldn't accept the 'Cross.' You can imagine the furor that stirred up.

“Not knowing what to do, they forwarded his demand through the chain of command. By the time it got to Division Headquarters there were a few suggestions attached to it by some very pissed off senior officers, including talk of a court-martial.

“However, when General 'Chesty' Puller finally caught wind of it he let them know in his own inimitable way what would be done: 'Court-martial, my ass!' He growled. 'You'll give that marine everything he asks for. No, by God, you'll double it, and then you will see that he has enough beer to last him for the remainder of his tour in Korea. Furthermore, I want him brought to Division Headquarters so I can personally pin that medal on his chest.'”

“My Dad did that?” Carl asked, his voice so filled with pride and emotion he could barely speak the words without choking.

“Yes, he did...that, and more. He held the respect of everyone in the regiment. He was a genuine hero...a man of few words who never talked about his combat exploits, not even after putting away a case of beer.

I’m not surprised he didn’t tell you about any of this. Your father was a true warrior in the mold of the Japanese Samurai. Personal glory was in the battle itself. To boast about it afterwards would have cheapened the deed.”

Monzone was strangely quiet. His face was a changing mask of pride, humility, and shame. The last time he and his father spoke they argued over what now seems like a trivial matter. That was two years ago. Had he known these things about his father then he would have understood him better, and the rift between them would have never happened. He made a mental note to call him. “Thanks, Viktor. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“I think I do, Carl. We all have fathers.”

Bert was going to say something, but waited until Mariko served their drinks.

Garrett handed her five dollars in military script. “Thank you, Mariko.” He loved the sound of her name. “This is for you.”

It didn't go unnoticed by anyone, that his tip was overly generous. Nor did they fail to see how he looked at her when he handed her the money, or that his hand held hers a little longer than needed to make the transfer.

Mariko—usually shy and reserved with the customers—was flattered by his attention. He made her feel special, as if she were the only woman in the room. For Garrett, she was.

“Viktor,” Bert said, you were about to tell us how you wound up in the Air Force.”

“Right...sorry about that...got a little sidetracked.”

“My fault,” Monzone said.

“There's not much to tell, really. After the truce we went right to work building new fighting positions. While we were breaking our backs doing that, Marine and Navy fighter jets would fly over us every day, low and fast. I envied the freedom those pilots had, and decided that I should be up there with them. Walking up and down the hills of Korea was great exercise, but it wasn't why I went there.”

“Why did you go? Bert asked. “You were only eighteen when you joined, too young to be drafted.”

“That’s right, Bert. Moreover, coming so soon after the 2nd World War, the Korean War—like this one—wasn’t fully supported by the American people. My friends thought I was crazy to enlist—even more so to join the Marines. But thousands of others no older than me were already over there putting their lives on the line, doing their part. I was too young for WWII, but old enough to appreciate the sacrifices that were being made every day in that bloody conflict. I vowed that the next war we were involved in, I would be a part of it. My reasons had nothing to do with patriotism, or duty to country.”

“What then?” Bert asked.

“My friends asked me that same question shortly after our high school graduation in the summer of 1951. I told them, ‘I don’t want anyone else doing my dying for me.’ Where those words came from, I don’t know. They just poured from me as though they had always been there, waiting for someone to open the spigot. You probably can’t understand it any better than they did. Even I couldn’t fully appreciate the meaning of my words then. I do now.”

“And what would that be?” Harvey asked.

“I’d like to answer that, if you don’t mind sir.” Garrett said.

Surprised, Kracek deferred to him with a nod. He was becoming more and more impressed with the young soldier.

“Captain, I understand the meaning of your words because I’ve heard them before, or something similar. But it wasn’t until now, hearing them from you, that I realized what they meant.

“You know about my Dad, that he survived the Bataan Death March. It was only years later, when he thought I was old enough—I was ten—that he told me the whole story. Well, maybe not the whole story. Given my age, I’m sure he left out many of the more gory details.

“He told me he witnessed some of the most horrific acts of inhumanity one can possibly imagine and, at the same time, a degree of selflessness and courage on the part of individual men and women that gave expression to the true human spirit and everything good within us. Their example, he said, gave them hope, and literally kept them alive.

“Even the hardened Japanese soldiers, who looked upon the captured enemy as less than human—a dishonored entity with no right to live—were impressed with such individuals. And, while they treated those brave men and women no less harshly, their respect for what they saw in them as the true Samurai spirit was apparent.

“My father came away from the experience a better person—stronger, more enlightened, with a greater appreciation of life. For the first time, he understood what war was all about, and it wasn’t about politics, or power. It wasn’t even about money. Any, or all of these things may be the catalyst for war, but once started it takes on a life of its own.

“I’ve never forgotten his words. He said: ‘What it really comes down to is one man facing off against another in a classic struggle of life and death. Most of us thrust into that situation would be grateful to walk away with our lives. A few, however, learn that the value of life is not measured by how long we live, but how well we live it. If a person’s life is to have any real meaning it must, above all else, be lived with honor. That’s the hard part. Dying is easy.’”

“He told me something else, which I was reminded of when I heard you explain your reason for going to Korea. He said: ‘Life is a gift we should always respect and protect. But, a life without honor is little more than a shallow living being waiting to die.’ To paraphrase your words, ‘An honorable man does not let someone else do his dying for him.’”

“Bat, your father sounds like a man I would like to meet. I think that I’d probably find him to be very much like his son. He must be very proud of you.”

“Do you think so, sir? Dad is a hard man to read. He keeps so much inside. You know, he never mentions his own deeds in that chapter of the war—my mother had to tell me—but he was one of the heroes of Bataan.”

“That’s a great story,” Bert said. “As humbling as it is it gives war, and our role in it, a whole new perspective. I was on the receiving end of one of those selfless acts of courage you just described. I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for Viktor and the helicopter rescue crew.”

“Nor would I, and a lot of other good men,” Garrett said.

Carl and Harvey nod in agreement, trying to assimilate everything they just heard.

Uneasy with the direction the conversation had taken, Kracek redirected it back to Bert’s question. “As to how I wound up in the Air Force...”

“We’re listening,” Bert said.

“After the truce was signed, I applied for Navy flight training. But the Marines no longer needed pilots, and I was never given the chance to apply for the school before my enlistment was up. The Air Force offered me the opportunity to test for the Aviation Cadet program, and I took it. The rest is history.”

“There are two people sitting at this table who probably wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t,” Bat said, “and, I believe I speak for both of us when I say, thank God you did!”

“Amen to that.” Bert stood up and raised his glass. “To Captain Viktor Kracek, a warrior’s fighter pilot, a man you want on your side when the chips are down.”

Monzone, Towlan, and Garrett followed Garelli’s lead. They were not alone. Every pilot in the bar near enough to hear Bert’s toast stood up and held their glasses high.

“To Viktor...here, here!” They shouted.

The spontaneous tribute took Kracek by surprise. He didn’t know what to say or where to go, but was deeply moved. Men such as these did not give praise easily. To be recognized in this way by his peers was a special tribute. Nonetheless, it made him uneasy. He was still searching his mind for a reason to excuse himself when she walked into the bar.

“Excuse me gents, but I see someone I’m to meet here tonight. I’ll be right back.”

Everyone in the room strained to see who it was that had captured his attention. When they saw her they let out a collective sigh of approval, then fell back into hushed conversation. “Who is she? How did Kracek come to know her?” For the second time that evening he had changed the subject of their discourse.

Kracek met her at the entrance. “Renee, am I glad to see you.”

“Hi, Viktor. Am I early?”

“No, your timing is perfect.”

“Really? Does it have anything to do with all the commotion I heard as I walked in? Why was everyone standing and facing in your direction?”

“Oh, that...nothing really. I’ll tell you about it later. First, I’d like you to meet some friends of mine.”

He led her to their table. Bert and the others were still standing, unable to take their eyes off them. “Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet Renee Lafitte. Renee, let me first introduce you to Bert Garelli.”

Renee extended her hand to Bert, who received it warmly. “So, you’re Bert. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m so glad I had a chance to meet you before you left, and to see that you’re well.”

“Thanks, Renee. It’s good of you to care. If I have to be replaced as Falcon Lead’s wingman I couldn’t have picked one more lovely than you.”

She turned to Viktor and said: “You’re right, he is a charmer.”

Kracek winked at Garelli. “Standing next to him is ‘Bat’ Garrett, one of our elite Special Forces troops.”

“Hello Bat.” Renee extended her hand.

The use of his nickname surprised him, as well as her firm handshake. *She is beautiful and self-assured, the kind of woman a man like Kracek would be attracted to*, he thought. Without knowing why, but he was happy for them. To find each other in a war-torn country halfway around the world was a small miracle—one of those wonderful twists of fate.

He had come to Bien Hoa for the sole purpose of personally thanking the man who saved his life and the lives of his men. But in the short time he has had to get to know him, he developed a respect and admiration for him that went beyond gratitude. Yes, he knew why he was happy for them.

When Bat released her hand, Kracek continued the introductions. “This is Harvey Towlan and Carl Monzone, two of our best young pilots, classmates of Bert. They went through the Air Force Academy and pilot training together.”

“Hello Harvey, Carl.” She shook their hands. “It must have been an interesting experience.”

“What?” Harvey asked.

“Going through all of that with Bert. How did you manage to stay out of trouble?”

“We didn’t. From our first year at the Academy, we were placed in the same flight, bunked in the same barracks and, thanks to Bert, when we got into trouble, we did that together too. They used to call us the ‘Three Musketeers.’”

“And now, there are four of you,” Renee suggested, looking at Bat. “It appears D’Artagnan has joined your elite group.”

Bert took that as his cue and, in his best French accent, said: “And so he has, m’lady. Gentlemen, I give you the fourth Musketeer.”

Going along with Bert, Carl said, “All for one...” The others joined in before he could finish the familiar pledge. “...and one for all.”

Although a shy man who usually kept to himself, Bat liked these men, with their easy going manner, and welcomed their camaraderie. To be accepted into their group, even in jest, felt good.

“Enough,” Bert said, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. “We’re forgetting our Musketeer manners. With a bow and a flourish of his hand he offered Renee his chair, saying: “Would the fair lady do us the honor of joining our humble entourage?”

“Merci monsieur, but it is you who honor me,” Renee said, in perfect French.

Monzone commandeered a vacant chair from a nearby table for Bert, and when they were all seated, Mariko magically appeared to take their order. Like everyone in the bar she had been watching their impromptu play acting, although with a more personal interest.

“So, you speak French, Renee,” Bert noted.

“I was born and raised in Cajun country. My father was French and my mother a native Indian.” She looked at Kracek, concerned about their dinner reservation. “Do we have time, Viktor?”

“For you, we’ll make the time.” He was enjoying himself, but he did promise her dinner and, as much as he liked the present company, he would prefer to be alone with her. There was so much he wanted to discover about her...about them. Was it fate that brought them together, or was it just an accident? Did it matter? How, or where, they happened to meet was not as important as why.

He sensed that she shared the same feelings, and was anxious to explore the possibilities. Was it love? He wasn’t sure, or if he was even ready for it. He only knew, that he hadn’t felt this way about a woman since Erin was killed in an accident of his doing almost three years ago. Though she forgave him seconds before she died in his arms, he never forgave himself.

Renee was just as excited for them to start down that wonderful path of discovery together. There were too many distractions in the bar, and she thought that he might need some help in breaking away from his friends. “Viktor, did you forget our dinner reservation?”

He looked at his watch. “It’s about that time isn’t it? Gentlemen, much as we’ve enjoyed your distinguished company, we should be going.” All four men stood up.

Staying in character, Bert said: “Monsieur, were it for any other reason but this fair maiden that you would leave us we would be offended. How can we fault you for wanting to be alone with a woman of such rare beauty and charm?”

“Bert, you’re incorrigible,” Renee said. “How does your wife put up with you?”

“I make her laugh,” he said, smiling.

“I’ll bet you do.”

9

Dinner with Renee

Mai escorted them to their table and handed them menus.

“Special tonight, lobster. It come with baked potato, green salad, and sprouts.”

“Do you mean Brussels sprouts, Mai?” Kracek teased.

“Yes sir...sprouts.” She didn’t allow him to trick her into trying to say Brussels, a word she had difficulty pronouncing.

Renee saw what was going on between them and intervened on Mai’s behalf. “What kind of soup do you have, Mai?”

“Cram chowder, mademoiselle.”

“Cram, er...clam chowder...sounds delicious.”

“Yes, Mam, it house specialty.”

“I’ll have the special then. And you, Viktor?”

“I don’t know which one of you said it better, but both versions sounded good. I’ll also have the special.” He looked at Renee.

“Wine?”

Renee nodded her approval.

“A bottle of white wine, Mai.”

“Yes sir.” Collecting their menus she removed the reserved sign from their table and went off to place the order.

The restaurant wasn’t crowded. Most of the evening’s diners were still taking advantage of ‘Happy Hour.’

“I like your friends,” Renee said.

“They’re good men, who not only know how to enjoy themselves, but can be depended on out there. I’m lucky they were assigned to the 429th.”

“Oh, I think it’s the other way around, Viktor; they’re the lucky ones.”

She’s very direct, unafraid to speak her mind, Kracek thought.

Erin was like that. “Thanks, but I meant what I said.”

“I know you did, so did I.” *He’s a hard man to compliment*, she mused. She liked that about him, and the way he played down his own role in the squadron’s impressive combat record. *He isn’t at all like the macho fighter pilot who performed that wild “tactical approach” yesterday morning. Self assured, yes, but modest.* “I saw the way they looked at you and waited for your reaction to what was being said. You seldom spoke, but when you did they hung on your every word. From what I’ve seen of fighter pilots, that kind of deference isn’t given lightly...it has to be earned.”

“You’re very perceptive,” he said. “I think you missed your calling.”

“What do you mean?”

“With your ability to read people, and your eye for detail, you would have made a good lawyer...private detective maybe.”

“Funny you should say that. Dad told me the same thing...said I was a lot like my grandfather—his father—who was a very successful lawyer in New Orleans. His name was Jean Pierre Lafitte.”

“Was?”

“Grandfather died in 1951, killed actually. He was shot to death by the distraught wife of a man he defended in a murder trial—only case he ever lost. He wouldn’t have taken it had the client and his wife not convinced him of his innocence.

“However, evidence they thought was buried forever surfaced during the trial and proved the husband’s guilt. The District Attorney asked for and got the death penalty. Grandfather appealed the sentence, but it was upheld in appellate court. A year later, Jason S. Winslow III was put to death by the state of Louisiana. That same day, Mrs. Winslow took a small pearl handled derringer from her purse and shot my grandfather through the heart as he was leaving his office.”

Kracek was intrigued by her story, and saw how difficult it was for her to tell it. “You must have loved him very much.”

“We were very close. I remember how safe and loved I felt when I was with him. He was a brilliant man. No matter what questions I had—and I had many—he always answered them in a way that even a little girl could understand. I could talk to him about anything and everything, things I’d never ask Mom or Dad. I guess that’s what makes grandparents so special. He always encouraged me to follow my dreams...told me there wasn’t anything I couldn’t do if I believed in myself and was willing to work for it.”

“I think I would have liked your grandfather.”

“You and he would have been good friends, Viktor.” She wanted to tell him that she felt the same love and sense of security being with him as she did with her grandfather, but was afraid to assume too much, too soon about their relationship. “Look at me, it’s been years since I talked about this with anyone.”

“You still miss him.”

“Very much. He was my mentor. The things he taught me then are what guide my life today. As long as I live his wisdom will always be with me. Someday, I’ll pass it on to my children.”

“And, your children will be talking about you with the same love and regard with which you speak of Jean Pierre.”

She looked at him and smiled. She had never shared her private thoughts with a man before, but, with him, it just seemed natural.

“Do you think so, Viktor?”

“Yes, I do.”

The waiter presented to wine to Kracek for his approval, uncorked the bottle with the dexterity of one who had performed the task a thousand times, and poured a little in a glass for him to taste. Kracek never understood all the fuss over choosing a bottle of wine, and would have preferred that the waiter simply fill their glasses and be done with it. He also knew how fruitless it would have been to try to change the deeply ingrained French influence in Vietnamese culture.

Tram—the oldest waiter in the club—was trained by French chefs and took enormous pride in how he performed every detail of his duties. Indeed, he was very good at it—a true professional who would have fit well in the finest Paris restaurants. Kracek respected that, and would never say or do anything that might offend him. He saw no harm in playing along with the expected ritual. Holding the wine goblet to his nose, he said: “Fine bouquet.” He then took a sip, and swished it around a few times before swallowing. “Mellow taste...excellent, Tram.” He nodded his approval.

“Merci monsieur.” He filled their glasses and carefully placed the wine bottle into the ice bucket at the side of their table. “It’s always a pleasure to serve you mon Capitan.”

Renee watched them with amused interest. *I wonder how many more surprises I’ll see tonight*, she thought. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. It’s something I picked up from an Huxley novel. But, don’t tell Tram. It would spoil the satisfaction he gets from our little exchange. He takes a lot of pride in what he does and I see no reason to discourage it.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“Kracek picked up his glass. “A toast...to Jean Pierre Lafitte and his beautiful granddaughter. I can’t remember ever feeling this grateful to a man I’ve never met.”

“Viktor, I...” a blushing Renee couldn’t quite find the words.

“Ssh, don’t spoil the toast. It’s customary to touch glasses and drink.”

“I believe it is,” she acknowledged. When she touched her glass to his the contact created a clear musical note that sent an unexpected, but pleasant sensation through her body. “Did you feel that, Viktor?”

“Yes, and we haven’t even tasted the wine yet. I’d say our evening is off to a great start.” He had shared similar moments with Erin, and knew it could mean much more, but he kept those thoughts to himself. It was too soon for them.

She saw in his eyes what he didn’t say, and her thoughts returned again to her grandfather...his wisdom, his unconditional love.

“You’re so much like him.”

“Who?”

“My grandfather.”

“That is high compliment, but I don’t think I am ready to fill his shoes.”

“Maybe not, but hearing you speak, the words you use, the way you say them...it’s as though I am listening to him. I also see his intelligence and passion for life. I feel like that little girl again, safe in his arms.”

“The more I hear you talk about your grandfather, the more I like him. He’s obviously had a tremendous influence in your life, and I know, that if he could see the woman his granddaughter has become, he’d be very proud.”

“You do have a way with words, Viktor. Maybe you’re the one who has missed his calling.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you could be a writer. No, you should be a writer. You have a talent for putting words together that ring clear and true, that touch one’s emotions. I know they do me, and I’ve seen the reactions of others when you speak. Both my grandfather and my father had that ability—my grandfather with the spoken word, and my father with his music.”

Tram arrived with their salads. “Black pepper, monsieur?” he asked, holding a large wooden dispenser of fresh ground pepper.

“Yes, thank you Tram.”

“Mademoiselle?”

“No thank you.”

Tram then took the wine bottle from the bucket and refilled their glasses. Seeing that it was still half full, he placed it back in the ice bucket. “Anything else, sir?”

“No thank you, Tram. As usual, you’re right on top of everything.”

“Merci, monsieur. Your lobster will be ready shortly.”

“You told me a great deal about your grandfather, but very little about your parents.”

“I grew up in a home filled with love and the most understanding Mother and Father in the world. They taught me the values that guide me to this day, and are always there for me when I need them. They kept our lives simple, never felt the need to accumulate material things. From them I learned, that one doesn’t need great wealth or power to be happy. Mom is the more reserved of the two, while Dad is kind of a free spirit.”

“A free spirit?”

“A true rebel. But one with a very different cause. He never let convention dictate what he could or could not do. Although he gave up on the idealistic notion that he could change the world, he wasn’t about to let it change him. Dad is a man of integrity and too strong willed to allow anyone or anything force him to compromise his beliefs.

“Society has never been kind to such men. It lacks the wisdom to understand their importance, and the courage to tolerate, let alone embrace their revolutionary spirit. Still, despite all he has endured for his beliefs, he told me that if he had it to do all over again he would change nothing; except, perhaps, be more wary of people’s intentions.”

“That’s good advice.”

“It is, and I’m not surprised that you think so. I have a feeling that you, my father, and my grandfather have much in common.”

As she spoke, Kracek thought: *She is as wise and as passionate in her beliefs as she is beautiful.* He let his mind wander into a future he could no longer envision without her in it. Everywhere he went and everything he did was with her by his side. “I hope I can meet your father some day.”

“Me too. He’d like that.”

He said hope rather than like. The significance of his choice of words didn’t escape her. She found herself excited with the idea of introducing him to her parents, and the possibility that there might be more for them to share. *All this and we haven’t even gotten our lobster yet,* she thought. She smiled and took a sip of wine.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he said.

“I was just thinking about everything that was said, when I suddenly realized how hungry I was.”

He turned to look for Tram, who was already headed for their table carrying a large tray with their lobster entrée. “Tram, you must be a mind reader.”

‘Monsieur?’

“Nothing, we’re just glad to see you.”

“Sorry, monsieur, but lobster is chef’s specialty and I ask him to make extra good for you and mademoiselle. I hope you like.”

“I’m sure we will.”

Tram checked the wine bottle and saw that it was almost empty.

“Another bottle, monsieur?”

Viktor looked at Renee.

“Not me, I’ve had enough.”

“So have I. We’ll pass on the wine, Tram.”

“Bon appetite, mademoiselle, monsieur.”

“Bon appetite,” Viktor repeated to Renee.

“Bon appetite,” she replied.

Neither of them had eaten anything since breakfast and, after sampling the chef’s lobster, it was difficult to continue a serious conversation. They said very little during the meal, but when their eyes met—which was often—no words were necessary. Each saw in the other the same sense of joy and pleasure over sharing something very special, something that had nothing to do with dinner.

When they finished, Tram collected the empty plates and inquired as to how they enjoyed the dinner.

“It was excellent, Tram,” Renee replied. Our compliments to the chef.”

“Merci, mademoiselle...coffee and dessert?”

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” she replied, “but coffee sounds good.”

“Make that two coffees,” Viktor said.

“Qui, monsieur.”

After he returned with their coffee, they took a few minutes to relax and enjoy the rich flavor of the French inspired blend.

Renee was first to break the silence. “You got me talking tonight about things I have never shared with anyone else, with the exception of my parents.”

“Your mother and father, yes...tell me more about them.”

“Oh no you don’t, not this time. It’s your turn. You promised you would tell me what happened in the bar before I walked in and rescued you.”

Am I that transparent? He wondered. Erin always said that my face never could hide my feelings. I thought time might help me to overcome that character flaw, but apparently not. Subconsciously, I probably hoped it wouldn’t. It was one of things she loved about me. I didn’t want to lose that too.

His mind flashed back to that fateful New Year’s Eve two years ago when she was taken from him. Images of that night appeared to him as though they were just happening: stepping out of the Officer’s club into the frigid New Mexico air; insisting on driving despite her concern for his condition. He recalled the light snow that began to

fall as they drove home...his serving to avoid the huge tumbleweeds that suddenly appeared in their headlights, losing control of the car and sending them rolling end over end into the darkness. He saw himself pulling an unconscious Erin from the twisted wreckage of their Mercedes and felt the blood. As he held her in his arms she was revived by the cold air and the wet snow on her face. "It's beautiful," she said. And, with her last breath whispered, "Viktor, I...I love you." The snow increased in intensity, as if to wash away horror of the scene; but it could not take away the intense pain and guilt he felt; nor would time be any more successful.

"Viktor," Renee interrupted, "where did go? Your eyes were open, but you weren't seeing anything in this room."

He looked at her with a forced a smile. "Sorry, hearing your words brought back an old memory."

"A pleasant one I hope."

Leaving her question, he diverted their conversation back to a less painful subject. "You were asking me to explain what you saw when you walked into the bar. Well, Bert was just proposing a toast."

"A toast? To what.? To whom?"

"To a fighter pilot."

"A fighter pilot? Would he be anyone I might know?" *God, she thought, getting this man to open up about himself is impossible. I don't know whether to be angry with him, or love him for it.*

“Okay, the toast was for me. It was Bert’s way of thanking me.”

“For what?”

“You know, for yesterday, when he was hit by anti-aircraft fire and had to bail out.”

“Ahh, yes. So he was thanking you for getting him shot down.”

Kracek smiled. “Very funny. I don’t think so, but you can never be sure with Bert.”

She laughed.

I love the way she laughs at my dry humor. “Seriously, he landed safely in some rice paddies. Unfortunately, a Vietcong patrol saw his plane go down and headed straight for their prize. But I was able to hold them off until the rescue helicopter could pick him up. That’s about it.”

“That’s about it?” She repeated, incredulously. “Viktor, you’re too much. Since coming to Vietnam, I’ve heard other fighter pilots talk about a routine mission and turn it into a war story worthy of the Congressional Medal of Honor. I soon learned not to take them seriously. I suppose it’s a fighter pilot thing. You, on the other hand, take a mission that is arguably worthy of that award and make it sound like a walk in the park.”

“Walk in the park? That’s very colorful. Where did you hear that?”

“From my boss, Major Thompson. He had a lot to say about you. After sitting in on an intelligence debrief of your mission, he also filled us in on the details yesterday’s mission—how you and Bert saved the Special Forces convoy from being overrun by the VC.”

It suddenly dawned to her. “That was Lt. Garrett in that convoy, wasn’t it? Of course, it’s beginning to make sense now. Bert wasn’t the only one that wanted to thank you for saving his life was he?” She didn’t wait for an answer.

“Major Thompson also told me that the flying you did to keep the VC from reaching Bert was as brilliant as it was courageous; and what you did on your final run when you discovered your guns were jammed was simply incredible. He heard this from the rescue pilot himself, Captain Johnson, who told him that you came in so low on the last pass your jet exhaust literally scooped up the water from the rice paddies, creating a sight so frightening it stopped the Vietcong dead in their tracks and bought him the time he needed to get safely away.

“The most unbelievable part of the story is the one on one duel between you and the enemy platoon leader. Please, Viktor, I know you don’t like to talk about your missions, but I need to know what really happened out there.”

“You’re even more beautiful when you’re angry.”

“I’m not angry, and flattery is not going to get you off the hook.”

“It isn’t flattery. Frankly, I’m the one that’s flattered. What happened between me and that VC platoon leader is something even I haven’t sorted out. I can only tell you what I told the Colonel. I was prepared to fly right through him until he suddenly lowered his weapon and just stood there, waiting for me.”

“Waiting for you?”

“Yes. Can you picture one man standing alone in a bloody rice paddy, defiantly facing another in a fifteen ton killing machine coming at him at more than five hundred miles an hour with a tidal wave of water in tow that towered over them both? It was a scene no Hollywood director could have conjured up. The strangest part is, I could sense what he was feeling.

“When he lowered his weapon all of my anger suddenly drained from me and, in that instant I knew, that the man bravely facing me in that field was not my enemy. We just happened to be on opposing sides of a senseless war neither of us wanted—a war brought about by the failure of our leaders to resolve their differences with reason. That was the truth we both saw so clearly that day, a truth he was willing to give his life for...the same truth that kept me from taking it.”

“What happened?”

“I pulled up in time to miss him. He was knocked down by my jet blast and the force of the trailing water, but unhurt.” Kracek grew quiet for a moment. “He and I both lived to fight another day...to meet again, perhaps.”

“Do you really think so, Viktor?”

“Anything is possible.”

10

First Kiss

Kracek and Lafitte stepped out of the club into a cloudy humid night and started back to the BOQ. Thunder and lightning hurried them along, but they would not make it back to his room before the clouds unloaded a torrent of rain, soaking them to the skin. Neither seemed to mind.

The moment they entered the room he took her in his arms and kissed her—tenderly at first; then, as their passion grew stronger, their tongues attempted to reach into the very depths of their desire. He could feel her body quivering as he drew her closer. “Your shivering. Let’s get out of these wet things.”

They undressed each other in eager anticipation, stripping away the thin barrier that stood between them. Each item of clothing that fell to the floor was like another stone removed from a virtual wall; until—standing unashamedly naked—all inhibitions were stripped away. They looked at each other but did not see the nakedness, only the love.

He swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed; where—bodies intertwined—their hands daringly exploring the curves and folds of each other’s wet form, as they melted together in a dance only lovers can know.

He slipped quietly out of bed and walked to the window just as the sun crested the horizon and cast its light over a deceptively peaceful Vietnamese landscape—like an ocean wave embracing a sandy beach. *My world was never more beautiful*, he thought. *No*, he corrected, turning to look at her, *our world*. It had been too long since he was able to share it with anyone else, someone he loved.

The thought warmed him from the inside, as did the sun that caressed his tanned body. As he watched its ascent into the morning sky the constantly changing light played against his physique like a sculpture in progress. He was unaware that Renee was awake.

She didn't speak, not wanting to interrupt his meditation, but more because she enjoyed looking at him. Watching him standing there rekindled the longing within her she felt last night. She wanted him again, to feel his body against hers, to hold him tightly as he entered into her, joining them in the ultimate embrace, uniting their very souls.

No other man stirred her emotions as he did. The love and happiness she experienced in his arms was beyond anything she had ever known, or believed possible.

"Viktor." She spoke his name with unmasked desire.

"Yes." He heard it in her voice. Turning, he saw it in her eyes.

"Come to bed."

They made love again with even greater passion, free of all uncertainties and doubts about their feelings for each other. If any remained, they were dispelled the evening before with their first kiss.

11

Commander's Reprimand

A small group of pilots were standing around the squadron operations counter when Kracek walked in. Monzone and Towlan were among them.

“Good morning, Carl...Harvey.”

“Good morning, sir,” they replied.

“How was dinner last night, sir.” Monzone asked, less interested in the dinner than in how it went with Lieutenant Lafitte.

Kracek had been around fighter jocks too long not to know what he was really curious about. Never one to kiss and tell, he played it straight. “Dinner was great. The lobster was outstanding...a specialty of the house. If you haven’t tried it you should.” Pleased with how he diverted his friend’s query, he smiled. That was a mistake.

“Captain, if you’re as evasive in the air as you are on the ground I’m glad we’re on the same team. But your smile says it all.”

Kracek just shook his head in capitulation and smiled again.

“Captain Kracek,” Towlan interrupted, “have you seen the schedule? We’ve got an 1100 takeoff.”

“Right, Harvey.” Towlan’s interruption was a welcomed reprieve. “We’ll brief at 0900. Check with intelligence and find out what they have on the target.”

“Already did. We’re flying air cover for the 1st Air Cavalry’s deployment into the Ia Drang Valley in the Two Corps area. Able Company was sent in earlier to engage what they thought was a company of North Vietnamese regulars, only to find themselves facing a full battalion. Reinforcements are being flown in, and we’ll be providing air support. Intel will fill in the details for us at the briefing.”

“Sounds like it could get interesting. What about the weather?”

“Looks good,” Monzone said.

Captain Edward Janrette, the assistant ops officer, stepped out of his office and walked over to the counter. “Viktor, there you are. The ‘old man’ wanted to see you as soon as you came in.”

“Thanks, Ed. I’m on my way.” Turning to Monzone and Towlan he said: “See you at the briefing.”

Brown was waiting outside Whitfield’s office when Kracek arrived. Eye contact was made, but neither one spoke to the other. The door suddenly opened, and a visibly shaken Major Pitts came storming through. His face displayed no emotion, but you could tell when he was nervous or upset by the beads of sweat that formed above his upper lip. He gave them a cursory glance and hurried by without speaking. Kracek and Brown walked in and saluted.

Whitfield did not ask them to sit, nor did he put them at ease. I’ll make this short and to the point. I’ve heard two different versions of your fight at the club last night. Who was at fault, or why it happened doesn’t concern me. I’ve got a war to worry about and I can’t afford to have two of my best pilots at each other’s throats; nor do I have the time to deal with your petty differences.”

“May I say something, sir?” Brown asked.

“No, you may not!” A grim faced Whitfield stared at them for a few long seconds before speaking. “This will not happen again, not while I am in command of this squadron. And, as long as you two are in it, you will put your differences aside and act like the professional fighter pilots you are. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir.” They responded together.

“Good. Now shake hands and get the hell out of my office.”

The two men looked at each other and hesitated. Neither one was willing to make the first move.

“Gentlemen, that was not a request.”

Both men turned to receive the full brunt of Whitfield’s stern glare, and reluctantly shook hands. Then, they stood up, saluted, and headed for the door. But the Colonel wasn’t through. “Captain Kracek, you stay.”

A puzzled Brown looked at them before closing the door behind him.

Kracek wondered what was coming next.

12

Whitfield's Advice

“Sit down, Viktor.” Whitfield held up a paper from his desk. “I just received this letter from the 7th Air Force Commander. You remember our previous talk regarding your mission in the Delta...well, General Simmons wasted no time. After reading your report, he called the Air Force Chief of Staff—who just happens to be an old buddy of his—gave him a short version of it, and wired him a copy. The Chief met with the Secretary of the Air Force to map out the best course of action and presented it to the President.”

“President Johnson?” Kracek asked.

“That’s the one,” Whitfield said smiling. “And, he apparently liked the idea.”

“What idea, sir?”

“To fly you back to Washington so that he could personally present you with the Air Force Cross in the oval office, with key staff members and a few reporters to witness it. That was the original proposal. Johnson, however, had other plans. He insisted on a full-blown ceremony before a Joint Session of Congress, with the entire press corps and all the major television networks there to report it to the world.”

Kracek was about to say something, but thought better of it.

“As you know, this President is a consummate politician. Hell, they all are. You don’t get to that position if you’re not. This is not just another photo opportunity, but a means for him to quiet some of the dovish voices in Congress and, perhaps, sway the few additional votes he needs to pass his Vietnam Appropriations Bill.”

“Christ, Colonel, does he really need me for that?”

“That’s not for us to decide, but don’t underestimate him. He’s as much a master of his profession as we are of ours. If he thinks you can help, you probably can.”

“Yes sir, but I’m not comfortable with a scenario that uses me to justify a war for which I have many unanswered questions.”

“Yes, I know, and you could refuse. But defying a request from the President of the United States is not a decision to make lightly. Your career would essentially be over, and your life would never be the same—yours and anyone else close to you.” Whitfield added the last part knowing full well that Kracek would be more concerned with hurting his family and friends than himself.

“Don’t worry, sir. Despite my misgivings about this war, I’m not about to throw it all away. There may be some people who would like to see that happen, but I don’t intend to do their job for them. Politics aside, I know I’m doing some good here, even saving some lives—ours at least.”

“If you weren’t this situation would have never presented itself. I’ve been through two other wars before this one, during which I grappled with those same issues. Maybe hearing my views on the subject will help ease your concerns.

“As I see it, we are professional soldiers who have taken an oath to preserve and protect the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, with our lives if necessary. No distinction is made between popular, or unpopular wars—as this one obviously is. We don’t choose our enemies. Our government, duly elected by the American people to safeguard their interests, has that responsibility. Our job, when the call comes, is to respond like the trained professionals we are. In short, we do our duty. We fulfill our oath.

“Of course we can choose not to, and suffer the consequences of courts martial, condemnation as a traitor, even imprisonment. That’s the party line and, for most of us it’s enough. Others, like you and I, need more.”

Kracek was about to say something, but Whitfield didn’t give him enough time to compose his thoughts.

“I’ve had more time to think about this than you. My own doubts about the wisdom of going to war didn’t start with Vietnam, or even Korea, but World War II.”

Kracek looked at his commander, puzzled. He was only a kid at the time, but old enough to remember the things people did in support of that war. Women filled jobs in factories to replace the men who went off to serve their country, people bought War Bonds, grew Victory Gardens, even saved used silver foil and string. Mothers hung stars in their windows, one for each son and daughter on active duty. Patriotism was proudly worn on one’s sleeve. “I thought everyone supported that war.”

“And so they did, Viktor. Nevertheless, President Roosevelt had to do a lot of convincing, make quite a few “fireside chats” on the radio, and no doubt engage in some serious political arm twisting to get Congress and the American people to buy off on it. That idea was not at all popular until he made it so. Of course, it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that finally galvanized the support he needed to get us directly involved.

“I was one of those thousands of young men who couldn’t wait to join up. It was only after I got over there, and saw what war was like first hand, that my doubts arose. Getting shot at and shooting back was the easy part. I was lucky. I got good at my job very quickly and survived. A lot of other men didn’t. Nevertheless, that part of war I could understand and accept.

“I also learned that war brings out both the best and the worst in us; that we are capable of selfless acts of courage on the one hand and the most despicable, most inhuman deeds you can possibly imagine on the other. In between those two extremes are some who see war as an opportunity to further their own ambitions, and they have no qualms about doing it at our expense.

“Decisions were made by some politicians and military leaders that, at times, seem to show little regard for human life—the enemy’s, or ours. Casualties are seen as just another coldly calculated element in their risk formula. The risk I refer to is not to those of us who put our lives on the line, but to them...their careers.

“The political scientists would have us believe that war is merely an extension of diplomacy—a necessary option, if you will. Like hell it is. War is, in fact, a failure of so-called intelligent, well-intentioned men to find common ground on which to resolve their differences. That’s when they turn to the professional soldier to bail them out. Does any of this sound familiar?”

“Yes sir. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought you were talking about Vietnam. Everything you said about World War II is as relevant today as it was then.”

“That’s the whole point, war is war. They’re all the same. Good men get killed while others grow richer. Popular, or unpopular, it makes no difference. I for one hope it never becomes popular.”

Viktor was fascinated by Whitfield’s firsthand knowledge of recent history and his perception of the truth. He was about to ask the obvious question, but was preempted.

“So, what do we do with this knowledge? Whitfield continued. “How do we reconcile it with what we’re doing in Vietnam? We can’t, and we don’t try. Except for the outright, naked aggression of one state against another without forewarning, war is nothing more than a failure of diplomacy, and those same incompetent men who could not, or would not find a peaceful solution to their disagreements invariably put our lives at risk.

“That’s why I believe that our job, our real job, is to stay alive...to survive, so we can take care of ourselves and our families...live to fight another day. How do we do that? For starters, by being better at doing our jobs than the people who put us here are at doing theirs. You certainly fall into that category, and will not only survive this latest failure of our leaders, but come out of it stronger and wiser.

“I’ve told you this before, but it bears repeating. You have a promising future in the Air Force, and a lot to give that will benefit all of us. Don’t let them take that away from you...not for this.”

By the time Whitfield finished, any doubts Kracek may have had about accepting his fate, i.e., going through with the President's 'show and tell,' were put to rest. *For some reason he's taken a special interest in keeping me from short circuiting my career. When I'm pushed, my first reaction is to push back and let the chips fall where they may. Win or lose, I'm left with the battle scars and a few more enemies—not the best route to future promotion.* “You make a strong argument sir, and your point is well taken. I still won't like it, but hearing your insights has made it easier to accept.”

“Glad to hear that, Viktor. I will admit, however, that I didn't come to understand these things without making a few mistakes along the way. Like you, when I was younger and more idealistic, I compromised nothing. Anyone who dared attack me, or my beliefs, was in for a bloody fight. And, I paid the price.

“That approach would be acceptable, if all we had to deal with were men of honor. Unfortunately, most are not. They can neither accept defeat, nor victory graciously. Calling them out and winning is a cardinal sin they can never forgive, or forget. Vengeance is how they reconcile their loss, but never by direct confrontation. You won't see it coming until the damage is done, when it's irreversible. If I had someone to advise me on these matters when I first got started in this business I'd be a general now.”

“I see what you mean, sir.”

“I thought you would, but don’t misunderstand me. As a squadron commander, I’ve got the best job in the Air Force. Where else could a man enjoy the privilege and rewards of command with the unmatched challenge of flying fighter aircraft? I may not make star rank, but I’ve accomplished some things in our profession that few others have. I’m proud of that, and of knowing I have the respect of my peers. If I had it to do all over again I would. But there is one thing I would do differently.”

”What’s that, sir?”

“I would heed the advice I just gave to you. I’ve never believed that to have a successful career a man had to compromise his principles. But he does need to be smarter about it, more wary of the motives of others. And, it’s not just the bad guys you have to worry about, but the good. Their intentions may be in the right place, but they don’t always have the will or the courage to carry them out.”

With Whitfield’s words still echoing in his mind, Kracek nodded in agreement. “That’s sound advice, sir.”

“I’m glad you agree. Now, on a more pleasant note, we’ve got you booked on Pan Am Flight 816, leaving Tan Son Nhut Airport Saturday morning. You’ll be traveling first class.”

“First class? Can we afford that, Colonel?”

“You bet we can. By the way, you’ll have company. We can’t have you going anywhere without a good wingman.”

“Garelli?”

“Right. You can thank him for your first class tickets. We couldn’t have Bert squeezed into a coach seat with his wounds not fully healed.”

“That’s great news, sir. Does he know about it yet?”

“He will, as soon as we’re finished here. By the way, the port of entry for your flight is Los Angeles. From there you’ll both fly United Airlines into Dallas, where you will part company. Bert takes Trans Texas Airlines (Tree Top Airlines) into Clovis, and you will continue with United into Dulles International, arriving there at about six in the afternoon.

“Someone from the Air Force Chief of Staff’s office will meet you. Since you will be getting there after close of business, I imagine they’ll take you straight to the hotel. You’re booked into a suite at the Jefferson.”

“A suite?”

“With all expenses paid. You’re getting the royal treatment.”

“There may be something to this hero stuff after all,” Kracek said, smiling. “And all I’ve got to do is stand there while the President pins a medal on me?”

“I don’t have a detailed agenda for your time in Washington, but I’m sure it will involve more than that. In fact, you may be asked to address the Congress, so prepare some suitable remarks for the occasion.”

“Make a speech before Congress? Christ, Colonel, I’m a fighter pilot not a politician. Speech making isn’t in my job description.”

“It is now, and you might as well get used to it. I’m sure the President’s staff will help you prepare it.”

“I can handle the writing part; it’s the other I’m not too sure of.”

“I know, but they’re going to help regardless; if for no other reason than to insure that nothing you say could be interpreted in any way that might be damaging to the President. It’s their job.”

“Of course.” Kracek wondered what he was getting into.

“And, Viktor, I’m just guessing here, but you should also be prepared to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee.”

“Testify? Before the Senate Armed Services Committee? Jesus, Colonel, that’s serious stuff. Do you really think...?”

“Just trying to cover all the bases, so you won’t be totally unprepared if you are thrown into that lion’s den. I wouldn’t worry too much about it though.”

Easy for you to say, Kracek thought. “Have you ever done it, sir?”

“Testify before the Senate? As a matter of fact, I have. After I got my fifteenth Mig, they saw the same propaganda value in me then as they do in you now. Korea was about as popular a war as Vietnam. Shortly after the generals sent their proposal to Washington I was on my way back. President Eisenhower was delighted with the idea and, like Johnson, insisted on presenting my ‘Cross’ at a Joint Session of Congress. Any of this sound familiar?”

“It sure does, sir. The parallel in our careers is amazing.” Then, it hit him. *So this is why he has taken such a personal interest in me. It must be like watching a rerun of his own experiences.*

Whitfield continued: “I was asked to say a few words. The President was so pleased with the reception I received from Congress, that he asked me to join him in the oval office for coffee. Before the first cup was poured he explained his real reason for wanting to meet with me. He told me about the difficulties he was having in enlisting the support of both houses—not to mention the American public—to back his efforts in Korea.

“Eisenhower made a campaign promise to end the war, but not without a clear-cut victory for the United Nations forces and a free, democratic South Korea. To do that he needed better trained men and superior weapons. That takes money, and Congress holds the purse strings.

For example, we needed a new airplane, one which could outperform the Mig-15, and the newer Mig-17. It would be the world's first jet fighter capable of supersonic speed in level flight."

"The F-100, Super Sabre."

"Right. The first prototypes were already built and were being tested. North American Aviation did a great job getting it off the drawing boards and into the air in record time. The first version of it, the F-100A, was designed for aerial combat and would have given us air supremacy over anything currently flying."

"I know," Kracek said. "I flew the "A" in advanced fighter training. It was lighter, faster, and more maneuverable than the "D" models we're flying now, which have been modified for the air to ground role. What I didn't know, was that it would have been introduced into the Korean theater only months after the truce was signed in July '53.

"That's right. At that time our kill ratio with the F-86 was already close to fourteen to one. Can you imagine what it would have been if this new fighter had entered the war?"

"Yes sir. With the 'Hun's' superior speed, 20mm cannons, and new radar sight, the Migs would have no way to run and no place to hide."

“Right again. The point is, none of it would have happened if the President had not been able to sway the congressional votes needed to pass his military appropriations bill. In hindsight we can see the wisdom of his actions. Perhaps, the mere threat of having to face advanced new weapons systems brought the North Koreans and their Chinese allies to the conference table, and thus shortened the war. We can only speculate as to how many lives were saved by that little piece of political maneuvering.”

“Do you think your testimony made the difference, Colonel?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it did have some influence over the outcome. I’d like to think so, but I’m sure that Ike had more than one hand to play. I was just his ‘hero’ card.”

“His ‘hero’ card? I like that. You do know how to set up an argument and then close in for the kill—if you’ll excuse the mixed metaphor.”

“You’re not so bad at it yourself. I can certainly appreciate the parallel you drew to air combat though. I hadn’t thought about it that way before, but the two skills do require remarkably similar instincts.” Pausing to reflect on the idea, Whitfield added: “You’re going to do just fine swimming with the sharks in D.C.”

“Thanks to you, I’m diving into the water well armed. Hearing your “hero” story has given me the confidence I need to deal with anything I may encounter there. I’m even looking forward to it. I can only hope that my Washington excursion is half as successful as yours.”

“I have every confidence in you, Viktor, but, when it comes to results, timing makes all the difference. I was lucky. For me, the timing couldn’t have been better. Give Eisenhower the credit for that. However, this is a different war, in a different time, with a different president. You shouldn’t expect the same results.”

“I understand sir. But you’ll have to admit that the parallel between what I am about to do and what you did thirteen years ago is remarkable.”

“Indeed, and if anyone can make the most of this rare opportunity it’s you. There’s something else. After you’re through winning over the U.S. Congress we’re sending you back to your alma mater at Nellis Air Force Base.”

“The Fighter Weapons School?”

“Yes. They’re aware of your efforts to develop an air to ground tactics study for our operations here and they want you to present your study to the school. You may be asked to fly demonstration missions and give a few lectures while you’re there.”

“They know of my work?”

“Word gets around fast. But I don’t need to tell you that. In this case, it came from the 2002 Stan Eval Group out of Okinawa”

“Yes sir, they’ve been collecting tactics data from the squadrons in Vietnam, and flew with us whenever they could. I should have known that the Fighter Weapons School would be on their mailing list. Most of their pilots are graduates of the school.”

“That’s true, but you’re the only pilot since the F-100’s entered the war a year ago to draft such a comprehensive document of our tactics in South Vietnam. The Stan Eval Group has been compiling a similar study, but they aren’t as far along.”

“They told me as much when they were here last month and took copies of my bulletins with them when they left. They asked me to send them a copy of my study when it was completed.”

“I’m not surprised; but you do have an advantage. You fly every day and learn something new each time. Nonetheless, the big difference between you, and the majority of other fighter pilots in Nam, is that you not only have the analytical skills to break down each mission into its simplest components, but the ability to write about it with clarity and logic. That’s an even rarer talent.”

“It’s my job, sir.”

“Modest as usual. However, I know that you’re spending three to four hours a day on this project, often after having already flown two missions. I’m sure you believe it’s your responsibility as the Squadron Weapons Officer to get this information out as soon as possible for our pilots, and those to follow. But what you’ve done, and continue to do, is commendable. Hell, it’s more than that, it’s heroic.

“Nobody expects this kind of selfless effort on your part. Christ, nobody could ask it of you. The people who are charged with this responsibility are in organizations such as the 2002 SEG, the Fighter Weapons School, and other special units in the Tactical Air Command. I only know of one other man who has done what you are doing while actively engaged in combat flying.”

“Are you referring to Major Blesse, sir?”

“Yes, Major “Boots” Blesse. And, in my estimation, his study on air combat maneuvering is still the best work ever done on the subject.”

“I couldn’t agree more, sir. I’ve read his book so many times I have it memorized. Nothing else compares with it. His no-nonsense treatise of air tactics is one that every fighter pilot can understand and relate to. It came directly from his experiences, and others, in the Korean War. As a double ace he personally validated the effectiveness of the tactics he wrote about.”

“There was something else about his work, something missing in all the other, more technical treatments of the subject,” Whitfield added. “His words did more than explain winning air tactics. They evoked the spirit and philosophy of the air warrior; which I believe to be as important in the making of a flying ace as the tactics themselves. The title he chose says it all, ‘No Guts, No Glory.’”

Whitfield’s words paralleled Kracek’s thoughts on the subject. It was reassuring to know that he, and the man he respected more than any other in their chosen profession shared the same views. He felt a growing bond between them. “I couldn’t agree more, sir. It sets his work apart from all the rest.”

“By the way, Viktor, have you ever met him?”

“No sir, never had the privilege.”

“Well, you will. I didn’t mention this before, but ‘Boots’ is a good friend of mine. We still keep in touch. It’s Colonel Blesse’ now. He pinned his birds on last week at the Pentagon, and was reassigned to the Fighter Weapons School as its new Commander.

“No doubt you two will have a lot to talk about. He’s very interested in what you have to say about air to ground tactics in South Vietnam, and will be asking for your help in incorporating those ideas into the school curriculum—eventually into all Air Force fighter training programs. What better way to prepare a new pilot for his tour in Nam?”

“There’s nothing I’d like more, sir. Ever since I got here, my goal has been to write a study of comparable importance for the air to ground role as he did for air combat tactics. Whatever happens in Washington I know now that this is going to be a worthwhile trip.”

“There’s no reason it can’t also be fun.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean New York...the Big Apple.”

“New York? You’re not suggesting a ticker tape parade are you?”

“No, nothing like that, but the Tonight Show is a distinct possibility. How would you feel about that?”

“Johnny Carson? I watch his show whenever I can. He’s a favorite of mine.”

“He’s everyone’s favorite; that’s just the point. The whole nation will be tuned in. What better way to showcase our latest hero?”

“Well sir, you know how I hate being used; but, for Johnny, I’ll make the sacrifice. Does it include a suite at the Waldorf and a chauffeured limousine?”

“Everything hasn’t been worked out yet between the President’s and Carson’s people, but I’m certain it will before you get to Washington. As for the Waldorf and the chauffeur, well, who knows, Johnny is known to be very generous with his guests.”

Whitfield glanced at his watch, a gift from his wife, Maggie, when they were stationed in France ten years ago. It brought back memories of a simpler, perhaps more innocent time. She knew it was something he always wanted, but would never get for himself—too expensive. It took ten months, but she managed to quietly save enough money to buy him his first Omega, and surprised him with it on Christmas. There was never to be a second, because all the love and effort that Maggie put into acquiring the first one could never be replaced. He treasured it too much. He loved her even more.

“I’m afraid we’ve run over the time I allotted for our meeting. Garelli was scheduled to be in here about a half hour ago. He’s probably in the pilot’s lounge overdosing on coffee.”

“I doubt that, sir. If I know Bert, he’s in the pilot’s lounge all right, but too busy entertaining the paying customers to drink much coffee.”

Both men smiled at the thought, relieved to have their conversation end on a lighter note.

“I think we’re through here. Send Bert in.”

“My pleasure, sir.” Kracek got up and started to walk out.

Whitfield called him back before he reached the door. “There is one more matter.” Kracek waited for him to continue. “Your mission today...you don’t have to take it. You’ve got a lot to do before you leave for Washington.”

“If it’s all the same with you, sir, I’ll take this flight. I was looking forward to flying with Monzone and Towlan, and they me. I wouldn’t want to disappoint them.

“It’s your call; but this will be your last mission before you leave. I’ve instructed Major Pitts to keep you off the schedule until then.”

“Yes sir, but I have a personal request, and it will require one more flight.”

“What’s that?” A patient Whitfield asked.

“I’d like you to show me the maneuver you used in Korea to shake that Mig. Since you’re sending me back to the Weapons School, I’d feel a lot better about going up against some of the best fighter pilots in the Air Force if I could include it in my arsenal of tricks.”

“I did promise to show it to you.” Whitfield thought about it for a moment before answering. “Okay, tell Janrette to set it up for this Friday. It’s the only free day I have this week. I’ll see that Major Pitts is informed.”

“Yes sir...thanks.”

Kracek stopped in operations to give Janrette the schedule request.

“No problem, Viktor, consider it done. Does Pitts know about it?”

“Not yet, but he will.”

“We’ll put you on the Friday morning go. It should be routine.”

13

Pilot's Lounge

Garelli was so absorbed in following his hands through an intricate flying maneuver he never saw Kracek walk into the lounge. The relieved expressions on the faces of the pilots he was holding captive should have alerted him, but he was too engrossed with spinning his tale to notice.

On the coffee table between them were three mugs. The two empty ones belonged to Captain Dave Larsen and Lt. Chuck Olsen. The third hadn't been touched. It's difficult to tell a war story with a coffee mug in your hand.

Larsen was an experienced fighter pilot with more than one thousand hours in the F-100, and had compiled a solid combat record over the last four months. A quiet man of medium stature, who has helped many new pilots get through their first missions in theater without incident.

His latest protégé, Lt. Olsen, arrived in country just two weeks ago, and was proving to be a quick study—a definite plus for anyone about to ply his trade in a combat environment. A engineering graduate of Iowa State University, his intellect was equally matched by a powerful physique and handsome Nordic features. His physical strength came from working on a farm with a father who never seemed to tire. He was a hard taskmaster, but never asked more of his son than he did of himself.

Chuck Olsen loved and respected his father more than any man he knew. He only wished he could have been more loving. But Sven Olsen was still mired in the ancient ways of his Viking ancestors. For him, a good father was one who stood strong and took care of his family. To show emotion was seen as a weakness, and he expected his son to follow his example.

“Bert, I thought I’d find you here bending a few ears. How’s the leg and shoulder?”

“Garelli turned at the sound of Kracek’s voice. “Viktor...good to see you. I’m still a little sore, but healing fast. How are you?”

“Couldn’t be better. Good morning Dave...Chuck.”

“Mornin’ Viktor...Good morning, sir,” they replied in turn.

“Okay, Viktor, stop stalling, what happened in there?” Garelli asked.

“Where?” Kracek enjoyed sparring with his young friend.

“C’mon, Viktor, we all know that you and Brown were called in to the “Old Man’s” office this morning.”

“Oh, that...almost forgot. Yeah, we did have a little chat with the Commander. Actually, he did most of the talking, and he kept it very brief.”

“And?”

“He told us to either ‘shape up or ship out’ and ordered us to shake hands.

“That’s it? A disappointed Garelli asked.

“Pretty much, Bert. The “old man” doesn’t waste any words.” Turning their attention to another topic, “Chuck, how does it feel, now that you’ve got a few missions behind you?”

“It’s getting easier every time I go up, but I’ve still got a lot to learn.”

“It’ll come soon enough. You’ve got one of the best instructors in the squadron to guide you through it.”

“Thanks, Viktor,” Larsen said, but I can take little credit for this one. I’ve never had a better student, one more quick to learn, or more willing to do what was asked of him. I think it’s his Viking heritage. Whatever it is, he makes me look good.”

“Coming from you, Dave, that’s a real compliment.”

“One I haven’t earned yet,” Chuck added.

“But you will...I’m sure of that. There is one bit of advice I would offer; that is, if your instructor doesn’t mind.”

“You know I don’t,” Larsen said. There isn’t a pilot in this squadron that doesn’t value your opinion.”

Recalling the look in Brown’s eyes just before he walked out of the bar last night, Kracek knew it wasn’t exactly true, but left the thought unspoken. “Thanks Dave. Chuck, the best advice I can give you, is never, never get complacent.”

I don’t expect you to understand the full meaning of that yet. You’re still preoccupied with learning to operate in a combat environment. For awhile longer, at least, you’ll be naturally cautious. However, when the initial apprehension wears off and your confidence level grows, there will be a tendency to let your guard down. That’s when you can get into trouble.”

“I don’t think I follow you, sir.”

“You’ve already flown a few missions. What were they like?”

“We flew to the target, dropped our bombs into a wooded area, made a few strafing passes, and came home,” Chuck said.

“You just described about eighty percent of the sorties flown in South Vietnam, sarcastically dubbed ‘toothpick’ missions, because of how our bombs turn the trees into a million tiny splinters.

“The target is usually hidden by the jungle canopy and may be reported as a Vietcong base camp, ammo storage area, troop concentration, or something else. Unfortunately, much of our intelligence comes from local agents. It is often inaccurate and, if the informant happens to be a double agent, deliberately misleading. As a result, our bombs do little more than destroy some perfectly healthy trees—turn them into ‘toothpicks.’

“The point is no one ever appears to be shooting back at us, because there’s seldom anyone there. On those rare occasions when we do encounter ground fire it’s from small arms, which can’t do much damage to an F-100, even if they did get lucky. What’s more, except for tracers at night, you’ll never see it coming.

‘Now, the Forward Air Controller’s low flying, low speed aircraft is very vulnerable, and a round from an AK-47 will tear right through it and the pilot. That’s why the FAC’s wear their flak jackets under their butts. We, on the other hand, don’t even realize we’ve taken a hit until we’re back on the ground. So you can see how easy it is to get complacent. It happens to practically all of us who have been here more than a month. Isn’t that right, Dave?’

“Damned straight, Viktor, and for all the reasons you just cited.” Larsen looked at Olsen. “Since Captain Kracek arrived in Nam he has made it a personal crusade to insure we don’t ever forget that the bad guys can and do shoot back. He writes about it in every tactics bulletin, brings it up in every meeting, and includes it in every flight briefing. Because of him our squadron has had fewer incidents than most others over here—though we have had occasional lapses.”

“Yes we have,” Kracek agreed. “What happened to Garelli wasn’t one of them, but it does underscore the fact that getting shot down in South Vietnam, can and does happen.”

“Amen,” Garelli said. I’ve got two new body holes to prove it. It was a hell of a rush, but I don’t recommend it to anyone.”

“Bert was filling us in on that mission when you came in,” Larsen said.

“I figured as much, but he’ll have to finish it another time. The Colonel asked me to find him. He’s waiting for you in his office, Bert.”

“Do you know what it’s about, Viktor?”

“I do, but I think he would prefer to tell you himself.”

Garelli got up, using his cane more for show than support. “I’ll see you guys later.” He walked out of the lounge still favoring his left leg.

“Looks like ‘ole’ Bert’s still hurtin’,” Dave observed.

“Yeah. You never hear him complain though. When the Colonel and I visited him in the hospital he was still a little weak from his ordeal, but never missed an opportunity to lighten up the occasion with one of his patented quips.”

“He’s good at that isn’t he?”

“Yeah...we’re lucky to have him. Every squadron needs a ‘Bert’ to help us keep things in perspective. The more stoic types like Chuck and me often get so wrapped up in our work, that we forget there’s a whole other world out there, and deprive ourselves of the very things we risk our lives to protect. Does that make sense? No, Bert has it right.”

“I agree sir,” Olsen said. “When I first got here I had no idea what to expect until I met him. He eased a lot of my concerns and, before I left operations, I was looking forward to my first mission.”

“We’re going to be without his services for awhile. Did he tell you?”

“He did,” Larsen said, “but we had already heard the rumors, and that you were going back with him.”

“No kidding? I just found out about it this morning.”

“We also heard you were to receive the Air Force Cross, and that you were invited to Washington so the President himself could make the presentation. Is that true?”

“It is. Guess there are no secrets around here.”

Larsen shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

The large wall clock behind the coffee bar told Viktor he was running late. “Sorry to run off, gents, but I’ve got a mission to brief.”

Standing up with him, Dave said: “Before you go, let me be the first to congratulate you on your ‘Cross.’ Judging from Bert’s story, you damned sure earned it.”

“Thanks, Dave.” Kracek clasped his friend’s hand warmly.

“Me too, sir. It’s an honor to shake the hand of a man who has won our country’s second highest award for valor.” Olsen was still trying adjust to the fast-paced world of combat flying...now this.

“Thanks, Chuck. See you at the club tonight.”

“Viktor.” Larsen called to him as he started to walk out and gave him the thumbs up signal. “Good flight, Falcon.”

“Same to you Condor.”

14

Flight Briefing

Kracek walked straight to the head of the table in the briefing room, laid down his flight data card, map, and checklist.

They would be using the new three-ship formation today with Towlan as his wingman and Monzone the element leader. 7th Air Force’s rationale for reducing the flight configuration by one was the greater flexibility it allowed, and their belief that most targets in Vietnam didn’t warrant the additional fire power of a fourth airplane.

Kracek conceded the second point, but he saw no advantage in flexibility. Experience taught him that combat flying was a dynamic, rapidly changing phenomenon with enough unplanned surprises to justify maintaining the integrity of a proven fighter force—the classic four ship flight.

Enemy air also concerned him, despite assurances from headquarters that it would never be a factor. North Vietnamese fighter jets have the capability to reach targets anywhere in South Vietnam and he thought it unwise not to be prepared for that possibility—given the increasing buildup of their regular army in the South,

“Harvey, why don’t you finish what you started to tell us in Ops.”

“Yes, sir. We’ve been tasked to fly top cover for the 1st Air Cavalry’s helicopter deployment. Charlie Company, of the recently deployed 1st Air Mobile Brigade, is being sent in to reinforce Able, already on the ground in the target area. Early intelligence reports that estimated an enemy force of not more than company strength were way off the mark, and...”

Towlan saw Captain Sam Connors walk in. “Hi, Sam. I was just going over some general info on the mission. You can take it from here.”

“Thanks, Harvey. How’re you doing, Viktor...Carl?”

“Couldn’t be better, Sam,” Kracek replied. “Looks like we’ve got a real one on our hands today.”

“It’s shaping up that way.” Using the map of Vietnam mounted on the stand to the side of the room, Connors pointed to the location of the target area twenty nautical miles west northwest of Pleiku. “This is our objective. The North Vietnamese managed to move in an entire battalion of their crack troops, while leading us to believe it was only company strength. Able Company was sent in to engage them and met unexpectedly heavy resistance. They haven’t been able to advance beyond the drop zone and are in danger of being overrun.”

“Fighter support has thus far discouraged the enemy’s advance, but ground reinforcement is critical. That’s where you come in. You’ll rendezvous with the troop carrying helicopters over Pleiku at 1130 hours and cover their approach into the drop zone, then establish an orbit southwest of the LZ until called in by the FAC to deliver your weapons.”

As he spoke, Connors pointed to Pleiku and ran his finger down the map to the orbit point. “The fighters already in the area may or may not have cleared off before you arrive, and other flights are closely scheduled behind you, so timing is critical. You’ll have no more than ten minutes on target.”

“More than enough,” Kracek said.

“The call sign for the Mission Commander is ‘Hardball.’ He’ll be in the lead chopper. His primary UHF frequency is 325.5, backup, 287.50. You’ll be loaded with napalm, 750 pound bombs, and 20mm. Any questions?”

Kracek looked at Monzone and Towlan. They shook their heads. “What about NVA anti-aircraft defenses?”

“We can’t confirm it with hard intelligence,” Sam answered, “but it must be anticipated, so plan your attacks accordingly. Any more questions?”

“Is Charlie Company all we’re sending in?” Monzone asked. “You just told us the North Vietnamese have sent down a battalion of their best troops. That still leaves us one company shy of an even match up.”

“You’re right, Carl. Charlie isn’t all we’re sending. Bravo Company will be thirty minutes behind them. If those three, supported by our fighters and artillery aren’t enough, Delta is standing by. They’ll be flown in as soon as we can turn the choppers for a second go. This is going to be a busy day.”

“It looks that way,” Kracek said. “Thanks, Sam...see you when we get back.”

“Always a pleasure.” Connors wished them luck and stepped out of the briefing room.

Kracek looked at his watch. “Time hack. On my mark it will be 0915...five, four, three, two, one, hack.”

Monzone and Towlan set their watches and took notes as Kracek began his briefing: “Check in on squadron common at 1040. I’ll turn right after takeoff and hold 350 knots for the join-up, then continue climbing to 20,000 feet. A few minutes before we rendezvous with the choppers we’ll go to a tactical spread formation and fly ‘S’ turns over them until we reach the target area.” He went on to cover every detail of the mission: tactics, bomb delivery sequence, rejoin procedures, recovery, etc. “Questions?”

Monzone and Towlan had none.

“Then there’s just one more item to talk about, enemy air.”

“Enemy air? Migs have never been seen in South Vietnam.”

Towlan said

“That’s true Harv, but that doesn’t mean they can’t reach this far. As you know, the North Vietnamese have established a forward operating base in Laos, and sightings have been reported near the border. They obviously have the capability, and as long as they do we have to assume that, given enough incentive, they will come south. With the war escalating, and a battalion of their best troops already engaged with ours, if there was ever a time to expect Migs, this would be it. Moreover, a large, slow moving formation of helicopters carrying our crack troops makes a very lucrative target.

“The North Vietnamese also have a lot riding on the outcome of this venture. It took considerable time and effort—not to mention risk—for them to position a full battalion this far south. They’re not going to give them up without a fight. If I was the NVA general overseeing this operation, the use of fighter air would be more than an option.”

“Christ.” Monzone blurted out. “You sound convinced that we’re going to run into Migs today.”

“I can’t read their general’s mind, but I can try to think like him. And, looking at the same set of facts he has, logic tells me that the deployment of my fighters would be more than justified. We’ve got to be ready for it.”

“What do you have in mind?” Carl asked.

“I ran this scenario by Major Pitts and Captain Janrette, and requested an armament change; i.e., that we swap the high explosive bombs on Falcon One and Three for air-to-air missiles, but keep our napalm. Two would go with his original armament load.”

“What did they say?” Towlan asked.

“Major Pitts thought it was ludicrous to think we would ever see

Migs this far south. I expected as much from him. He also mumbled something about the planes already being loaded. Janrette saw the logic behind my proposal and suggested they take it to Colonel Whitfield for his decision. Pitts wasn't happy...muttered something about getting back to me. That took place just before our briefing. We'll know what's been decided before we leave operations."

"What do we do if we are hit by Migs?" Monzone asked. "This is new territory for us."

"And for me, but that's a good question. Assuming they buy my idea, we'll jettison all of our external stores except air to air missiles and engage the Mig's as far from the helicopters as possible. Our first priority will be to keep them off our troops until they're safely on the ground.

"We've been well trained in the text book air to air maneuvers. If we do have to go at it for real today that's what we'll use...that, and sheer guts. The best advice I can give you is stick with what you know and trust your instincts."

"Is that all you can tell us?" A concerned Harvey asked.

"In terms of going one on one with a Mig-21, yes. Anything you do for the first time is going to be filled with unknowns. The last thing we want to do is complicate the problem with theoretical details that in the heat of battle would be forgotten anyway. But, we *can* talk about tactics.

“If we encounter Migs they’ll probably come at us high from the east, using the sun to mask their attack. That’s why I want you down sun, Carl. Watch for them, but don’t concentrate all of your search in one quadrant. They could strike from any direction. Remember, their tactics manuals are probably copies of ours, or the Russians— who, no doubt, copied ours. If we are attacked, I’ll turn to meet them head on to split their formation.” Kracek remembered what Whitfield told him about his air to air engagements in Korea.

He used stick-figure drawings on the blackboard to show the helicopter formation, the target area, the Migs coming out of the sun, and the turn into them. Towlan and Monzone were fascinated by his ability to create a visual graphic on the board, then give it a third dimension with his hands. It made the transition from one to the other appear seamless. He was almost as well known for his animated briefing style as he was for his flying skill.

“After that,” Kracek said, “it’s Katie bar the door. There’s no way to predict what will happen after the initial encounter. You’ve been in enough simulated ‘dog fights’ to know that. Good instincts are important, but there are some other things we can do that will help.

“The Mig-21 is a smaller aircraft, and can out turn the F-100 at higher altitudes. But if we engage them below fifteen thousand feet we can match them turn for turn. That shouldn’t be a problem since they must come to us.

“As always, it boils down to pilot skill, with the advantage always going the guy who can conserve more of his maneuvering energy. So be aggressive, but smooth on the controls.”

“That’s good advice,” Whitfield said, from the back of the room. He had walked in while Kracek was facing the blackboard. Towlan and Monzone saw him enter, but he cautioned them against interrupting the briefing.

“Colonel Whitfield.” Kracek acknowledged. “I didn’t see you come in, sir.” He didn’t call the flight to attention. It was Whitfield’s policy that briefings and classroom academics not be stopped should a senior ranking officer decide to visit.

“I know, you were pre-occupied with your briefing.”

“How long have you been here, sir?”

“Long enough to hear most of what you said about a potential Mig encounter.”

“I suppose it must have sounded like the blind leading the blind.”

“Not at all. Everything you said was good solid advice, particularly the part about heeding your instincts and conserving energy. I couldn’t have put it better myself. No doubt, Colonel Blesse would also approve.”

“Thanks, Colonel. Is there anything more you’d like to add?”

“No. But, I didn’t come here to critique your briefing on Mig tactics. I came to personally give you my decision on your request to reconfigure the aircraft for this mission.”

Kracek put the chalk down and waited for the Colonel to continue.

“Captain Janrette and Major Pitts brought your request to me and made their arguments for and against. Although Janrette made the stronger case, I had to go with Pitts on this; not because of anything he had to say, but because I believe the heavier bomb load you’re carrying will be needed to support our troops on the ground. If you are hit by enemy air you’ll still have your 20mm cannons, and for the kind of close-in maneuvering at near ground level you correctly described, your guns will be more effective than heat seeking missiles.

“Furthermore, if the Migs do enter the fray, they will only have time for one or two passes before reaching bingo fuel. If you use the tactics you just briefed—split their formation and keep them occupied for a few minutes—that’s all it would take to run them low on fuel. They’ll have to break it off or they’ll never make it back home. Do you agree?”

“I do sir, but what if getting back home is not a priority for them...if their orders are to take out the choppers at all costs? And what if they send more than one flight?”

“That would certainly complicate the situation, and I don’t have an answer. As for your second concern, I’ve contacted 7th Air Force and requested that they coordinate with the U.S. Navy to provide top cover as long as it’s needed. F-4’s, armed with air to air missiles, will be launched from our carriers in the Gulf to defend the air space over the target area.

“If the Migs do show, they’ll keep them busy while you provide our guys on the ground the fire power they need to level the playing field. If any get through, and you’re forced to jettison your bombs, they will have done their job. In any case, they would probably be across the border before you could engage them.”

“I see what you mean, sir. Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For getting us the extra air cover for one, and for taking the time to personally deliver the message.”

“Just doing my job.” Whitfield enjoyed the look on Kracek’s face when he heard his own, often used words coming back at him.

“And we’ll do ours, Colonel.” Turning to his wingmen, Kracek asked: “Any other questions?”

“No sir.”

“Then we’re done here.”

Whitfield shook the hands of Monzone and Towlan as they left the room and wished them luck. He stopped Kracek at the door and clasped his hand with both of his.

“Bring them home safe, Viktor.”

“I will sir.”

15

The Mig Kills

“Tower, Falcon, flight of three, number one for the active. Request right turn after takeoff.”

“Roger, Falcon, cleared right turn.”

“Roger...Falcon taking the active.” Hearing Renee’s voice distracted him momentarily.

Major Thompson caught the slight break in his transmission. “Lt. Lafitte, did you notice anything different about Captain Kracek’s usually faultless radio procedure?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“I’ll bet you don’t.” Thompson turned away to check the aircraft with his binoculars, a big smile on his face.

Kracek lined up on the centerline with Two on his right wing and Three on his left. They ran their engines to full military power and checked their instruments. When he received a thumbs up from both he released brakes.

“Falcon One, on the roll.”

“Roger Falcon...safe flight,” Renee added.

Falcon Two and Three followed Lead at fifteen second intervals. At two hundred feet altitude Kracek started a right climbing turn and watched his wingmen join in close formation. “Nicely done,” he said, as he turned left to intercept his outbound course from the Bien Hoa Tacan. “Tower, Falcon outbound on the 0-3-5 radial.”

“Roger Falcon, you’re cleared Tower freq,” Lafitte replied. “Come home safe, Viktor,” she whispered in words audible only to herself, as she watched them fly out of sight.

Kracek switched the flight to channel six, then signaled them into spread formation to complete their climb checks. They leveled off at twenty thousand feet.

Eighteen minutes later, Three spotted the helicopter formation. “Lead, we have a ‘tally’ at twelve o’clock low, five miles.”

“Roger, I’ve got them. Mustang this is Falcon, how do you read?”

“Loud and clear, Falcon. What’s your position.”

“We’re at your six o’clock high, five miles out. We’ll be overhead before you reach Pleiku.”

“Roger that, Falcon...wouldn’t want to start the party without you.”

“Not a chance.”

Kracek looked down at the long line of Huey helicopters. He had never seen so many flying in the same airspace. There were forty total—thirty two of them were carrying Charlie Company. The other eight were gun-ships, armed to the teeth, and very capable of suppressing hostile ground fire. They surrounded the main body: two in front, two in the rear, and two on each side. *Christ*, he thought, *one good strafing pass would take out half of them.*

The landing zone was a flat grassy area, large enough to land the entire fleet simultaneously. Within seconds Charlie Company was on the ground and moving into position. The empty choppers cleared the area under the covering fire of the gun-ships. Troop insertion took less than two minutes—an impressive performance, even for the battle tested 1st Air Cav.

“Falcon this is Roadrunner, your friendly Forward Air Controller, how do you read, over?”

“Loud and clear, Roadrunner...what have you got.”

“This is your lucky day, Falcon. We have a full NVA battalion spread out inside the trees just west of the stream separating them from the landing zone. The only thing holding them back from an all out assault is our air support, but they keep gaining more real estate.”

“Copy that. We’re carrying a full load of napalm, 750’s, and 20mm. Just show us where you want it.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

Kracek smiled under his oxygen mask.

Roadrunner deftly maneuvered his O1E (military version of the Cessna 170) into a forty five degree dive, zeroed in on the target, and fired a smoke rocket. It hit in the center of the NVA battalion. “Falcon, my smoke marks the center of the target. The bad guys are spread out parallel to the tree line, one hundred meters on either side.”

“In sight, Roadrunner. Falcon Flight, set switches for bombs. Lead’s in from the northeast.” Kracek smoothly rolled his aircraft inverted and pulled it through the horizon, positioning his sight just below Roadrunner’s smoke. He watched it slowly drift up to the target, then released one of his bombs. “Falcon One off left. He looked back as he climbed out from the target to spot the impact. Roadrunner’s smoke was obliterated by the blast. “Two, put it about fifty meters either side of mine.”

‘Roger, Lead. Two in.’

Towlan offset his pass twenty degrees from One’s attack heading and released his bomb fifty meters south. He recovered to the right, so as not establish a pattern the enemy gunners could anticipate. “Two’s off right.”

“Three is in. I know where this one goes.” Monzone slowly walked his pippet (sight aiming point) fifty meters to the north side of Falcon One’s impact, and ‘pickled’ one off. “Three, off left.”

Kracek watched his wingmen make their drops as he positioned himself for a second pass. “Nicely done, gents; you’re starting to get good at this.”

“Falcon One, Roadrunner.”

“Go ahead,” Kracek replied.

“Your first three bombs really shook them up. They appear disoriented. Some of them are running out into the clearing.”

“Roger, I see them. Set up for napalm, Falcon. One in from the northeast.”

Flying parallel to the edge of the trees, fifty feet above the ground, Kracek dropped his two napalm cans at the north end of the clearing. At four hundred and fifty knots airspeed, the liquid fire spread out the length of a football field annihilating everything in its path. The exposed troops were engulfed in flames.

Looking back over his shoulder, he thought he was witnessing a scene out of Dante's *Inferno*. *My God, a second ago there were men in that field; now there's nothing but fire.* Shaken by the horror of it, there was no time for regret, or philosophical reflection. The lives of his own men were at stake. "It's them or us," he told himself, not at all satisfied with his simplistic rationalization. Far from stopping the enemy assault, another group came charging out of the southern half of the tree line, untouched by the fire.

"Falcon Two is in. I have the troops in the open." Two napalm tanks came tumbling off his airplane and impacted where Falcon One's left off. It extended the fiery hell another one hundred yards, and decimated the second assault wave. He started his recovery to the right.

"Falcon Two, Roadrunner, break left now! You're picking up ground fire from the middle of the target area."

"Reversing left," Two replied. "Thanks Roadrunner." Towlan saw the tracers go by his canopy as he pulled his F-100 into a hard left turn.

“Falcon Lead, Roadrunner, I’m going in to mark the gun with smoke.”

“Roger that. Falcon Flight set switches to bomb mode and climb to dive altitude.”

“Roadrunner in on target.” Captain David Lee flew his O1E with the skill and confidence of the fighter pilot he was. It took a fighter pilot’s training and experience to do the job with the precision it demanded.

The Forward Air Controller must not only know the flight capabilities of the aircraft he controls, he must be intimately familiar with its weapons and tactics. Moreover, he must be able to think like a fighter pilot. Thus, his role in a close air support mission is critical to its success. Lee was more than up to the task.

“Off left...do you have my smoke?”

“I’ve got it,” Kracek replied.

“The gun is about ten meters due west,” Lee added.

“Copy that, Runner. Falcon One in.” Kracek put the F-100 in a steep dive and placed his sight just short of the target, then pulled the throttle back to eighty eight percent and watched his instruments unwind. All of his concentration was now centered on achieving the release parameters of 450 knots, 6500 feet altitude, and 45 degrees of dive at precisely the same time the sight aim point reached the target. He had only seconds to mentally process the rapidly changing data to put his bomb on target.

This time, however, he had to deal with another distraction; for he was as much a target as the gun barrel he was staring down. The barrage of cannon shells coming up at him bracketed his airplane as he hurtled toward the ground, but he was so focused on the target that the tracers streaming by his canopy seemed to be moving in slow motion. It felt as though he were seeing it from another dimension; that time had been suspended and he could see everything with an incredible clarity. *Is this what they mean when they talk about being in the zone?*

He pondered that thought, as he pressed the red button on the control stick, releasing the seven hundred and fifty pound bomb. It separated from its wing pylon with a jolt that rocked the airframe. “Falcon One is off.”

Kracek began a sharp left climbing turn and looked back just in time to see the target disappear in the explosion. The huge shock wave it created was clearly visible in the humid jungle air.

“Falcon One, Roadrunner, you put it right down their throats. There’s nothing left but a big smoldering hole in the ground. Are you okay? They were throwing so much stuff at you I could barely see your aircraft.”

“I’m okay. All instruments read normal, and I don’t see any new holes. What else do have for us?”

“Glad you asked. You were too busy to notice, but a second gun battery opened up on you as you pulled off...fifty meters due west of the one you just clobbered. If you hadn’t pulled off to the left you would have flown right into their line of fire.”

“Guess it’s not their day,” Kracek quipped.

“Falcon Two is in on the gun from the northeast.” Towlan was a little slow turning in. It cost him a few seconds of tracking time and reduced his dive angle a few degrees. “Two is off left.” His bomb hit slightly short.

‘Roadrunner acknowledged: “That was close enough to knock out the crew, but not the gun. Falcon Three, drop about ten meters southwest of Two’s last bomb.”

“Roger that. Three’s in. Bombs away.” “I always wanted to say that,” Monzone told himself.

“That did it,” Roadrunner observed. “Nice shooting.”

“Falcon Lead, this is Hawkeye, your friendly Navy top cover. Enjoyed the show, but we’re down to bingo fuel and heading back. No Migs today.”

“Thanks, Hawkeye. You must have scared them off.”

“Speaking of fuel, Falcon, how’s yours?” Roadrunner inquired.

“Falcon, fuel check...Lead has 5500 pounds.”

“Falcon Two, 5300.”

“Three has 5400.”

“Fuel’s not a problem, ‘Runner,’ but all we have left to give is 20mm.”

“Copy that. If you can make a few strafing passes parallel to the tree line, ten to thirty meters inside of it, that should keep them off our troops until the next set of fighters get here. They’re about seven minutes out.”

“You got it. Falcon One in from the southwest.”

Using a steeper dive angle than normal to give the high explosive 20mm cannon shells a better chance of penetrating the jungle canopy, Kracek fired a long burst into the trees. Two placed his burst parallel to his and ten meters further in, and Three the last ten meter strip, completing the thirty by one hundred meter area that Roadrunner wanted covered.

As he turned in for a second pass Kracek heard Monzone's voice yelling into his headset with unusual urgency. "Falcon One, break left, break left! Air to air missile inbound...Migs six o'clock high."

"Falcon One breaking left." Straining to see over his shoulder as he put the F-100 into a hard left turn, Kracek saw the missile fly harmlessly by and spotted his attackers. He quickly assessed their closure rate, distance, and angle off, then reversed right and pulled up sharply into a classic High "G" Barrel Roll. "Two, stay high until I complete this roll, then take the fighting wing position. Three, cover us."

In a perfectly executed Barrel Roll, Kracek scrubbed off just enough airspeed to force the Migs into an overshoot. They were too close for another missile shot, and never had a chance to use their guns. As they slid out front, he rammed the throttle into afterburner, brought his sight to bear on the trailing aircraft and fired. The Mig 21 literally exploded, forcing Kracek to pull up sharply to avoid flying through fragments of the disintegrating airplane. "One down," he heard himself say, as he zeroed in on the Mig leader. The hunter was now the hunted, and he wanted out, but it was too late.

"Holy Christ!" Towlan exclaimed off mike. "How did he do that?" On mike, he said: "Falcon One, Two's on your wing. You're clear."

"Roger, Two. The lead Mig is heading for the deck."

Forced to pull up to avoid swallowing the wingman's debris, Kracek was now out of gun range, but a short burst of afterburner quickly closed the gap. The Mig Leader was game, but obviously inexperienced in air combat. At less than one hundred feet above the jungle canopy, in a desperate attempt to avoid the F-100's guns, he made a series of level "S" turns—a futile tactic that allowed his pursuer to close even faster. He could see the border...close, yet so far away.

Kracek placed his sight just behind the Mig's cockpit and squeezed the trigger. The burst was unexpectedly short, but every round found its mark, tearing huge holes in its tail section and fuselage. Smoke and flames shot out of both sides of the crippled aircraft, yet the pilot was still able to maintain control.

The American flyer is very skilled, Captain Diep reflected. My aircraft is badly damaged and can no longer maneuver. If he fires again I am a dead man. Less than a minute to the border, a minute I do not have.

Kracek scanned the cockpit to find the reason his guns stopped firing. He knew he wasn't out of ammo; nor was it likely that all four guns would go dry at the same time. He found that the gun circuit breaker had tripped, reset it, and closed to within a thousand feet of his prey...an easy kill.

The Mig was no longer capable of evasive maneuvering and its pilot was using all his skills just to keep it in the air. Another burst would have finished him. “I can’t do it,” Kracek heard himself say. “There’s no way he can make it back to his base, and I can’t...I won’t, shoot down a helpless man.” In a move even he couldn’t have imagined, he joined on the Mig Leader’s wing.

Captain Diep couldn’t believe his eyes. “What is he doing? Why doesn’t he finish me?”

Falcon Two and Three, and Roadrunner were asking themselves the same questions. They knew that they had just witnessed an incredible feat of airmanship, but that last maneuver by Kracek was beyond comprehension.

His eyes still fixed on the strange aircraft flying his wing, Diep saw its pilot signal him to continue on heading, then render a salute. He returned it, thankful for the reprieve, as he watched his improbable wingman peel off in a climbing right turn—his aircraft gracefully silhouetted against a backdrop of clear blue sky.

As long as he lived he would remember that picture, and the day his life was spared by a man he called the enemy. *Amidst the ugliness of war there can still be humanity and beauty.* The thought had a calming effect on him as he reached down for the triangular shaped ejection grips in front of his seat.

Kracek kept him in sight as he turned away. He didn't have time to think about his actions, but it felt right. "Good luck, my friend."

All eyes were locked on Captain Diep as he nursed his crippled aircraft across the border into Cambodia and ejected. His parachute had time for only one swing before he hit the ground in a small clearing, a hundred meters from where his aircraft crashed in a ball of fire. He was on his feet immediately and waved at the circling F-100's to let them know he was okay. A radio call to his command center before he bailed out alerted them to his plight. Help would be coming soon.

As he watched his benefactor fly south, he reflected upon his good fortune. *In what war does your enemy spare your life in the heat of battle? These are not the merciless killers our generals and politicians would have us believe them to be. They are human beings like us, with families and loved ones, who dream of a better world for our children. Why do we kill each other?*

His questions would go unanswered. Nonetheless, because of what happened that day, he would never again view the enemy in the same way.

"Roadrunner, Falcon, we're down to bingo fuel."

“Roger Falcon. That was one a hell of a show you put on. I thought I’d seen it all, but what you guys did today was spectacular. If you ever make it to Danang the drinks are on me.”

“Thanks, Roadrunner, but without you to point out the bad guys we wouldn’t have been half as effective.”

“I’ll take that to the bar with me tonight.”

“You and me both.”

16

A Hero's Welcome

Ten miles out, Kracek called for landing instructions.

“Falcon, this is Bien Hoa Tower, the active runway is two-seven, winds 2-2-0 degrees at seven knots, altimeter 3-0.2-0. Call turning initial.”

“Roger, altimeter 3-0.2-0...say traffic.”

“We’ve got three F-100’s on takeoff roll and flight of two approaching the break. They’ll be clear before you reach initial,” Lafitte replied.

“Copy that. Request clearance for a tactical approach.”

“I’ll take that Lieutenant.” Major Thompson wanted to play a personal role in what he believed to be a historic first in the war. News about the Mig kills had already gotten back to them. “Falcon, you are cleared tactical approach. Call two miles out. The field is all yours. You earned it.”

“Thanks, Tower.” Kracek lined up on the runway centerline and signaled the flight into a loose right echelon. Three quickly crossed under, aligning himself with Lead and Two on a forty five degree angle. “Looking good, Falcon.”

“Tower, Falcon is two miles out with three for full stop landings.”

“We have you in sight, cleared all the way. Call the break.”

Kracek instructed his wingmen to keep it stacked slightly high, as he slowly descended to less than a hundred feet above the ground and aligned his aircraft with the left edge of the runway. That placed Two on the right edge and Three an equal distance further right. “Falcon, take four seconds in the break and fly it just like a closed pattern.”

At the approach end of the runway Kracek pulled up sharply to twenty five degrees of pitch and executed two aileron rolls in rapid succession (one for each MIG), then continued a hard climbing left turn to downwind rolling out at exactly fifteen hundred feet above the ground.

It happened too fast for Falcon Two to respond in kind. “What the...he never briefed this!” A surprised, but unflappable Towlan flew a standard closed pattern to downwind, rolling out just outside Lead’s jet wash.

Falcon Three, however, did have time to react. “Christ, I never saw anyone but the Thunderbirds pull a stunt like that. If he can do it, so can I.” Four seconds behind Two, Monzone pulled up sharply and did a single aileron roll before turning to downwind. “Shit hot!” He exclaimed, pleased with himself and his first tactical approach, a la Kracek. “I love this business.”

By the time Monzone rolled out level on downwind Kracek was already turning base. “Falcon One, base with three in the green for a full stop.”

“You’re cleared to land, One.” Thompson handed the mike back to Lafitte and picked up his binoculars. “Looking good,” he casually remarked. He wasn’t commenting on the landing gear, but the aggressive way Falcon One flew the pattern: a steep, tight final turn, drag chute deployed before his main wheels touched the runway in front of mobile control—a Kracek trademark. No one flew the pattern tighter than he did.

Two and Three landed with equal spacing and followed Lead to the end of the runway. De-arming completed, they taxied to the ramp in staggered formation, maintaining one hundred and fifty feet separation. Kracek was surprised by the number of vehicles and people waiting near his parking slot. Cameras were flashing, as the large crowd threatened to push through the cordon of military police. Ignoring the uproar, he deliberately went through the checklist shutdown procedures, as his crew chief set the wheel chocks and reinserted the safety pins.

An open hand gesture from the crew chief told him he was cleared to lower the speed brakes, located at the F-100's underbelly center. Another gesture told him to lower the flaps. That done, the crew chief signaled him to shut down the engine. Kracek pulled the throttle around the idle stop and into the off position. The familiar sounds of the J-57 engine gradually subsided, replaced by the noise of the crowd and arriving vehicles. The former was music to his ears, the latter he could do without.

Braxton then hooked the ladder onto the cockpit ledge and climbed up to take his pilot's helmet and clipboard. Kracek followed him down. His feet firmly planted on the concrete ramp, he took off his parachute and placed it against the nose wheel of the aircraft.

Ignoring the efforts of the MPs to hold them back, the crowd closed in on him before Kracek had a chance to start his pre-flight inspection. He recognized some of the higher ranking officers. The distinguished looking man with four stars on his shoulders was General Bradford Simmons, 7th Air Force Commander. With him were Lt. Colonel Whitfield, and several squadron pilots, including Major Pitts. Right behind them were a host of newspaper and television reporters armed with cameras and microphones.

“Guess the post flight will have to wait, Brax.”

“Yes sir. I’ll take care of it after they’re gone. You got bigger things to worry about.”

“Captain Kracek,” Whitfield called out above the clamor. “Over here. We heard about your Mig encounter minutes after you downed the second one. Great heads up flying! I’m proud of you. You’ll have to fill me in on all the details later. I’d like you to meet our Commander, General Simmons.”

Kracek saluted sharply. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Captain,” Simmons said, returning the salute. “Colonel Whitfield told me a lot about you.” He took Kracek’s hand in both of his. “I had planned to meet with you before you left for the states, but in light of what you did today it couldn’t wait. Today’s mission may well mark an historic milestone in the war. You should be proud.”

“Thank you, General, but like everyone else out there today, I was only doing my job.” *Including, he thought, those North Vietnamese soldiers and Mig pilots I shot down, .*

“Yes, yes, I know. I was told to expect that kind of a response from you. However, for you, ‘doing my job’ takes on a whole new meaning, one with which many of us are not familiar.

“You may not know this, but your peers consider you the ‘Top Gun’ in this war, and that’s a title fighter pilots do not easily concede to anyone. Colonel Whitfield agrees, and I don’t have to tell you what his endorsement means. Nevertheless, your own deeds speak for themselves, and no amount of selfless modesty can lessen their significance.

“I’m as impressed as everyone else and, like Bill here, damned proud. It’s reassuring to know that the fighter pilot spirit is alive and well.”

As they talked, cameras were flashing non-stop, and television crews recorded the scene with pictures and sound. Reporters were jockeying for position to get their mikes in front of Simmons and Kracek. A woman from NBC news got there first.

“Captain, what can you tell the American public about the first Migs shot down in South Vietnam? Does this mean the war is escalating?”

“No, it does not!” Simmons interrupted, a hint of agitation in his voice. One isolated incident of this nature cannot be interpreted to mean that the war is expanding any more than it already has. Today’s Mig kills by the Captain may well be the first and the last we’ll see in South Vietnam.”

The General knew, as he spoke, that our bombing campaign was indeed being intensified, and that the North Vietnamese would need every fighter plane they had to defend their homeland. To have two of them thrown in to support an operation in the south was totally unexpected.

“Captain Kracek,” a man’s voice called. “How does it feel to be the first American pilot to shoot down a Mig in South Vietnam?” The logo on the mike thrust in front of him was that of CBS news, and the man holding it was an aggressive young reporter by the name of Dan Rather. Kracek knew him. They met in the Caravelle Hotel bar in Saigon shortly after his arrival in Vietnam last year. He remembered the lively debates they had over the war and our involvement in it.

“Dan Rather...still here I see.”

“Well, I did go home for a few months, but like you I got bored...had to be where the action is. I didn’t expect you to remember me.”

“I never forget a good argument, Dan. How does it feel to shoot down a Mig? Well, two of them will never again be used against us. That part feels good.”

“What about you personally?”

“There’s nothing personal about it. He attacked us. That’s not hard to understand since we were bombing and strafing his troops. I was forced to defend myself and took advantage of his mistake. We were both simply doing our jobs.” He looked at his Commander and gestured with his hands. Whitfield shook his head and smiled.

Several other reporters tried to ask questions of him at the same time, but they were diplomatically sidestepped by General Simmons. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sorry to cut this short, but the Captain has just returned from a demanding combat mission. He and his wingmen must complete their debriefing while everything is still fresh in their minds. You’ll have ample opportunity to ask your questions in tomorrow’s press conference at 7th Air Force Headquarters. Thank you.”

The reporters paused momentarily to digest his carefully chosen words. It was all the time he needed. Before they could renew their quest for information he took Kracek by the arm and walked off.

“Let’s go Captain; you’re riding with Colonel Whitfield and me.”

General Simmon's driver had parked the staff car close and kept it running. As he was about to get in Kracek heard a familiar voice call his name.

"Captain Kracek." It was Sergeant Braxton—standing on the ladder, holding a can of spray paint and a stencil in his left hand. With his right he pointed to the two red stars he had just painted on the side of the aircraft. "Look!"

When he saw what his crew chief had done he felt a surge of pride well up within him. He trusted this man to keep him flying safely, but he also felt personally responsible for him—as he would a younger brother. Smiling, he gave him a big thumb's up before climbing into the staff car. The cameras caught it all on tape, and continued to roll as they drove off.

With that poignant scene as a backdrop, Dan Rather summed up the day's events for his television audience: "You've witnessed an interview with Air Force Captain Viktor Kracek, who just returned from a combat mission in which enemy aircraft were encountered in South Vietnam for the first time in this war."

“While flying in support of U.S. Army forces locked in a life and death struggle with a much larger enemy force, Captain Kracek was attacked from behind by two North Vietnamese Mig-21’s. After skillfully evading their missiles, he maneuvered his aircraft to force the Migs out in front of him, and shot both of them down. It would seem the North Vietnamese picked the wrong day, and the wrong man, to open up the air war in the South.

“Other pilots have told me this was a rare feat of airmanship; recognized as such by the hero’s welcome he received here today. Nevertheless, to hear the Captain tell it, he was ‘just doing his job.’”

Later, in the CBS studio in New York, Walter Cronkite recapped Dan Rather’s report for his viewers. “That was indeed a hero’s story, one we are especially proud to bring you this evening. Captain Kracek’s own words speak volumes for the man. I like his style.

“Apparently, he and our reporter ran into each other in Vietnam last year while the Captain was there on temporary assignment as a Forward Air Controller. Dan told me they met in the bar of a Saigon Hotel and had a very interesting debate about the war over a cold beer.

“He told me how impressed he was with the Captain’s knowledge of historical events leading up to our involvement in Vietnam, his dedication to his profession and, most of all, his passionate love of flying. He sounds like a man we would all like to know more about.

“That’s our news for tonight. This is Walter Cronkite, and ‘that’s the way it was.’”

17

General's Debrief

Inside the staff car seen driving off behind Dan Rather's shoulder, the General turned to Kracek. "Now that the press has been placated, at least for a while, let me congratulate you again." Simmons extended his hand. "Shooting down two enemy aircraft on the same mission is a feat only a handful of fighter pilots have accomplished. One of them is sitting next to you. To do it on a close air support mission makes it all the more remarkable."

"Thanks, General. But, as I told Dan, I was lucky. It could just as easily have gone the other way. I might have been the one trying to find my way home through the jungle instead of that Mig pilot."

“You’re right son, luck does play a part in it, and you certainly have that going for you. But skill, knowledge, and courage play a far bigger role, and these things you obviously have in abundance. Now, since I won’t be able to stay for your debriefing, I’d like a blow by blow account of your mission, particularly the Mig encounter.”

Kracek gave the General a detailed description of events, starting with the successful insertion of Charlie Company. He talked him through the bombing runs, and vividly described the horrifying effectiveness of napalm against troops in an open field. “Only after they believed we had expended all of our 750 pound bombs did they open up with their anti-aircraft guns. I noted their use of this tactic on a previous mission and briefed the flight to drop only one bomb on the first run. Consequently, when they started firing at us we had an answer.”

“This tactic,” the General asked, “did you mention it in your after action report?”

“Yes, he did sir,” Whitfield interjected. “A copy of it went to 7th Air Force over my signature. Viktor briefed the squadron that afternoon. He also posted the information in a supplemental tactics bulletin with his recommendations to counter it.”

“Good,” Simmons said, wondering why he didn’t hear of it until now. He made a mental note to find out. “Go on, Captain.”

“After taking out their antiaircraft guns, we started our strafing passes, and hoped our fuel would allow us to stay on target until the next set of fighters could arrive to relieve us. However, our Navy top cover hit bingo fuel before we did and had to return to base. Thinking about it now, the fact that they were there, visible to the enemy fighters, may have been what kept the Migs from coming in before we were through making our bombing runs.”

“I’d say that that was a good possibility, wouldn’t you, Colonel?” Simmons asked.

Before Whitfield could respond, Kracek said: “It was Colonel Whitfield’s idea to provide top cover for us on this mission, sir.”

“I know, I approved it. I love it when one of my decisions works out so well. Go on.”

“With our top cover out of the picture the Migs wasted no time. They were on me before I could complete my second strafing pass. If Lt. Towlan, hadn’t spotted them and called the break when he did, I might not be here to tell the story. Instead of two Migs going down in flames, it could have been an F-100. I was lucky.”

“You’re doing it again, son. Let me remind you, that it was you who anticipated the possibility of enemy air on this mission—a concern shared by Col. Whitfield and me. Had you not prepared your flight for it, the outcome may have been quite different. That wasn’t luck, but the work of an outstanding fighter pilot and a damn good leader.”

“I couldn’t agree more, General,” Whitfield said.

“Now,” Simmons continued, “I don’t want to hear any more about luck. Tell me about the Migs.”

Well sir, the hard left break diverted the heat source of my engine out of the missile’s effective tracking angle. Without a strong infrared signal to home in on, it broke lock and flew into the ground—probably killing a few of their own troops.”

“The irony of war,” Simmons said , under his breath.

“Sir?”

“Nothing, just thinking out loud.”

“The instant his missile flew by I reversed my turn and pulled up into a High ‘G’ Barrel Roll, forcing both Migs into an overshoot. They were closing too fast to follow me through the roll. As they slid out in front all I had to do was line them up in my sight and squeeze the trigger.” Kracek used his hands to demonstrate the maneuver.

“A High ‘G’ Barrel Roll...how about that Bill? It’s nice to know the old tricks still work.”

“They usually do when they’re done right,” Whitfield replied.

Kracek didn’t wait for another cue from the General. “I opened up on the wingman from no more than a thousand feet. His aircraft literally blew apart, forcing me to pull up to avoid swallowing its debris. That gave the Mig leader a chance to fly out of gun range, and he showed no interest in sticking around. He headed straight for the Cambodian border.

“But, with my speed and altitude advantage, I closed on him before he could make it across. I fired my guns, but the burst was cut short before I released the trigger. The few rounds I got off hit him, but didn’t do enough damage to bring him down—not right away.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was coming to that, sir.”

General Simmons gave Kracek a look that told him he should pick up the pace of his story.

“The Mig was badly crippled, but the pilot was able to keep it flying, and the border was less than five miles away. Checking the cockpit, I found that the gun circuit breaker had been tripped. But, by the time I could reset it and position myself for another shot we were in Cambodia.”

“He got away? But, I thought...”

“No sir, he didn’t. As it turned out, a second burst wasn’t necessary. His engine flamed out and he was forced to eject. His plane crashed about a hundred yards from where he came down in his chute.”

“That was one hell of a mission. You and your wingmen are to be commended.” The General then looked Kracek’s square in the eyes and asked: “Is that really the whole story?”

Kracek thought a moment before answering. “It’s the way I’ll put it in my report, sir.”

“That’s not what I asked you. I thought there might be something more you could tell me to explain the rumors I’ve heard regarding your encounter with the Mig Leader.”

The General’s question went straight to the point. A surprised Kracek looked at Whitfield, who understood what his eyes were asking and nodded his assent.

“The rumors are true, General. There was something else, something I thought better left unsaid.” He went on to fill in all the previously omitted details, feeling somewhat relieved after he did.

“I know how hard that must have been for you,” Simmons said. “But you have nothing to worry about, not from me. I was told I could count on you to be forthright and you didn’t disappoint me. I don’t know of any other fighter pilot who, if he had a Mig dead in his sights, would not have taken the shot, helpless or not, border or no border.

“I’m not sure what I would have done in that situation, but I respect your decision. You were there, I wasn’t. And, who can say you didn’t do more for this God-forsaken war by sparing his life than by taking it? But you’re right, it is better left unsaid. As you stated, none of this will go into the official report.”

Kracek breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, sir.”

“No need for that, son.”

The staff car pulled up in front of the 429th Squadron Operations building. Kracek started to get out, but was stopped by the general.

“Captain Kracek.”

“Sir?”

“In a few days you’ll be headed back to Washington. I know Colonel Whitfield has talked to you at length about it, but I wanted you to hear it from me. You know, of course, you’re not being sent there for a simple awards ceremony.”

“Yes sir, Colonel Whitfield made that very clear.”

“I’m sure he did. Nonetheless, how you deport yourself there, and how you are perceived by the Congress and the American public, can have a significant impact on how this war is conducted; perhaps, even affect its outcome. I want you to prepare for it with the same commitment and attention to detail you give to every mission. It may well be the most important one you will ever ‘fly’ in this war.” The General looked into his eyes as he spoke and never blinked. Neither did, Kracek.

“You can count on it, sir. I hope the results of this ‘mission’ come up to your expectations.”

“Things will happen of their own accord. Regardless of the outcome, I have every confidence in you.”

Kracek stepped out of the car, snapped to attention, and saluted sharply before walking away.

Whitfield also got out, and was about to follow him into operations, but Simmons was not through yet.

“Bill, hold a minute.”

Whitfield bent down to the open window to hear what he had to say.

“Is Kracek scheduled to fly again before he leaves for the states?”

“Yes sir. He and I are scheduled for a Friday morning go.”

“No, I can’t allow that. Today’s mission will be his last until he gets back. He’s far too valuable to risk sending up again.”

“But, I... “Whitfield was about to say something about his promise to Kracek, but thought better of it.

“Yes?”

“Nothing sir. I’ll take care of it.”

“You do that, Colonel.” Simmons returned his salute, then instructed his driver to return to Tan San Nhut.

As he watched him drive off, Whitfield was distracted by the familiar sound of Huey helicopters landing further down the ramp, bringing in the day’s casualties. The MASH team retrieved the men in the side carriage racks even before the blades stopped rotating, and transferred them, and the walking wounded into the awaiting ambulances. As they sped away, he thought: *More broken bodies, youngsters, whose lives will never be the same again as long as they live.*

It was one of the few times when he allowed himself to reflect upon the war. He was a professional soldier, a squadron commander. Too many others depended on him and looked to him for leadership to allow himself the luxury of self doubt. Left wing politicians, university professors, and student protesters could freely express their opinions. He could not.

Nevertheless, while he disagreed with much of what they had to say, and even less with the methods they used to further their agenda, he would be the first to defend their right to do so. It's one of the things in this war, or any war, worth dying for.

As he started to enter operations he was distracted again, this time by a flight of F-100's approaching the break for landing. Looking up, he saw the leader begin his pitch-out over the runway threshold, followed by two and three at exactly four second intervals. He could see the markings on their tails as they banked sharply into the turn—Black Falcons silhouetted against a broad, horizontal yellow band. The sense of pride he felt at that moment washed away the negative thoughts of the war.

He walked into ops.

18

Tan San Nhut Terminal

11 Dec 1965, 1730 hours

Kracek tried to hold up his end of the conversation, but his thoughts kept wandering off to another place. The coffee in front of him had grown cold and he was constantly checking his watch. Their flight was scheduled to depart Tan San Nhut at 1830, in about an hour.

“Don’t worry, Viktor, she’ll be here.”

“Do you think so, Bert? I expected her forty minutes ago. Something must have happened. This isn’t like her.”

“Yes, I do. If she couldn’t make it she would have gotten word to you.”

“Then why isn’t she here yet?”

“Who knows. Maybe her shift ran a little late...Saturday afternoon traffic in downtown Saigon. It could be any number of things.”

“Maybe, but it’s those other things that worry me.”

The concern for his friend showed in Garelli’s face. *This isn’t like him. Usually, when things are going to hell and everyone is running for the exits, he calmly evaluates the situation and takes action. His confidence seems to grow under pressure. Yet, when it comes to Renee, he harbors the same uncertainties and vulnerabilities as the rest of us.* Garelli tried changing the subject.

“Tell me about your trip to Washington.”

Kracek’s thoughts were still preoccupied with Renee. “What did you say?”

“I asked you about Washington.”

“Oh...sorry, Bert...not much company, am I? Washington, yes. You know about the Joint Session of Congress and the medals thing. That will happen the day after I get there. Aside from reserving me a suite at the Jefferson, that’s all I can tell you.”

“You did say earlier that you might have to stick around a few days after the ceremony. Sounds like they have something else in store for you.”

“Maybe, but I don’t know anything for certain other than what I just told you. I can only add what Colonel Whitfield suggested might happen.”

“What was that?”

“He thought that I might be asked to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee.”

“The Senate Armed Services Committee! Was he kidding?”

“I’m afraid not. He has good reason to think so.”

“He does?”

“He went through a similar experience during the Korean War. After he got his fifteenth Mig, he was sent to Washington to receive his award before a Joint Session. Eisenhower had also inherited that war from his predecessor and, like LBJ, was having the same problem trying to convince Congress and the American people to support it. He needed to give them a hero, and Whitfield was tailor-made for the part.”

“I see what you mean; the parallel between the two wars, the presidents, and now you and the Colonel...it’s amazing.”

“He also told me that, seeing the enthusiastic bipartisan reception he received from Congress, President Eisenhower asked him to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee. So, his suggestion that I might be asked to do the same was more than speculation.”

“It’s incredible. For the first time in my life I’m at a loss for words.”

“Don’t worry, Bert, I’m sure it will pass.”

They both laughed.

19

A Day To Remember

Base Operations, Bien Hoa, 11 December 1965, 1330 hours

Lt. Lafitte and Sergeant Donnelly are standing in front of the counter in Base Operations. They had just gotten off shift.

“So,” Donnelly said, “our favorite fighter pilot is headed for the states to have his medals personally presented to him by the President. It won’t be the same around here without him to shake things up.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Sergeant. Captain Kracek seems to have a talent for turning up at the wrong place at the right time; which is good for us, but bad for the other guys.”

“I like the way you put that, Lieutenant. He does tend to make things happen. I’m gonna miss him.”

“So will I. We all will, but none more than our guys out there in the jungle who are bearing the brunt of this war.”

“Lt. Lafitte?”

She turned around to see a baby faced young airman, who looked like a recent high school graduate who hadn’t begun to shave yet.

“That’s me.”

“Oh,” he said, surprised. “They told me you were a woman, but they didn’t tell me you were so...uh...I mean...” He was able to stop himself from saying beautiful, but not the blush that turned his face apple red.

“They didn’t tell you what, airman?”

“That...you were so tall, mam.” It was the best he could come up with to avoid further embarrassment. Relieved, his face started to regain its original pale color.

Renee wasn’t going to let him off the hook so easily. “Well, Airman First Class P. T. Hunnicut,” she said, reading his name tag, “who are they?”

“That would be the dispatcher, mam. He told me to pick you up at Base Ops before drivin’ out to Tan San Nhut to meet two other officers arrivin’ in country.”

“So, you’re my driver.”

“Yes, mam. Guess I should’ve told you that right off.”

“Yes, you should.” She recognized his accent, but asked anyway. “Where are you from Hunnicut?”

“Lubbock, Texas, mam,” he said, proudly.

“Texas? I thought all Texans were least six feet tall...lean and mean.” Hunnicut was barely five foot six and a little on the plump side.

“No mam. I think it’s the high-heeled boots and the tall hats that give people that impression.” Pleased with his comeback, Hunnicut was feeling more confident.

Renee was beginning to like the little guy. “You know, I hadn’t thought about it in that way, but we really need to be going. Getting through Saigon is always a problem and I don’t want to be late.”

“Yes mam. My car is parked right out front.”

She turned to Sergeant Donnelly. “I’d better be going Sarge. Thanks for the company.”

“My pleasure, Lieutenant. Drive safely.”

“We will.”

Donnelly watched her through the glass front door of Base Operations as she stepped into the staff car. *She is a beautiful woman, he thought. Neither Hunnicut, nor I, could ever tell her that, but there is someone who can. And, if he is as good a man as he is a pilot, they are two very lucky people.*

Airman Hunnicut drove through the main entrance to the base. The guard saw the figure in the back and saluted sharply even before he could see the rank on her shoulders. Better to err on the safe side. That's what they told him in training. Besides, anyone sitting alone in the back seat of a military staff car is almost certain to be an officer. He confirmed that as she drove by and quietly congratulated himself.

They drove through what might be described as a poor man's industrial zone, hastily built just outside the base. It was a patchwork of vendor's in stalls and tin shacks, who sold anything and everything a GI could want. You name it and it could be bought: stereos, cameras, wristwatches, food, drink, clothing, military contraband, and, of course, girls.

A man didn't have to travel all the way to Saigon for an evening's entertainment. He could blow a month's pay in a few hours right outside Bien Hoa's main gate. For these enterprising Vietnamese merchants, the war—particularly with the continuing buildup of American troops—was an economic windfall.

Lafitte's natural curiosity drew her into the seemingly chaotic display of frenzied human enterprise; but it was almost too much for her to take in. White steam drifted lazily into the air from pots of boiling rice, while the pungent smoke from woks frying a variety of fish, meat, and noodles filled the air with a hundred different aromas.

Most of the people were wearing the typical pajama-like costumes, their feet clad in rubber sandals. Some women wore the traditional Ao Dai, while others wore mini skirts, see through blouses, and high spiked-heeled shoes. They were merchants of a different kind, and the product they were selling required a special kind of packaging.

The road was buried under an onslaught of bicycles, motor scooters, pedi-cabs, and conventional taxis (mostly French Renaults). Pedestrian traffic spilled out into the already overburdened street, creating a block party atmosphere. For Lafitte, it brought back memories of New Orleans during Mardi Gras.

Hunnicut was forced to slow to a walk, which made him an easy mark for every kid with a wrist watch or a sister to sell. One of the more brazen mini-skirted 'ladies of the afternoon' propositioned him through his open window. "Heh, GI, where you go...stop here.

I show you good time...only ten American dorrah.” Ignoring the uniformed woman in the back seat, she leaned into the car window and explained—not to mention showed—just what his money could buy. “You like?”

“Airman Hunnicut, I think it would be best if you kept your window rolled up until we get through this.”

“Yes mam, but the air conditioner ain’t workin’ none too good. I think we’re low on coolant.”

“That’s okay. I can deal with the heat inside the car. It’s what’s coming at us from the outside that bothers me. I can’t afford to lose my driver to one of those pretty young girls.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that, mam. I’m just a small town boy from Lubbock. These ladies scare me to death...they surely do.”

“Glad to hear that, Hunnicut, they should.” *I wonder how long it will be before they stop scaring him*, she mused.

The other side of this colorful gauntlet of humanity stood in stark contrast, as though they had entered another world. The ugly nondescript buildings, the frantic activity of an endless sea of people desperate to sell their wares, the smells, the noise...all were suddenly left behind. In its place, as if waved into existence by a magician’s magic wand, was the tranquil beauty of the real Vietnam.

Lafitte and Hunnicut fell silent, as the road that carried them through the “industrial zone” suddenly opened to a vista of lush green countryside that extended to the far horizon. Acres of rice paddies lined both sides of the narrow paved road, reaching to the jungle’s edge two hundred meters away.

In the field a group of men, women, and children were planting new rice shoots by hand. Lafitte captured the image on her Nikon—as she had the very different scenes they saw just moments ago. She would take many pictures before they left this utopian paradox behind them.

There was an old man on an ox drawn cart filled with manure, a woman who was effortlessly balancing a large basket of rice on her head. Lafitte caught her just as she looked up and smiled. Several of her front teeth were missing—a minor physical flaw of no concern to her.

A perceptive Lafitte understood the meaning of the scene even before she snapped the picture. The woman was a mother...the rice she was carrying would feed her family, perhaps for the next few days. She had good reason to smile.

Airman Hunnicut saw a young girl riding a bicycle fifty meters in front of them. She was wearing a white and blue Ao Dai and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a ribbon streaming from it to protect her from the hot sun. “Mam, how about that girl up ahead? Looks like she’d make a great picture.”

“Yes, she would.” Lafitte leaned forward over the front seat and took the shot through the front windshield, and another close up from the side window as they drove by. The girl turned to look at them just as she released the shutter. “She’s beautiful,” she said, almost involuntarily.

“Yes mam, she sure is.”

But, it was more than her physical beauty. Wearing no makeup, she had a look of innocence and purity about her that contrasted sharply with the girls in the “industrial zone.”

When Lafitte’s mind could finally process all she had seen, she summed up their experience: “This girl, the old man, the woman bearing the basket of rice, the family working in the rice fields...these are the ‘real’ people of Vietnam. No, they are Vietnam. And they live in this paradise; one in danger of being destroyed by a war none of them asked for. God help us.”

“Amen,” Hunnicut said solemnly.

When the girl saw them looking at her she turned away, embarrassed. *Americans*, she silently observed. *The boy driving is very handsome*. In another time, and in another place, she and the boy from Texas might have begun a relationship from their chance encounter. The look in their eyes told them as much. But not here...not now. For, just as the war brought them together, so it keeps them apart.

Hunnicut reluctantly drove past the girl, saddened by the fact he would probably never see her again.

The sun shone brightly between the towering cumulus clouds that were forming all around them, when a typical day in Vietnam was turned into a magical one. A brilliant rainbow suddenly appeared in the moisture rich sky and tumbled forth from a giant gray cloud in the distance, casting its arc of brilliant colors upon the workers in the rice fields. They stopped what they were doing, straightened their hunched backs, and looked with wonder into the face of nature. The same ominous gray cloud that had given birth to a beautiful rainbow was also framed in a dazzling halo of light, back-lighted by the sun—a rare manifestation of the poet’s “silver lining.” Lafitte and Hunnicut were as enthralled and humbled by the spectacle as the peasants in the field. “Stop the car, I’ve got to get this picture.”

“Yes mam, I was hoping you would.”

Lafitte got out of the car and used up the remaining film. “It’s breathtaking,” she said. “If I didn’t get these pictures, no one at home would believe it. Percy, do you realize what we’re seeing?” She called him by his first name. It seemed natural, given the special moment they were sharing.

“Ah think so, mam.” Hearing her call him by his given name surprised him, but he liked it. “It’s the prettiest rainbow ah have evah seen.”

“It’s more than that, Percy, it’s magical. People talk about clouds with silver linings in poems and songs, but I never knew anyone who ever saw one. And, how many people can say they actually stood at the end of a rainbow? I don’t know what to make of it, but I’m thrilled to be a part of it.”

“You’re right, Mam, it is magical.” As he spoke the girl on the bicycle passed them again. Standing outside the car he got a better look at her, and she him. *She’s even prettier up close*, he mused.

This time the girl did not divert her eyes. *He is more handsome than I thought*. The image of his face stayed with her long after he drove out of sight. She was both excited by the encounter and saddened by the loss.

The traffic in downtown Saigon was always slow, but today it was exceptionally bad. The main thoroughfare was so packed with vehicles of every description it looked like a huge parking lot. The flowers lining the center divider were as lovely as ever, but they weren't enough to pacify the frayed nerves of the motorists sweltering in their cars. The discordant sound of a thousand horns reverberated off the surrounding buildings and shattered the polluted air, as it echoed back to the street with a vengeance.

They were only about four blocks from the Caravelle hotel, but it may as well have been four miles. Directly ahead of them was City Hall; across from it, the American Embassy, and a few blocks away on the opposite side of the road was the famous old Continental Hotel. Lafitte had heard that their French restaurant rivaled the best in Paris. She put it on her list of places to visit in Saigon—a truly unique city, whose architecture reflected its French colonial heritage.

“Can you see what’s causing the delay?”

“Not yet, Lieutenant, but it seems like the traffic further up, near the Caravelle, is moving. Whatever’s causing the delay has to be a little ways ahead. Ah’ve noticed there are more police around than usual—Vietnamese and American Military Police.”

“Something must have happened,” she said, “something a lot worse than a traffic accident.”

One of the American MP's saw the staff car and walked over.

"It looks like your answer is coming our way now," Hunnicut said.

Lafitte rolled down her window to talk to the MP. He stopped beside the car and saluted smartly.

"Afternoon, Lieutenant, I'm Sergeant Logan. Thought you might like to know what's causing the delay."

"Thanks, Sergeant. We're on our way to the airbase and running late. What happened?"

"There was a bombing less than two blocks from here."

"A bombing?"

"Well, not exactly a bombing. Someone tossed a live grenade into a bar packed with off duty GI's and bar girls."

"My God! Was anyone hurt?"

"Afraid so, mam. I can't give you a casualty count, but it looks bad. Some of the dead and severely injured are lying on the sidewalk; others are still being carried out. The medics are doing all they can, but its more than they can handle. We're trying to keep one lane open so traffic can keep moving through. However, with all the confusion and the additional police and medical vehicles coming and going, it's been almost impossible."

"I can certainly understand why. Did they catch the guy who did it?"

“No mam, and it was a girl...drove by on a motor scooter and casually tossed a grenade into the bar as though she were delivering a newspaper. No one suspected anything until it was too late to stop her, or warn the people inside. She was described as being very young, and wearing the traditional Vietnamese dress.”

“You mean the Ao Dai.” Lafitte recalled the first time Viktor and she had breakfast at the Officer’s club. Mai was wearing a pink Ao Dai.

“Yes mam. I think that’s what it’s called.”

“It is. A friend of mine explained that bit of Vietnamese culture to me, the same friend I’m on my way to see off at Tan San Nhut; that is, if I can get there in time. His flight leaves at 1830.”

“Say no more, Lieutenant. Have your driver follow my lead.”

Walking ahead of them, Sergeant Logan had the cars blocking their way move off to the side allowing Hunnicut to pass into the far right lane, which was kept clear for emergency and police vehicles. That enabled them to get around the bottleneck. Unfortunately, it would also give them a disturbingly close look at the torn bodies sprawled on the sidewalk, and the walking wounded staggering out of the bar.

Laffite counted five bodies, men and women, lying in pools of their own blood. Those still alive were being administered to by medics. As they drove slowly by they saw a young GI being helped into an ambulance. A blood-soaked bandage wrapped around his head covered both eyes. Fragments of glass from the beer bottle he was holding were blown into them. The hand that was holding it was gone.

A young Vietnamese girl stumbled out of the bar screaming hysterically, her blouse in shreds and covered in blood, but it wasn't hers. It belonged to the soldier she was sitting with when the grenade went off, killing him instantly, but miraculously leaving her unhurt. Disoriented, she tried to run into the crowd, but was stopped by one of the Army medics who wrapped a blanket around her and held her in his arms. She was shaking uncontrollably.

Lafitte and Hunnicut were shocked by the horrific scene. Neither of them had ever seen the war this close before.

When Lafitte spoke her voice trembled. "That poor girl. She wasn't physically harmed, but the psychological scars will haunt her for the rest of her life. And the American soldier...what will become of him? Will he lose the sight as well as his right hand?"

Mercifully, their staff car made it through, and the terrible carnage was put behind them.

“Mam, ah nevah saw anything so horrible in all my life. How could anyone do such a thing?”

“I don’t know, Percy. Perhaps no one does. If they did, we wouldn’t be here.”

Once past the Caravelle Hotel traffic moved faster. They made a left turn in front of City Hall, putting them on the road leading out of Saigon.

“That’s the American Embassy to the left, Lieutenant. Looks like they’re on increased alert. Everything is locked down.”

“Yes,” Lafitte acknowledged.

“We’ll be in Tan San Nhut in about twenty minutes.”

Lafitte looked at her watch. “Twenty minutes. That will get us there at 1720 hours, forty minutes before they have to board...not much time.”

They didn’t speak the rest of the trip, their minds constantly besieged with the horrific sights and sounds of the gruesome scene they left behind.

“Tan San Nhut just ahead, Lieutenant.”

The guard at the main gate saluted as Hunnicut drove through. Lafitte returned his salute, but it was more of a involuntary reflex than a conscious act.

The road to the air terminal divided the base into two distinct sections. On the left was the flight line, and all facilities required for flight operations. To the right was 7th Air Force Headquarters, and everything else needed to support a small town of about four thousand people.

Hunnicut stopped at the air terminal entrance and got out to open the door for Lieutenant Lafitte, but she was already out of the car. “Sorry mam, I’m a little slow today.”

“No need to be, Percy. I could have waited, but I’m not used to having doors opened for me, and I am a little pressed for time.”

“Will you be needing a ride back to Bien Hoa, Lieutenant?”

“Yes. When will you be leaving?”

“The two officers ah’m to meet should arrive at 1845. Allowing about thirty minutes for them to get off the plane and collect their luggage, I expect we’ll be ready to leave at about 1915. Does that work for you?”

“Almost perfectly. It will even give me some time to relax over a cup of coffee. After all we’ve been through today, I’m going to need it. Would you mind coming to get me at the snack bar?”

“No mam. For you, it would be a pleasure.” He saluted. The Lieutenant was no longer just an officer to him, but a new friend, with whom he shared a day that neither of them would ever forget. He watched her walk away until she disappeared into the terminal. “Whoever she’s meeting,” he heard himself say, “he’s one lucky fella.”

20

Departing Saigon

Lafitte walked into the terminal and headed for the snack bar. She saw them immediately, but—distracted by Garelli’s endless patter—Kracek didn’t see her as she made her way through the sea of people. She called his name. “Viktor!”

Although the airport was noisy, Kracek turned at the sound of her voice and instantly spotted her in the crowd. He rushed into her arms and hugged her so close it took her breath away. Such a show of public affection was uncharacteristic of him.

“Viktor,” she gasped, “what will all these people think?”

“I don’t care, I’m just happy to see you.”

“So am I,” she said. “Sorry I’m late. There was a bombing...”

He interrupted her last words before they could be fully processed in his mind. “You’re here now, that’s all that matters. Bert’s with me. We’re sitting over...bombing? Did you say bombing? Where? How? Wait, I’m sure he’ll want to hear this too.”

Garelli stood up to greet them as they approached, and he and Lafitte exchanged greetings.

“I’m so happy to see you again, Bert. You’re looking fit.”

“Me too,” he replied. “And you are as beautiful as ever. But you look tired...something wrong?”

“There was a bombing in Saigon, and Renee witnessed the aftermath up close,” Kracek explained.

“That’s right,” she said. “Someone threw a grenade into a bar near the Caravelle Hotel—a popular hangout for GI’s.”

“I know the area,” Kracek said. “I stayed at the Caravelle last year. The air base didn’t have enough housing to accommodate the sudden influx of new Forward Air Controllers, so they put us up in hotels downtown.”

“You didn’t tell me this was your second tour, Viktor.”

“I guess it never came up,” he replied.

She just shook her head, wondering what else he had not told her, then continued. “The MP, who guided us through the traffic jam, also told us that the attacker was a just school girl. Can you believe that?”

Kracek didn't respond immediately. His mind was flooded with images of the carnage. “Goddamn this war! There's no place you can go where you can feel safe. You never know who the enemy is until it's too late. He, or she, might be sitting next to you in one of a thousand Saigon bars: a street peddler, a shoeshine boy...even a girl on a motor bike. They never trained us for this. How could they?”

“Any casualties?” Bert asked, somber faced.

“Sgt. Logan, the MP that got us through the jammed traffic, couldn't give us an accurate count, but as we drove by I saw a half a dozen people lying on the sidewalk, drenched in blood. Others stumbled out of the bar in a continuous stream. Half of the wounded were GI's, the other half bar girls. The medics were doing all they could, but were unable to cope with so many wounded and traumatized people. It was awful. I never saw anything like it in my life. I felt so helpless, I...” Still shaken, Renee could no longer hold back the tears.

Kracek took her in his arms and held her tightly. “I know, I know...it's okay. I'm just thankful you're safe.”

“I was so worried I wouldn’t get here in time see you off,” she said. “They must be ready to board the plane.”

Garelli looked at his watch. “In about twenty minutes...enough time for a drink. What can I get you, Renee?”

“Nothing, Bert...thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I just need a few minutes to regain my composure.”

“If you two don’t mind then, I’m going to find something to read on the plane.”

“You go ahead, Bert,” Kracek said, “but listen up for the boarding call.”

“Will do.” He flashed a thumbs up and walked away. His limp was barely noticeable.

“He looks healthy,” Lafitte observed.

“He heals fast. A few weeks at home with his wife and kids and he’ll be as good as new.”

Before they turned away, a small Vietnamese boy carrying a shoeshine box approached Garelli and tugged on his arm. “Shine GI? I make number one shine.”

It startled him. Remembering Kracek's words, he politely refused the boy's offer and instantly hated himself for doing it. The youngster reminded him of his own son. "Christ, Bert," he chided himself, "he's just a kid trying to stay alive in this God forsaken place."

He took a five dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to him. When the boy saw the size of the bill his eyes lit up, and a broad grin spread across his expressive little face, revealing a missing front tooth. Taking the money with both hands he bowed and repeated the Vietnamese word for thank you several times before running off to join his two friends watching from the side. They were also carrying shoeshine boxes.

Garelli looked back at his friends and smiled, then gave them a knowing wink before heading over to the newsstand.

"He's a good man," Lafitte said.

That he is, "Kracek said." "You know, of course, that excusing himself to buy a magazine was just a pretext to give us some time alone."

"I know. Let's not waste it."

They talked about many things, studiously avoiding any mention of the war, Kracek's's trip to Washington, or anything remotely negative that might spoil the few minutes they had. They recalled more pleasant memories: the first time they met, dinner at the 'O' Club, their first night together. Their relationship was barely a week old, yet it seemed as though they had known each other forever. Perhaps their love for each other just made it seem that way.

Although they managed to keep the war out of the conversation, neither of them could keep it out of their thoughts. Despite its negatives, it did bring them together. But things can change quickly in Vietnam, and she could not help but wonder if the war would also tear them apart. Could his trip to Washington be the first ominous step?

"Renee, what's wrong? You look sad."

"I'm sorry Viktor. I know we agreed to keep the war from spoiling our last few minutes together, but I couldn't help thinking about it, and how it has affected our lives—ours, and so many others."

"It's always there, isn't it, hanging over us like a dark cloud. But, there is no point in worrying about something beyond our control, and you certainly have nothing to be sorry about."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

“For your understanding...for helping me see things as they are...for taking away my sorrow.” Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke.

Before the first tear could run down her lovely face, Kracek reached across the table and took her hands in his. “Renee, my beautiful Renee, have I ever told you that I love you?”

“No...yes...but hearing you say it now, in this way...it seems like the first time.”

“I’ll say it again, I love you! I love you more with every moment that passes. Erin’s death left a huge void and sadness in my life. The void, I was able fill with my flying and my work, but the sadness never left, not until I met you. Now, everything I do and everything I accomplish has meaning again, and I’m happy.”

“Viktor, your words sound like echoes of my own thoughts. I love you too, so very much. Although we’ve only known each other a short time I’ve never been more sure of my feelings, or less afraid to embrace them. I know I should be more wary, but, oddly enough, I’m not You, your love, took away my fear. Whatever the future may hold I’ll never regret our time together, however short or long it may be.”

As Renee spoke, his eyes never left hers. The coffee shop was crowded with people, mostly military personnel, but also civilians—reporters, or embassy employees, perhaps. Some of them would no doubt be on the same flight. All were engaged in conversation, eating, drinking, or trying to flag down a harried waitress to take their order. More people filed in looking for an empty table. A few were leaving.

Despite the dissonant mix of loud voices and the steady flow of people brushing past the backs of their chairs, Kracek was like a man in a trance. All he could see, all he could hear, was Renee. She was equally indifferent to the crush of people and noise. They felt as though they had slipped into another dimension where only the two of them existed...enveloped in a aura of indescribable beauty.

“Do you feel it?” He asked.

“Yes, she whispered. Is it what I think it is?”

“It is.”

“But, I’ve never felt anything like this before. How can I know?”

“For that very reason, because it’s an experience like none other you’ve ever known; one so rare, that few people encounter it in their lifetime. You never read about it in books. What writer could possibly put it into words?”

“How can you be so sure, Viktor? Has it happened to you before?”

“Yes, with Erin. When it happened to us we knew instinctively that we were experiencing something unique and wonderful.”

Yes, she thought, I did “know” the moment it began. Doubt entered my mind only when I tried to explain it with logic. She was about to tell that to him, but never got the chance.

“Viktor, didn’t you hear it?” Bert asked, as he approached their table. “Pam Am Flight 816 is boarding through Gate Three.”

“This is it,” Viktor said. “Will you walk with us to the gate?”

“You couldn’t keep me away.”

Garelli had his ticket and passport ready and was about to go through the gate.

Renee stopped him. “Bert, you’re not going to leave without giving me a big hug are you?”

He didn’t need any more coaxing than that. He took her in his arms and hugged her warmly. “Goodbye, Renee. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Bert.” Whispering in his ear, she said: “Look after him for me.”

“You bet,” he said, with a wink, then let her go and handed his ticket to the attendant.

Viktor and Renee waited until the last of the passengers filed through the gate. Taking her in his arms again, he said: “I love you.”

“And I love you, Viktor. I know you’ll be busy, but try to think of me sometime. More importantly, come back to me.”

“I will.”

They kissed one last time before letting each other go. She watched him disappear through the flight line door, then walked back to a nearly empty snack bar and sat down at the same table she and Viktor had just vacated. She ordered a coffee and waited for Airman Hunnicut.

21

Pan Am Flight 816

The stewardess checked his ticket as he stepped into the Boeing 707, and directed him to the right side of the First Class section. Kracek thanked her and followed the passengers ahead of him to the other side of the plane before turning left into First Class. Garelli was only a few rows away, but an army lieutenant colonel was putting his bag in the overhead compartment. He waited for him to take his seat.

“For a while there I didn’t think you were going to make it.”

“Neither did I, Bert. Leaving her behind was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.”

Kracek put his briefcase in the overhead compartment. Except for his camera it was the only carry-on he allowed himself. Fighter pilots travel light by necessity. There's not much room for luggage in an F-100. Aside from his orders and other papers, the briefcase contained toilette articles, a change of underwear, socks, and a new shirt. It was going to be a long flight and he wanted to arrive in Washington clean and refreshed, if not rested.

Also included in the case were a writing tablet, pens, and pencils. He would utilize the long hours of air time ahead of them to draft the remarks he might be making before the Joint Session of Congress.

Taking the aisle seat he fastened his belt, checked the backrest, air vent control, radio channels, life vest, etc. "Everything checks out here," he said, jokingly. "Ready for lift-off. How about you Garelli?"

"What?" Caught off guard by Kracek's uncharacteristic humor, Garelli, quickly recovered and played along. "Right, I'm good to go here, Captain. 'Let's get this crate' in the air," he shot back, recalling a line from in old Clark Gable movie.

"What are you talking about, Lieutenant?" Kracek admonished, straight-faced. "We're not flying this airplane. They've got a very capable crew up front, so just sit back and enjoy the ride."

"But you said...I mean, I was just..."

“Gotcha!”

“So, you do have a sense of humor after all. You ought to let it out more often.” *I’m glad he’s able to take his mind off Renee, but I owe him,* he mused.

‘Would you like something to drink sir?’

Kracek looked up at an attractive brunette by the name of Susanne—the name on her plastic badge. “Yes, I would, Susanne, Johnny Walker Black and water, please.”

“You got it, Captain.”

He watched her drop the ice cubes in the glass, pour the scotch, and add the water. She handed it to him with a bag of pretzels. “Here you are, sir.” Kracek took the glass and thanked her.

She looked at Garelli. “And you, Lieutenant?”

“A beer would be fine, mam.”

“No, it would not; it would be ‘dear,’” she corrected, with a smile.

“What?”

Susanne explained. “On one of my flights to Libya, a passenger once told me, and I quote, “Wine is fine, beer is dear, but whiskey is risky.”

“He sounds like a very wise man.”

“He was also a big flirt. So, what will it be, Bud, Becks, San Miguel...”

“It doesn’t matter; they all taste the same to me. Why don’t you pick one.” Garelli flashed the smile that melted many a female’s heart.

Great smile, she noted. She could tell by the tone of his voice that he wasn’t just being flippant. Usually shy, she surprised herself by stepping out of character and in a deliberately affected voice said: “Okay soldier, it’s your funeral.” Popping the cap on a Beck’s, she poured half of it into a glass and handed it and the bottle to him with a bag of pretzels and a not so shy wink.

“Thank you, mam.” *She’s pretty*, he noted. *This trip may go faster than I thought.*

“You’re welcome.” *He’s cute, but already taken*, she mused, noticing the wedding band on his finger. *Still, having him on board should keep things interesting*. She moved on to the army colonel sitting across the aisle, a row behind them.

Kracek glanced back as she served him a coffee, and took inventory of the seven rows of ribbons that dominated the left side of his jacket. At the top was the Congressional Medal of Honor. He wondered what story it had to tell. Next to it was the Navy Cross, followed by the Silver Star with two oak leaf clusters, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, and an assortment of campaign ribbons that told of his service in three major conflicts. Army Aviator Wings, a Master Parachutist’s Badge, and the Combat Infantrymen’s Badge framed the colorful splash of ribbons in silver and blue.

If Kracek didn’t know what Audi Murphy looked like from his Hollywood movies, which included his life story, “To Hell and Back,” he might have assumed that Murphy and the Colonel were one and the same. But, Audie’s boyish good looks and small stature belied the deeds of the most decorated soldier to survive World War II. One would not make that mistake with this man. He looked every bit the part.

A once broken nose, a square-set jaw, and a muscular physique even his uniform couldn't hide, made that very evident. The small scar above his right eye added to the warrior persona. His closely cropped black hair was streaked with gray, and his steel blue eyes, set deep in an almost handsome face, seemed to hold a thousand magnificent adventures.

Kracek was quick to recognize such men when he met them. He made a mental note to introduce himself later, as he settled back in his seat.

Flight 816 was little more than half full. There were only six other passengers in first class. Two of them—an Army nurse and her young patient—were sitting in the left front row of seats. A bandage covered the soldier's right ear and his right leg was amputated at the knee. He wasn't blind, yet he stared off into space, seeing nothing.

The tragic scene invoked an unspoken curse from Kracek. *This goddamned war didn't just take his leg, it took his soul!*

The soldier's nurse, a petite, plain looking woman not much older than her charge, took care of him with the same love and compassion she would give a younger brother. Though not physically beautiful, she had the voice of an angel—kind and soothing. It took his mind off his pain.

“It’s strange how war not only brings out the worst in us, but the best as well.” Kracek said.

“Yeah,” Garelli somberly acknowledged.

Kracek knew there was a message in the apparent contradiction, but was too tired to pursue it. The scotch was already making him drowsy. He put his unfinished drink on the fold-down tray and laid his head back.

From his window seat Garelli watched the ground crew go through their preflight tasks. Once completed, the yellow tow vehicle hooked up to the nose wheel of the Boeing 707 and slowly pushed it backwards into the taxi lane. He was about to tell his friend, but stopped himself when he saw that he was already asleep.

It was a short reprieve. Kracek was awakened by the familiar sound of the huge jet engines at full military power, and felt the sudden forward thrust as the Captain released brakes to begin the takeoff roll. He observed approvingly, as the pilot smoothly rotated the nose of aircraft to flying attitude and eased the big jet safely into the air. Not until the landing gear was neatly folded into the airframe did he settle back in his seat again, wondering what this journey held for him. Sleep would come before the answer.

About an hour later: “Captain, Captain,” Susanne said, as softly as she could and still be heard.

He felt her hand gently nudge his shoulder, and opened his eyes to see her lovely face looking down at him.

“Sorry to wake you sir. Would you care for dinner?”

“Oh...yes, I would. Thanks.”

“New York Strip, or grilled salmon.”

“The steak, please.”

She placed a steak dinner on his tray and rolled the serving cart to the next row.

“Good choice.” Garelli said. He had already taken a few bites of his own meal.

“I have a hunch we couldn’t have gone wrong with the salmon either, Bert.”

“You’re probably right. You know, I think I could get used to this first class stuff.”

“So could I.” Kracek took a bite of his dinner. “You’re right about the steak.”

That was about the extent of their conversation until they finished the meal. They hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast at Bien Hoa.

Susanne appeared with a fresh pot of coffee. “More coffee, Captain?”

“Thanks...I’ve had enough.”

“How about you, Lieutenant?”

“You bet.” Garelli handed her his cup.

Kracek retrieved his briefcase from the overhead compartment, took out his toothbrush and toothpaste and headed for the rest room. On his way back to his seat he noticed several people sitting in the lounge, enjoying an after dinner drink. Returning his briefcase to the overhead, he suggested they do the same.

“Sounds like a plan to me, Lead.”

“Maybe, but I’ve never had any of them work out exactly as briefed. I’ve had to improvise more times than I like to admit.”

“Improvisation, so that’s what you were doing when you damn near ploughed up the rice paddy with your airplane—not to mention the people in it.”

The lounge occupied an area about ten feet deep in the front part of the first class section. Bench seats conformed to the curved sides of the aircraft fuselage. Each section had its own similarly shaped coffee table and could accommodate seven people.

Two civilians occupied the seats on the right and were already half way through their first drink. They had taken their jackets off and loosened their ties, and saying something about a deadline. Reporters no doubt. The colonel was sitting alone on the left sectional. The name tag above his right breast pocket read P.J. Martin.

Kracek made the obvious connection. *It must be him. There can't be two Martins with the stack of ribbons he's wearing.*

“Colonel Martin?”

The Colonel looked up. “Yes?”

“Colonel Phillip J. Martin?” Kracek repeated, using his full name to be absolutely sure he was who he thought him to be.

“That’s right, Captain, but you have me at a disadvantage. Have we met before?”

“Not exactly sir, but we have worked together.”

He checked his name tag. “Kracek, yes, Captain Viktor Kracek. We have worked together, and on one of the hairiest missions I’ve ever been involved in since coming to Vietnam. They told me you might be on this flight. It’s good to see you.” Martin stood up to shake Kracek’s hand. “I looked forward to thanking you personally for what you did for us that day.

“You and your wingman put on a hell of a show. I’ve never seen bombs delivered so accurately under such poor lighting conditions, and without the benefit of a qualified Forward Air Controller. If it wasn’t for you our guys would have been overrun, and twenty four of the Army’s finest would have been lost. We are in your debt.”

“That’s kind of you Colonel, but no one’s in debt to anyone. We were all just doing our jobs, except you.

“Me?”

“Yes, sir. You may not be certified in the position, but you performed as effectively as any FAC I’ve ever seen.”

Martin was about to respond when Kracek continued. “There’s someone else I’d like you to meet, my wingman, Lieutenant Robert Garelli.”

“Of course, the look on his face told me he had to be there. Bert, isn’t it? Thanks, for just doing your job.” As he shook his hand, Martin looked at Kracek and winked.

“It was our pleasure, sir. Call again, anytime,” Garelli said.

“I’ll remember that. I’ve heard so much about the both of you, I feel as though I already know you.”

“We’ve also heard about you, Colonel,” Kracek said. “I suspect we got our information from the same source.”

“Of course, Lt. Garrett, one of the finest young officers I’ve ever served with.”

Kracek took note Martin’s carefully chosen his words, placing himself *with* his men, rather than above them. He treated his soldiers like he would his peers, because he understood, better than most commanders, that to lead other men in battle was not only an enormous responsibility, but a unique privilege. His belief in that idea is what made him the leader he is; one whose men would follow him anywhere, do anything he asked of them.

“Now that we’ve been properly introduced would you join me for a drink?” Martin asked.

“We’d be honored, sir.”

As though waiting to be cued, the stewardess arrived with the Colonel’s drink and placed it on the coffee table. “Your bourbon on the rocks, sir.”

She looked at Kracek, who didn’t wait for her to ask. “A scotch and water, please.”

“Yes sir. Black Label, right?”

“Right.” *She must have exchanged notes with Susanne,* he thought.

A look into his eyes, told her that there was something different about him. He was not at all typical of the fighter pilots she had met before. The additional time she spent taking his order did not go unnoticed.

Garelli interrupted her reverie. "I'll have a Beck's, please."

"Oh, yes sir," she said, embarrassed. "I'll be right back with your drinks gentlemen."

For crying out loud, Garelli thought, she likes him.

The Colonel saw it too. "Captain Kracek, I believe you just stole that young lady's heart."

"It was kind of obvious, wasn't it, Colonel?" Garelli said.

"She doesn't know that Viktor just left the love of his life back at Tan San Nhut."

"Is that true, Captain?"

Kracek tried to deflect the question, suggesting that Garelli sometimes reads more into things than are actually there.

"Really? Judging by your reaction, I'd say he was right on the mark."

"You know Colonel, I've heard some Green Berets refer to you as the 'Delta Fox'. Now I see why. Yes, there is someone, but I'm not comfortable talking about my personal life."

"Of course, Viktor, I didn't mean to pry." Realizing he called him by his first name, he asked: "May I call you Viktor?"

“I prefer it, sir.”

“So do I,” Martin replied. “My friends call me Joe, and I consider the two of you my friends. By the way, ‘Delta Fox’ is one of the nicer names I’ve been given. Some of the others, such as Phillip the Masochist and Old Iron Ass are not as complimentary.”

“Never heard those,” Kracek said.

“Me neither,” Garelli seconded.

“You wouldn’t. But I don’t mind. In fact, I take it as a compliment...an indication that I’m making a positive impact. If they didn’t respect me, and trust me to lead them through whatever we have to face out there, they wouldn’t waste their time dreaming up imaginative nicknames.”

“I see your point,” Kracek said.

“Do you?” Then you’ve no doubt heard the old Army adage, first coined by an old sergeant in Washington’s Revolutionary Army, which is: ‘If the troops aren’t complaining, something must be wrong.’ The nickname thing kind of falls into the same category of ‘grunt’ philosophy.”

“Yes sir, I am familiar with the expression. But I was told that it was originated by a U.S. Marine Gunnery Sergeant, while the Marines were being led across the Libyan desert by Lt. Perry to take Tripoli.” Kracek knew his rejoinder would get a rise out of the Colonel.

Garelli cringed. *Guess he can't help himself. Taking risks is part of his nature.*

“Are you contradicting me, Captain?” Martin said.

Garelli's face turned a shade lighter as he braced himself for the worst.

“No sir. I was just passing on something I picked up from some ‘barracks lawyer’ during my stint in the Marines. Even as young and naïve as I was then, I never put much stock in their ‘words of wisdom.’ I often wondered how someone with no more experience than me could know so much.”

Martin smiled like someone who knew exactly what Kracek was talking about. “Garrett said you were in the Corps...the First Marine Division?”

“Yes sir...in Korea.”

“Infantry, right? So, before you climbed into the cockpit of a jet fighter you were a ‘grunt,’ just like us. Your stock went up several points when I heard that. It explains the aggressiveness and cool under fire you displayed out there.

“By the way, I also spent some time in the Marines. I was assigned as Army Liaison to the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, and fought with them at the Chosen Reservoir. To stand with such brave men during one of the fiercest battles of the war, under the harshest conditions imaginable was an honor, one I will never forget.”

“Christ, Colonel, that’s the same outfit I was in when I got to Korea almost two years later. That explains the Navy Cross you’re wearing. I was curious about that. Now I know why...”

No, Viktor, you don’t. I didn’t do anything more than a dozen other marines I was with, one of whom saved my life. He was also awarded the Navy Cross, posthumously. Gunnery Sergeant Zachary Howard was the most courageous man I’ve ever known, a warrior among warriors.

“You can understand now, the respect I hold for the Marines Corps. Most of us in the army do, particularly those of us in Special Forces. The rivalry that exists between our two services doesn’t diminish the mutual respect we share, or the bond that unites us as soldiers. You are both a land and air warrior, and I’m honored to call you my friend.”

“The honor is mine, sir, and we share the same distinction.”

Kracek extended his hand.

Martin met it half way and clasped it firmly. “By the way, regarding that disputed quote mentioned earlier, I have a confession to make. I also got my information from a ‘barracks lawyer,’ and I have no more reason to believe my source than you do yours.”

Garelli breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“Did you say something, Bert?” Martin asked.

“Oh, no sir. I was just thinking.”

Rachel arrived just in time to save Garelli from embarrassment. “Your drinks gentlemen. Refill, Colonel?”

“No thanks, I’m still working on this.”

“I’d like one, Rachel.” The voice that came from behind her was that of the Captain of Pam Am Flight 816, Timothy L. Jackson; a man in his mid thirties, with auburn hair that was cut closer to the military style than the long-haired fashion of the day—no doubt because he also flew F-102’s for the Florida National Guard on his free weekends. His face was not easily distinguished from a thousand others, but his eyes were unusual if not strange. The iris’s were so small, that in the sun, or a well lighted room, they were practically lost in the gray of his pupils.

He turned to Kracek and extended his hand. “Viktor Kracek. I saw your name on the manifest. How long has it been...eight years?”

“Tim Jackson...I’ll be damned. How the hell are you?” Kracek stood up and took his hand. “Yeah, I guess it has. I had no idea you were flying the Pacific route. Weren’t you with United Airlines?”

“I was. That is, I started out with them. I switched to Pan Am when they made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, one that better fit my lifestyle. You haven’t change a bit.”

“Neither have you. But before we start reminiscing about our cadet days, I’d like to you meet some friends of mine. This is Colonel Martin.”

Martin stood up to shake his hand. In his dress green uniform, decorated with practically every medal it was possible to own, he was an impressive figure.

“It’s a real pleasure to meet you, sir.” Jackson couldn’t turn his eyes away from Martin’s amazing array of ribbons and medals.

“Likewise,” Martin said, ignoring the obvious fascination Jackson had for the left side of his chest. “Any friend of Viktor’s is a friend of mine.”

Kracek continued the introductions. “And this is Lt. Bert Garelli, who recently had his baptism under fire...up close and very personal.”

“Bert...pleased to meet you. Up close and personal, eh? I’d like to hear more about that.”

“Always happy to meet a friend of Viktor’s.” Garelli let Jackson’s last remark go without comment.”

“Would you gentlemen mind if I join you?” Tim asked.

“Not at all,” Martin said. I was hoping you’d have time to visit.”

Rachel waited patiently while they completed their introductions. “What will you have, Captain?”

“Make it a double scotch on the rocks,” he said, with a wink unseen by the others.

Garelli, Kracek, and Martin, all looked at him incredulously.

“Just kidding,” he said, smiling. “I’ll have my usual coffee, Rachel.”

“Yes sir.” She was enjoying her part in the Captain’s little joke.

“I think we were had, gents,” Martin said. “Viktor, if your cadet friend is as good a pilot as he is a stand-up comic we might just make it back to the ‘real world’ in one piece.”

“No worries there. But to tell you the truth, I’ve never seen this side of him. It must be something that happens to you when you have so little to do on these long over water flights.”

“You got it partly right.” Jackson said. “It also has to do with trying to figure out how to impress these beautiful ‘stews’ over drinks at the hotel bars we often find ourselves in. I obviously can’t do it with my looks, but you’d be surprised how fast women warm up to you when you can make them laugh.”

“He’s got a point there,” Garelli said.

“Now there’s a man who appreciates the power of humor.”

“You don’t know how true that is,” Kracek said. “You and Bert should get along fine. Tell me Tim, how did you make it into the left seat so fast? I never expected to see you come through that door wearing four stripes on your sleeves.”

“As you know, Viktor, the airlines are going through an expansion phase, acquiring new routes and increasing their jet fleets, especially for the long distance hauls. Boeing, Lockheed, and the others, can’t build them fast enough to keep up with demand. Pan American Airlines—to a lesser extent, TWA—was best positioned to capitalize on the situation, but found themselves short of jet-qualified pilots. That’s when they approached me—and a lot of other guys—with an offer I couldn’t refuse, a choice of domicile and a guaranteed promotion to Captain within five years.”

“I’ll say. That must make you one of the youngest in the industry.”

“Not quite. Someone else has me beat by about three weeks. However, while we may be among the youngest in today’s fleet, neither of us is anywhere near the youngest to ever fly for Pan Am. When they were just getting started, some of their first Captains were only in their twenties.”

“Are you serious?” Garelli asked.

“The opportunities for pilots in those early days were unlimited. We thought we’d never see that kind of opportunity again, but here we are—something you may want to consider, Viktor. I know how much you love flying fighters, but if you were ever going to make the move this would be the time.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. You’re right, I do love flying, and I’m not ready to give up my formula one racer to drive a bus.”

“I hear you, and you don’t have to. I do my ‘formula one’ racing on weekends flying F-102’s for the Florida Guard. You could do the same.”

“It sounds tempting, but it’s more than a love of flying that keeps me in. I love the job. It takes me to places all over the world, and not just for one night stands. The opportunity to experience new cultures, different languages, and political systems has taught me a lot about the world and the people in it. I’m not the same naïve kid who joined the Marines thirteen years ago. I’m older and wiser—wise enough to know that there’s much more to learn. In the Air Force I have the opportunity to do that.

“After all, where else would a young man be given the responsibilities I’ve been given? Each new assignment, each new job, each new problem I face is a challenge, and I thrive on challenge. Hell, I need it as much as I need to fly, probably more. So, as long as the Air Force provides me with interesting jobs, and recognizes my work, I’ll stay where I am.”

Martin understood exactly what his friend was talking about. “Viktor, you’re beginning to impress me as much with your verbal skills as you do with your flying. I’ve never heard the case for a military career made so convincingly, or with as much conviction. Your words come across loud and true. I’ll remember them the next time one of my men needs career counseling.”

“Thanks, Colonel. Coming from you that’s a real compliment.”

“Just stating the obvious. I would also suggest—should you ever decide on a career change—that you seriously consider writing.”

“I’ve been told that before. I do like to write, and I have been thinking about doing a book. In fact, it’s a goal I set for myself a long time ago.”

“Okay Viktor, you win,” Tim said. “I should’ve known better than try to recruit you. Hell, you almost convinced me to give up my position with Pam Am and go on full-time active duty. But I also love what I’m doing, and I’m not ready to give up the perks that go with this job. I might work on Bert, though.”

“No way,” Garelli said. “I’m strictly a career officer; though I’ll admit you had me going there for a while. However, Viktor’s eloquent defense of a military career erased any doubts I may have had, and convinced me to stay where I am. That’s the second time he’s ‘rescued’ me.”

Jackson was quick to connect Garelli’s words with Kracek’s reference to his “baptism under fire,” and Martin’s remarks about his flying ability. *How could he know about that, unless he had seen him in action. Is it just coincidence, that these three men are traveling together? There’s got to be more to it.* “‘Rescued?’ What do you mean.?”

Garelli started to respond, but Kracek's eyes told him he would rather the subject be dropped. "It's a long story...better left for another time."

"We've got nothing but time," Jackson said. "We won't be starting our approach into Guam for about forty minutes. If that's not enough, we can continue it over a cup of coffee at the flight line snack bar while they refuel the aircraft."

He wasn't going to take no for an answer. Garelli looked at Kracek again, who, seeing that Jackson wasn't going to be put off, shrugged his shoulders and stood up. "You go ahead without me, I've heard it all before. I need to stretch my legs." Excusing himself, he walked towards the back of the first class section and continued into coach. They wouldn't see him again until Garelli had finished telling his "war story."

"Did I say something wrong?" Jackson asked.

"I don't know how he was when you and he were going through flight training," Garelli replied, but Viktor rarely talks about his missions. It's not his style. If you press him he'll give you a watered down version, but that's about it."

“Yeah, that’s him alright; he hasn’t changed a bit. Did you know that he was the second cadet in our class to solo? I was the first, but I had over four hundred hours of flying time, and a commercial pilot’s license, before I even started the program. He, on the other hand, had never even sat in the cockpit of a real airplane before. Once he did there was no stopping him. I’ve never seen a more naturally gifted pilot, or known anyone who loved flying more.

“He was also a perfectionist, who would spend hours alone in a parked airplane going through checklist procedures over and over again until he had them memorized. He was never second again for anything.

“His goal, he told me, was not just to become a pilot, but a fighter pilot. At the time, only the top five percent of the students could be assured of an assignment to fighters after graduating basic flying school. Sometimes even fewer slots were offered, depending on the needs of the Air Force. But, he left nothing to chance. He finished first in our class.

“I remember too, a guy named Brown. He was runner-up to Viktor in almost every phase of training, and not happy about it. Coming in second was something he wasn’t used to, and never learned to accept. He and Viktor both earned fighter assignments.

“I know about Brown,” Garelli said.

“You do?”

“He’s in our squadron. And he still hates Viktor’s guts, more now than he ever did in cadets.”

“How so?”

“You know how intense and competitive Brown is. He sees everything as a contest he has to win. It was drilled into him by his father since he was a boy and, despite his great running ability, he hasn’t been able to outdistance that demon from his past. Now that Viktor has been awarded the Air Force Cross for each of his last two missions he’s more frustrated than ever.

“The other night at the club he tried to goad Viktor into a fight. He was drunk and threw the first punch. It was the biggest mistake of his life; which is what it almost cost him.

In a move so fast none of us could follow it, Viktor blocked it with his left forearm and countered with a right to Brown’s solar plexus.” Garelli demonstrated the move as he spoke. “Before Brown knew what happened, he was down on all fours gasping for air. If Viktor hadn’t acted as quickly as he did to reverse the effects of the blow, he would have died right there.”

Jackson listened in disbelief. He thought he knew his friend—they were roommates in cadets. Yet, he never knew of his martial arts prowess, and had never seen him come close to getting into a fight.

“What happened?”

“When Brown got up there was fire in his eyes. He gave Viktor a look I’ll never forget and stormed out of the club. The animosity between them was raised to a whole new level. Ever since that night, whenever one of them walks into a room with the other there, the tension is so palpable you could cut it with a knife. I hope they never have to fly together.”

“That could be a problem; but, tell me about the missions you alluded to earlier. They don’t hand out the Air Force Cross for a routine sortie. What has my old cadet buddy been up to?”

“It’s a story you’re not going to believe. But, that I’m here to tell it at all, and not lying face down in some stinking rice paddy, or tied to a tree in a Vietcong base camp, is because of him. He saved my life.”

Colonel Martin jumped in before Garelli could continue. “I’ll second that. It wasn’t my life he saved that day, but he and Bert damn sure saved the lives of my men. Despite Viktor’s matter-of-fact characterization of it, we are in their debt, and the Green Berets always repay their debts.”

“This gets more interesting by the minute. But, I’m confused. First, Bert tells me that Viktor saved his life, then you tell me that he and Bert saved the lives of your men...on the same mission?”

“Yeah,” Garelli said, “but in two separate phases. We were scrambled to provide air support for a Special Forces convoy under ambush by the Vietcong, the Colonel’s unit. I was hit by ground fire on my second bombing run. I tried to nurse it home, but flamed out and ejected about twenty five miles short of the field. The second phase of the mission was my rescue.”

“Sounds like you had a busy day.”

“That’s an understatement,” Martin said. “If you don’t mind Bert, I’d like to cover the first phase, since I probably had the best seat in the house.”

Garelli deferred to the Colonel.

Martin described the ambush in vivid detail, as though he was still there. And, by the time Garelli got through telling his side of it, Jackson realized he had heard an incredible story of courage and flying skill. He also understood his friend’s reasons for staying in the Air Force.

22

Once a Marine

Kracek found an empty aisle seat in coach where he could wait out the war stories. Talking about his missions made him uncomfortable, and hearing someone else rehash them was no less tolerable.

A stewardess came by with a tray full of assorted drinks. He took a coffee. She asked the marine corporal sitting next to him if he would like something, but he kept staring out the window, oblivious to what was going on inside the aircraft.

“Let me try, miss. Corporal...corporal.” Kracek tapped him on the shoulder, startling him.

When he saw his rank the young marine practically snapped to attention in his seat. “Yes sir...sorry sir. I was kinda lost in my thoughts.”

“At ease, corporal. War tends to do that to a man. This nice young lady was just offering you a drink.”

“Oh, yes mam...a glass of milk please.”

“Coming right up, soldier, and please don’t call me mam; it makes me feel sooo old. My name is Kathy, and it’s a pleasure to serve you.” Kathy was the ‘girl next door’ type, a blue eyed blonde with a soothing voice that reflected her Carolinian roots.

“I apologize, mam, I mean, Kathy.” Looking into her eyes, it suddenly seemed as if all the problems of his private world melted away. A pretty girl will do that to you, and she was prettier than any girl he had ever seen before.

“Here you go, corporal.” She handed him a container of milk and a clear plastic cup.

“What’s your name, marine?” Kracek asked, as he watched him empty the carton into the cup.

“Boone, sir, Joshua D. Boone. My friends call me Josh, mostly.”

Kracek reached over to shake his hand. “Kracek...Viktor Kracek. Pleased to meet you, Joshua D. Boone. Now that’s a name no one is going to forget. The ‘D’ wouldn’t stand for Daniel, would it?”

“Yes sir, it does. How did you know?”

“Just a guess. You’re probably asked this a lot when you meet people for the first time, but are you related to *the* Daniel Boone we read about in history books?”

“Yes sir, I sure am, he said, proudly, “a direct descendent. My daddy tells me that I got my eye for shooting from him.”

Kracek took note of the Expert Medal Josh was wearing just below the single row of ribbons on his uniform. “I see you earned the Expert Medal. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“Thank you, Captain. I won it in Boot Camp, at Parris Island. It wasn’t so hard, really. The M-16 is a very accurate rifle.”

“I know.” *This is good, Kracek thought. He’s beginning to open up. All he needed was someone to talk to...take his mind off whatever it is that’s troubling him.* “What was your total score.”

“Two hundred and forty eight, sir,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound too boastful.

“Two forty eight. That’s a near perfect score...just two points shy of it. The best I could do was two nineteen, good enough for Sharpshooter. If I remember correctly the range record back then was two forty seven. That was with the old M-1 rifle.”

“You went to Parris Island, sir?”

“I sure did. Like you I wanted to be a marine, and joined shortly after graduating high school. It was the Korean War then—a war no more popular than this one. Still, I wanted to be part of it. I had to be a part of it.”

“You did, sir. Why?” Boone was feeling more at ease. He had never known an officer like him before—one that talked to him, not at him. He felt he could trust him.

“Probably for much the same reason you had when you joined up, Josh. My friends thought I was crazy, and maybe they were right. I only knew that I couldn’t sit home while there was a war going on somewhere in the world in which Americans were getting killed. If there was a bullet out there with my name on it, I couldn’t let anyone else take it for me.”

“By golly sir, that’s exactly why I joined the Marines. My friends told me I was crazy too, but I didn’t know how to explain. Now I understand. A few minutes ago I was doubting myself and this awful war. I kept asking why...why are we in Vietnam? What good are we doing?”

“I’ve seen so many terrible things. I’ve seen my buddies blown to pieces in front of me—parts of them splattered against my flak jacket. I’ve walked into suspected Vietcong hamlets shelled by our artillery, only to find that practically all of the bodies were women, children, and old men. We were ordered to burn their huts, destroy their rice stores, and kill all the animals. The bodies lying in the streets were left there to rot; everything else was burned. They told us to leave nothing the Vietcong could possibly use.”

Hearing his own words was more painful for him than the memories that constantly haunted his mind. You could see the torment in his face as he fought back the tears. “What kind of war is this, sir? How can God-fearing men do such horrible things to each other?”

“I don’t know, Josh. I don’t have the answers. Maybe there are none. No, I don’t believe that. They’re out there somewhere. One day we’ll find them. When, or how, I don’t know that either; nor do I believe will we see the end of war in our lifetime, or our children’s.”

“You paint a real dark picture, Captain. More wars as far into the future as we can see. That’s not a world I want my kids to live in. Isn’t there anything we can do to change it?”

“It’s the only world we’ve got, Josh. Can we change it? Yes, I believe we can—given enough time. We must! But not if we leave it to our political, religious, or intellectual leaders to do it for us; certainly not to our generals and corporate executives.

Yet, even among the groups I just mentioned, there are, and always have been, a few mavericks and forward thinkers, who were willing to risk it all to advance us another step. Patrick Henry, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Teilhard de Chardin, Howard Hughes, and Barry Goldwater (more a maverick, than a forward thinker) are a few that come to mind.

“Unfortunately, the vast majority of people are still mired in the past, and believe their careers are best served by maintaining the status quo. They see change as their enemy. Practically every decision taken by them is made not with our interests in mind, but theirs. If that means going to war to maintain power, or protect corporate profits—despite the potential loss of millions of lives—we go to war!

“The only way we’re going to change this is by changing them; and the only way we are going to change them is by changing us, because they are us.”

Josh was stunned. “I’m sorry sir, but I never heard anyone say such things before. You sound, so...so cynical, if you’ll pardon my saying so.”

“I am cynical, Josh, at least to the extent that I don’t trust our leaders to always act in our best interests. Maybe it’s because I’ve been around a little longer than you have and seen more of this world. But, I think you’ve seen enough this past year to have some doubts of your own. If what you’ve been through in this war hasn’t shaken your confidence in the people who sent us here, then nothing will.”

“You’re right, sir, and it did. Guess I wasn’t ready to let go of the more simple beliefs I held before coming to Vietnam. But after hearing you, I know now I can never go back. I don’t want to. I owe that to the men and women who aren’t going to make it home—and the children I hope to have someday—to do more with my life...something that they, and I, can be proud of.”

Kracek looked at him and smiled. He felt the same sense of pride for the young marine as he would for a younger brother. *He’s a good kid, he’ll be okay*, he thought. “Have you ever considered flying, Josh?”

“Flying?”

“It’s the greatest job in the world—in my opinion, of course. There’s nothing else like it, especially piloting fighter aircraft. To be able to break free of the earth and soar like an eagle through an unlimited expanse of blue sky is a high like none other. In fighters, because they’re faster and more maneuverable, the rush is even greater, as is the challenge to the pilot. It never gets old or boring. Each time you go up is a new experience, one that is never predictable.”

“You make it sound great, like it’s the only job in the world.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but it’s the only one that I want to do. If I could do it for the rest of my working life I would. If I could afford to pay the Air Force for the privilege of flying their airplanes I would gladly do that. The irony is they’re paying me. But don’t tell them I said that.”

“Sounds wonderful, sir, but do I qualify ‘I’ve only got a high school diploma. I thought flight school required a college degree.”

“It does. The Air Force phased out the Aviation Cadet program several years ago. When I went through, it only required a high school certificate; now you need a four year degree. However, the U.S. Navy “NAVCAD” program—for which you are eligible—only requires two years of college, or the completion of the GED equivalency exam. How old are you, Josh?”

“Twenty, sir.”

“Same age I was when I came back from Korea. How much time do you have remaining on your current enlistment?”

“A little more than a year.”

“That’s about what I had left.” Kracek recalled his discussions with Whitfield, and the striking parallels in their lives. He was beginning to feel like a bridge between generations. “Strange,” he said under his breath.

“What, sir?”

“Oh, nothing Josh...just thinking about another conversation I had recently.” He gathered his thoughts and continued where he left off. “From Korea, I was reassigned to the Marine Security Detachment at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, about an hour from my home.

On free weekends I’d take the Long Island Railroad to a small town called Bellmore; then take the bus or walk the mile and a half to my home in North Bellmore, an even smaller town. When we were kids, my friends and I made that same walk every Saturday to a movie house in Bellmore with seventy five cents jingling in our pockets—enough for a ticket, a candy bar, popcorn, and an ice cream sundae after the show.”

Kracek's voice trailed off as images of his childhood flashed before him as vividly as the movies he watched in that little theater. Josh wanted to say something, but couldn't bring himself to disturb what were obviously happy memories for the Captain.

"Sorry, Josh, got a little carried away. They were good times for me—as they should be for any kid. But, war has a way of changing all of that. Nothing saddens me more than knowing that there are millions of children in this world who will never have the same opportunity we did, who will be forced to lose their innocence before they've had a chance to know the joys of childhood.

Their birthright is literally being stolen from them by selfish, narrow minded little men who place their own interests above ours. "This isn't just cynicism talking, Josh, it's anger. Those self-serving sons of bitches truly piss me off."

"I know what you mean, sir." Josh felt his own anger rising within him as he was moved by the impassioned words of a man, who genuinely cared about the plight of our children. "I've seen the war from the ground and got to know the children of Vietnam first hand. They're no different from kids anywhere else in the world. But, unlike that little theater in Bellmore you went to as a boy, the only movie playing in their neighborhood is war. They were born into it, and there's a good chance they'll die in it."

“You’re right, and no child should ever have to bear that burden.” Kracek momentarily paused, deep in thought. “Enough about war, Josh, where do you go from here?”

“To Clarksville, Tennessee, sir...my hometown. Just like you, I’ve been assigned security duty. Isn’t that something?”

“More than you know. Clarksville was my first assignment out of Boot Camp. It was a high security facility, and they were very selective as to who they assigned to it.”

“They still are, sir. I had to have my clearance upgraded to top secret and pass a battery of tests before being accepted.” Amazed over the similar paths of their military careers, Josh began to feel as though he were following in the footsteps of an older brother.

“I took the same tests,” Kracek said, “and I’ll say this: If you can pass them, you have an excellent chance of getting into Navy Flight School.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, but if you’re going to pursue a flying career you’ve got to want it more than anything else.”

“I do, sir. But, until now, I never thought it was possible. Ever since I saw my first airplane, I’ve dreamed about becoming a flyer. I remember it like it was only yesterday. My father took me to a carnival in Nashville when I was eight years old—along with my mom and baby sister who was two years younger than me. It was set up in big grassy field about a mile outside the city, and had the usual tent shows, rides, and games. For me, the biggest attraction of all was a seven minute flight in an old World War I biplane—a New...something or other.”

“Neuport?” Kracek suggested.

“Yes sir, that was it. The pilot looked as old as the airplane. I’ll never forget him. He was a short, plump, rosy cheeked man with a big handlebar mustache and an even bigger smile. He wore an old brown leather jacket, a leather helmet and goggles, a silk scarf, riding britches, and shiny brown boots. What a sight he was.

“What I remember most was his love of flying. When he talked about it his face lit up, his eyes sparkled, and suddenly he was twenty years younger and six inches taller.”

“He sounds a lot my first instructor. Flying wasn’t just a job for him, it was his life. He not only taught me how to fly, but instilled in me the same love for it that he had. I couldn’t have had a better teacher to launch my flying career. I’ll never forget him. By the way, Josh, how was that ride?”

“Never took it, sir.”

“You didn’t?”

“No sir. My Daddy couldn’t afford the ten dollars. It was all he had in his pocket.”

“Sorry to hear that. I’m sure your Dad regrets it even more. He must have felt terrible...probably still does.”

“He does,” Josh said, with a slight sadness in his voice.

“Disappointed as I was, I would’ve felt even worse if he had spent the whole ten dollars on me, knowing that it was all he had for the family. I could also see the pained look in his eyes when he turned me down, and explained why he couldn’t do it. I didn’t let him see my disappointment that day, and I’ve never mentioned it to him since. Yet, every time we’re alone together he brings it up and apologizes again. He’s never forgiven himself.

“I love my Dad more than anything. He’s the finest, most upright man I know. I wish I could do something to take away his hurt.”

Kracek was moved by his story, particularly the love and concern he expressed for his father. Though only eight years old at the time, he had the maturity to understand why his father had to deny him.

“Josh, you’ve already given him the most precious gift any father could hope for, a good and loving son. But, maybe there is something you can do to take away his hurt.”

“There is?” He asked. “How?”

“By taking that flight.”

“By taking...” He started to repeat Kracek’s words. “Yes sir, I think I know what you mean...by going to flight school.”

“Exactly, but only if it’s what you really want. It’s your life. You’ve got to do what’s best for you. Anything else wouldn’t work—not for you, nor for your Dad. If he were here he’d be the first one to tell you that.”

Kracek’s obvious concern touched the young marine deeply. He felt alive again, excited about his future. “You almost sound like him, sir.”

“Do I? You know, Josh, talking to you like this reminds me of something an ancient Chinese philosopher by the name of Lao Tse said a long time ago: ‘When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.’ The quote may not be exact, but the idea is.

“Looking back on my own life, I can see that I’ve always been both a student and a teacher—in fact, we all are. The roles are interchangeable, depending on the circumstances. Today you needed a teacher and I needed a student. I believe—as Lao Tse did—that this is in accord with the natural order of things, more specifically, human relationships. A nice idea, don’t you agree?”

“Yes sir it is. Never thought about it that way, but it’s true. How did you come to know about Louser...er...lou...”

“Lao Tse,” Kracek corrected.

“Yes, Lao Tse,” Josh repeated.

“I read a lot, and I’m a good listener.”

“Gosh, Captain, you must have done a lot of reading and listening.”

Kracek smiled. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the stewardess standing in the aisle next to his seat.

“Captain Kracek,” she said. “Sorry to bother you sir, but we’ll be letting down into Guam in about ten minutes. Your friends were wondering where you were.”

Kracek checked his watch. “Where did the time go, Josh? I was enjoying our conversation so much I lost track of it.”

”Me too, sir. And, I’ve been listenin’ too. You’ve given me a lot to think about. I’m also going to try and find the book by that Lao Tse fella.”

“You do that. As teachers go he’s still one of the best. Kracek got up to leave and shook hands with his latest student. “Take care, Josh.”

As he walked away the plane was hit by clear air turbulence. It rocked the big jet, but Kracek quickly found his “sea legs” and continued on. His steadiness did not go unnoticed by his new friend.

Colonel Martin and Bert were heading back to their seats when they saw him enter the first class section. “Viktor, where were you? We were about to send out a search party.”

“No need, Colonel. I was just visiting a Marine Corps buddy of mine.”

“Once a marine, always a marine, eh Viktor?”

“Not unlike the Green Berets, Colonel.”

“Semper fi my friend,” Martin said, with a wink.

23

Guam Coffee Shop

A bright multi-colored coral necklace encircled the island of Guam, and protected it from the relentless pounding of the ocean's waves. It served as a home for thousands of marine life species and provided a ready source of protein for the native islanders. The clear aquamarine water between the reef and the island was like a window into the beauty of the world below. Beyond it the ocean became a impenetrable deep blue. That contrast was a sobering reminder of how vulnerable the island would be to the destructive power of the sea were it not for the barrier reef.

Garelli followed their approach from his window. A few low clouds obstructed his view of the entire island, but they would pose no problem to the landing. Captain Jackson set the big plane down so smoothly you couldn't feel the wheels touch the runway. "Not bad," he remarked.

"He always could 'grease' them on," Kracek said. "It's Tim's specialty, the one thing I could never best him in during our cadet training. I think he's got the patent on it."

"How much time will we have on the ground?" Garelli asked.

"About an hour, long enough to top off the tanks and take on a few more passengers—enough time for a cup of coffee and a sandwich."

"Sounds good. I need to stretch my legs."

At the Base Ops snack bar, Kracek, Garelli, and Colonel Martin picked up their coffee and sandwiches and found an empty table.

Jackson stopped by a few minutes later carrying tray with a taco plate special, a piece of cherry pie, and a coke. "Mind if I join you."

"We saved you a seat," Garelli said, pulling out the chair next to him.

"Thanks, Bert."

"Still got a healthy appetite," Kracek noted.

“You know how I love Mexican food, and this is the best.”

“I remember. What makes it so good here...the cook Mexican?”

“No, he’s a local, but he knows his spices. The story I heard is that an airmen stationed here years ago, who was Mexican, showed him how to prepare his mother’s recipes. It became an instant success, and he’s been doing it ever since. I’ve been to Mexican restaurants all over the world—even Texas—and there’s none better. Can’t beat the price either. You should try it next time you pass through.”

“Maybe I will.”

Quickly setting the small talk aside, Jackson wasted no time steering the conversation to the subject that most interested him. “About those missions you’re friends told me about; they sound unbelievable, like something they might have dreamed up in Hollywood. But, I doubt that any writer—unless he himself was a fighter pilot who had done those things—could even imagine the kind of flying you did on those two missions. And he would have needed more creative ability than any fighter pilot I know. I’ve always known you were good, but this...”

Although uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was headed, Kracek couldn't walk off again without giving his friend something. "To tell you the truth Tim, except for what we briefed for those missions, I had no idea what I was going to do until I did it. The situation pretty much dictated my actions. You know what they say, 'Necessity is the mother of invention.'"

"Maybe, but not everyone would have attempted what you did in that field, nor would they have had the presence of mind, or the flying skill to take out two Migs that had you dead in their sights."

"Luck had a lot to do with it. I could just as easily have 'bought the farm' in that paddy. Moreover, if I had turned just a fraction of a second later, the Mig leader's missile would have found its mark, and an enemy star would have been painted on the side of his cockpit instead of mine.

"The way I see it, we were all were simply trying to do our jobs, and equally willing to risk it all to get it done. Many of the men in that rice paddy did. They paid the ultimate price.

I can understand the need for some guys to let off a little steam after going through something like that, but I take no satisfaction in gloating over another man's misfortune."

When he finished there was only silence. Jackson desperately searched his mind for something to say, but couldn't find the words.

Kracek used the pause to make his break. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I see an old Marine Corps buddy of mine sitting over there by himself.” He didn’t wait for a response before walking away.

“Is he always like this?” Jackson asked.

“Always,” Garelli said, smiling.

“Corporal Joshua D. Boone.” Kracek announced the young marine’s name with emphasis as he approached his table.

Josh was surprised by the unexpected visit. “Captain Kracek. It’s good to see you again, sir.” He sprung to his feet before Kracek could stop him.

“No need for that. May I sit down?”

“Of course, sir...please.” He motioned to an empty chair.

“I can’t stay long, I’m with some friends...just wanted to say hello.”

“That’s mighty nice of you, Captain.”

“Not at all. To be honest, I needed to get away for a few minutes. You could do me a big favor though.”

“Anything, sir.”

“Let me introduce you to my friends over there.” Kracek gestured to the table he just left. “They’d like to meet you.”

Josh took a quick inventory of the table: an Army colonel, Air Force lieutenant, and an airline captain. He swallowed hard. “Oh, I don’t know sir...maybe another time.”

Kracek saw his uneasiness over sitting down with a group of officers—one of them a colonel. “No need to worry, Josh, they’re good men; and it would be a big help to me.”

He wondered why the Captain needed his help, but didn’t ask. He didn’t think it necessary or proper to question him. *If the Captain needs my help that’s good enough for me*, he reasoned. *After twelve months of Nam I guess I can do this*. “Okay sir, I’m ready.”

“I knew I could count on you.”

They walked over to the other table.

“Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Corporal Joshua D. Boone.” The three men stood at the same time.

“Josh, this is Tim Jackson, the Captain of the Pan Am flight that’s flying us back to the states.” They shook hands.

“Pleased to meet you sir. That was a real nice landing.”

“Thanks, Josh. I didn’t think anyone back there would notice, except Captain Kracek, of course.” Jackson winked at his friend.

Kracek continued with the introductions. This is Colonel ‘Joe’ Martin, Commander of the 3rd Special Forces Company in the Delta. You may have heard of him.”

“I sure have. It’s a real honor to meet you, Colonel,” he said, shaking his hand. “I’ve heard many stories about you and your men. My ‘Gunny’ told me that your company is the best Army unit in Nam.”

“Well, that’s a real compliment coming from a Marine Gunnery Sergeant. We have the same high regard for the Marines. You’re combat record here, and in every other war the Marines have fought, is second to none.”

“Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me.”

A fine young man, Martin thought. *He handles himself with confidence*. “Have you ever given any thought to becoming an officer, Josh?”

“Yes sir, I sure have.”

Martin saw him glance at Kracek as he answered and didn’t ask the obvious question.

“And this,” Kracek continued, “is Lieutenant Bert Garelli.”

Garelli reached out to shake his hand. “Good to meet you, Josh. Viktor has told me all about you. Apparently you and he share a similar background. We have something in common as well.”

“We do?”.

“Yes, we all share the same good friend. Why don’t you join us? I’m sure we have a lot to talk about.”

Garelli's disarming manner and charm put him at ease and made him feel welcome. "Thank you, sir; I'd like that." He hesitated just long enough to insure that he wasn't seated before the others. It wasn't simply a matter of military protocol, but something his father had instilled in him years ago—respect for his elders.

The snack bar was filled with people, most of whom were on the same flight. The majority were Army enlisted men—although there were a few from the other services, as well as several nurses. They all had one thing in common; they completed their year in "Nam" and were going back to the "real world."

A great weight had been lifted from their shoulders, and the excitement over that long awaited event was heard in the jubilant tone of the voices coming from each group. However, rather than compete with one another, filling the room with a discordant array of sounds, they seemed to be joined in "a cappella" harmony.

The mood was decidedly upbeat, but the 'choir members' were not so preoccupied that they didn't notice an Air Force captain inviting a Marine corporal to join him and his officer friends at their table.

"Who is that guy?" Someone asked.

"Beats me," another replied, "but he must be 'connected' to get that kind of attention from the brass."

“Maybe he’s a general’s son, or somethin’.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Who cares man, we’re going home.”

24

Hawaii Leg

Flight 816 departed Guam twenty five minutes late. There was nothing wrong with the aircraft. It just took awhile longer to get refueled. The B-52's were being readied for a major bombing operation over Vietnam and every fuel truck on the base was being used in support of that effort.

Kracek checked his watch as the Pan Am jet started its takeoff. It was 1930 hours. They were taking off late, but a good tailwind and a slightly higher cruise speed would get them to Hawaii on schedule. He made a quick mental calculation of their time to cruise altitude. *Should take about twenty minutes*, he mused.

Exactly twenty minutes later the familiar static noise of a keyed mike pre-alerted the passengers to a pending announcement: “This is Captain Jackson. Sorry for the delay back there, but I’m sure I don’t have to explain the priorities in this part of the world to the men and women in this plane.

In any event we’re on our way, cruising at five hundred miles per hour at an altitude of thirty seven thousand feet. We’ll be picking up a tailwind midway through the flight, which will give us the added push we need to make our planned arrival time at Hickham Field, Hawaii.”

No sooner did Tim finish speaking when a loud cheer from coach class came thundering back to him. “Would you say the troops are in a good mood, Pete?” Tim asked his co-pilot.

Labou smiled broadly. “Great to hear isn’t it?”

“You bet. We’re flying with the most appreciative and most deserving passengers in the world. What’s more, we’re getting paid handsomely to do it. I’d make this trip for nothing, but don’t tell that to the president of Pan Am.”

“So would I. The mission of this flight is its own reward. I hope we can continue making this run. On the other hand, I’m looking forward to the day we won’t have to, when the war is finally over.”

Tim looked at his co-pilot and nodded in agreement. First

Officer Peter S. Labou joined Pan Am on his recommendation about a year after he did. They were assigned to the same squadron in the Florida Air National Guard. The Guard was a great way for a fighter pilot to leave the active duty Air Force for a more lucrative flying job with the airlines, and still continue to do the flying he loved best.

Labou had the look of a patrician gentleman. Tall and slim, with slick black hair, combed straight back and parted in the middle, piercing gray eyes, and a nose that appeared to hover over the pencil thin mustache under it.

He reminded you of an old Hollywood actor who had gained fame through his roles as Count Dracula; not Bela Lugosi, but John Carradine. He even had the same impressively rich voice of the actor, as well as his serious demeanor.

Born and raised in Queens, New York, he lived less than a mile from the Belmont Racetrack—a street kid, who had his share of fights. But, he was also a loner and never ran with a gang. Every chance he got he'd be at the stables. He loved horses, and dreamed of becoming a jockey.

Unfortunately, his physical development would rule out any hope of pursuing his dream. Nevertheless, even when it became obvious he could never become a jockey, he couldn't stay away from the track. It was like entering another, more wonderful

world: the smells, the clean fresh air, being close to such magnificent animals, and the people that loved them as much as he did.

The trainers and other horsemen took a liking to the kid and gave him work cleaning the stalls and grooming the horses. On occasion, they would even let him exercise them. They not only paid him for work he would have gladly done for nothing, they made sure he had a good lunch.

Every year he would spend his entire summer at the racetrack with his parents blessing. They loved their only son, but couldn't afford to take him on a real vacation. At Belmont he was with good people, safe, and off the street, doing something he loved. For Pete, it was better than any vacation.

Jackson looked at him and nodded in agreement. When the cheers subsided he continued his announcement. "The cabin crew will be serving dinner shortly, so sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride." Another cheer swept through the aircraft.

After dinner, Garelli stood up to stretch. "I'm going to the lounge. You coming, Viktor?"

"Not this time, Bert. I've got some work to do, and I need to get it done on this leg of the trip."

“You mean the speech you’re writing for the Joint Session?”

“Yeah. I want to get the first draft written before we land at Hickham. That’ll give me time to edit and rewrite before we get to Washington.”

“I’m glad I’m not in your shoes. If you feel like taking a break, you know where to find me.”

“I sure do partner, with that cute little brunette. What was her name?”

“Susanne.” He said, as he walked away.

“Bert.”

Bert turned back to see the big smile on his friend’s face.

“Remember you’re flying solo this time.”

Garelli winked and flashed a thumbs up as he turned to walk away.

Retrieving his briefcase from the overhead compartment, Kracek took out a yellow writing tablet and a black mechanical lead pencil. He slid the case under the seat in front of him and lowered his tray table. All he needed now was a little inspiration.

Several hours and a few cups of coffee later he put away his note pad, satisfied with what he had written. He reset the folding tray, reclined his chair, and rested his head back against the pillow. Before falling asleep his mind drifted off to Vietnam. Not the war...Renee.

25

L.A. International

As Jackson promised they did catch a tailwind, and landed on time at Hickham. Flight 816 would continue into Los Angeles carrying a few more passengers, but with a different flight crew. Tim and company would be staying overnight in Honolulu to get their required crew rest before flying out the next day on another Pan Am flight.

In Los Angeles Martin, Kracek, and Garelli reported to the American Airlines ticket counter to get their departure times and new boarding passes. Martin and Kracek would be flying out in an hour and a half on American Flight 448, nonstop into Dulles International. Garelli would depart fifteen minutes later, taking AA Flight 444 into Dallas, then, Trans Texas Airways into Clovis, New Mexico.

They were greeted at the entrance to the First Class Lounge by a young woman in an American Airlines uniform. She wore her long straight hair pinned up in a bun and very little makeup. Despite her plain appearance, the natural beauty of the woman couldn't be hidden. Nevertheless, it was the confidence with which she handled herself that impressed more.

“Good morning, gentlemen, I am your hostess, Cynthia Waldon.”

“Where do they find these women,” Bert said in a half whisper, not expecting her to hear him.

“I couldn't help but hear that, Lieutenant...” Bert didn't let her finish. “Oh, I'm sorry, I meant no offense.”

“None taken, Lt. Garelli,” she said, noting his name tag. “The tone of your voice told me as much. I'd be happy to explain how we're selected for this position, but first let me give you a tour of our lounge. On the right side of the room we have a self-service buffet with sandwiches, appetizers, cakes, pastries, coffee, tea, or milk...but not me.” They all laughed.

Intelligent and a sense of humor too, Bert mused. Whatever they're paying her, it's not enough.

“Did you say something, Lieutenant?”

“Me? No, never said a word.” Bert answered, unable to conceal his surprise. He felt like the little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. *Jesus, he thought, does she read minds too?*

“I think she’s got your number Bert,” Viktor said.

“No kidding.”

“Rest rooms,” Cynthia continued, as if cued by Bert’s thoughts, “are in the rear of the room to the left. In there, you’ll find showers, shaving gear, towels, and more. To our left front is the lounge bar, stocked with just about any kind of liquor or soft drink you can name. James, our bartender, will be happy to take your order.

Behind you, near the rear windows overlooking the parking ramp, are several desks for your use. If you need to do some typing we have a private room for that.

“Well gentlemen, that about covers it. If you have any other questions, or if I can be of further assistance, please call me, I’ll be up front.”

“Thank you, Miss...Miss...” Martin couldn’t remember her name.

“Waldon,” she said.

“Miss Waldon, yes, thank you. That was as good an orientation brief as I’ve ever heard. You may want to consider a new career field.”

“And what field might that be, Colonel?”

“Army Special Forces. We can use some good women in our ranks.”

Cynthia was both surprised and flattered by the Colonel's answer. She knew of that elite group. Her younger brother was currently going through Ranger training at Fort Benning in his quest to join their ranks. Only the best of the best get to wear the green beret.

"Why thank you, sir, that's quite a compliment. Do you really mean it, or have I just been taken in by a new approach?"

"I never say anything I don't mean," Martin replied, without a trace of irritation in his voice. "It was not meant as a 'come on'... but if it was, would you have been offended?" He was charmed by this intelligent young woman and enjoyed the verbal sparring,

"That's a very interesting question," she said, sidestepping the issue, yet leaving it open. "Perhaps, we can discuss it sometime when I'm not on duty." She too was attracted to this rugged soldier hero, and thought: *Now he's a man I would like to know better.*

"Maybe, we can." I'll be coming by this way again, and, since I haven't taken any time off in over a year, I think I can convince my boss to allow me a few days leave before going back to Vietnam. If I could arrange it, would you consider renewing our conversation over dinner?"

Cynthia had seen a lot of men come through the AA lounge; some who were just as self-assured and far richer. However, none stirred her interest as much, or made her feel more like a woman than this man. It was an opportunity she couldn't let pass. Not given to false modesty—she was too honest for that—and unafraid to take a risk, she said: “I'd like that, Colonel.”

“So would I. How may I contact you?”

She took out a business card and wrote down her telephone number. Handing it to him, she said: “You can usually reach me at work, but if I'm not here try this number.” She turned to walk away, then looked back over her shoulder, striking a pose reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe at her seductive best.

The smile she managed to put on his usually taciturn face was still there when Martin turned to his friends. Before they could pick up their dropped jaws, he preempted them. “Gents, what do you say we have James pour us some refreshments?”

26

Washington D.C.

The sun had just slipped below the horizon as Kracek and Martin stepped off the airplane at Dulles International, leaving in its wake a panorama of magenta and purple hues covering the western sky.

“Well, we’re here,” Martin said, with little enthusiasm. “I don’t mind telling you that Washington is not my favorite city. Given the choice, I would have preferred to stay in Vietnam. But, after traveling half way around the world in a flying submarine, even D.C. can look good.”

“You took the words out of my mouth, Colonel. Sounds like you’ve spent some time here.”

“Done my time would be a more accurate...three years in the Pentagon, as part of the Army Chief of Staff’s Planning and Analysis Team. With the exception of the few times I was given the opportunity to make a truly meaningful contribution to a needed Army project I did not enjoy my tour. Though, I will admit, I did take some satisfaction in outmaneuvering my over ambitious young colleagues.

“But this is D.C., the politician’s ‘mecca,’ and if you aren’t one of them, or do not quickly learn the rules of their game, you won’t survive in these waters. The barracuda in this pond will eat you alive. I’ll take a war anytime. There, a fighting man at least has an even chance.”

Kracek pondered his words. *He’s obviously not one of them, or he’d be wearing a star on his shoulder now.* “I know what you mean, sir. I haven’t done my penance in this place yet, but I’ve seen enough of what you talk about at the squadron and wing levels of Command, and I don’t like it any more than you do.”

Martin smiled. “We share that in common, Viktor, including the love and dedication we have for our profession. However, if I had it to do all over again, there is one thing I would do differently.”

“What’s that, Colonel?”

“Knowing what I know now, I’d be far less trusting of the people I work with, especially in a ‘non-combat’ environment. Fighting prowess, tactical knowledge, and leadership skill are highly prized qualities everyone values and depends on in the trenches. In peacetime, when no one’s life is on the line, it’s a different story. Then, if you display the same level of skill and courage to promote an idea you believe in, particularly one that would change the way we do things, you become a target for any number of more career oriented officers to shoot at.

“Why? Because you make them look bad, or so they believe; which is all that matters to these petty bureaucrats. Your competency is seen more as a threat than an asset. And make no mistake, if you don’t watch your back, they can and will bring you down. So, as you fighter pilots are so fond of saying, ‘check your six.’”

“Colonel, you’re the second person this week to talk to me about the same subject. Although your version is a bit more colorful, your words echo the advice given to me recently by my boss, Colonel Whitfield.”

“Whitfield?”

“Yes, the 429th Squadron Commander. Do you know him?”

“No, but he sounds like a man I should know.”

“I’d be happy to introduce you to him when we get back to Vietnam. As much as the two of you have in common it ought to be an interesting meeting.”

They followed the other passengers through the terminal to the baggage claim area. The sign above Station ‘B’ read: AA448. Suit cases, boxes, golf club bags, and an assortment of other containers soon came popping through the vinyl flap opening.

Among the first to come out were two military issue, green canvas suit bags, folded in half, with large zippered compartments on each side and a leather carrying handle attached to the top. It was all the luggage each of them would claim. One learns to travel light in the military. After all, the combat soldier carries everything he’ll need on his back for as long as he’s in the field, and the fighter pilot doesn’t have room for much else in his airplane but himself.

They pulled their bags off the conveyor belt, loaded them onto the luggage carrier and headed into the terminal. A crowd lined the guard rail to the walkway—some holding signs with company and individual names on them, including theirs. An Army major was holding one, an Air Force captain the other.

“Colonel Martin,” the major called.

“That’s me major, and this is Captain Kracek. I presume your Air Force associate is here for him.”

“Yes, sir.” This is Captain Leslie Schuler. I’m Major Dietzel, Richard Dietzel.”

Captain Schuler was a woman who was obviously more dedicated to her work than she was to her personal appearance. She wore little makeup, and her shoulder length hair was put up in a bun. If her objective was to present herself as a no nonsense professional, she succeeded. Black rimmed glasses not only reinforced the image, but suggested that there was more behind them than stunning blue eyes. Indeed, she graduated from Stanford University summa cum laude with a BA in Political Science, and stayed on another year to earn a Masters Degree in International Affairs.

Shaking their hands, she said: “I’ve seen your files, gentlemen, and it’s an honor to meet you both. I’ve also heard a great deal about you from the people here who know you—particularly you, Colonel.”

“I can only imagine what you’ve heard, Captain.” Her half smile told him that the stories she heard were not all complimentary.

“Don’t worry, Colonel, I’m an analyst—a good one I think. It’s my job to sift through the tons of intelligence data we receive daily to uncover the solid facts our decision makers can use with confidence. I don’t have time for hearsay and gossip; which, as you know, there is far too much of in the Pentagon. I’ve also learned to judge people by what they do, not what they say.”

“Very wise of you, Captain. We could use more like you in this bureaucratic wonderland.”

Major Dietzel listened with interest, if not with understanding. He was a slight, mousy looking man, who looked like he could have been Herman Goebels illegitimate son. Like the more infamous confidant of Adolf Hitler, he was also the perfect bureaucrat, and very comfortable in the role. “We have a staff car waiting out front to take you to your hotel, sir. Please, follow us.” He reached for Martin’s bag. “I’ll take your bag, Colonel.”

“Not necessary, I’ve got it,” Martin snapped. He glanced at Kracek, who knew what was going through the Colonel’s mind.

The chauffeur held the door of the stretched black limousine as Kracek and Martin got in. Schuler and Dietzel took the rear-facing seats opposite them. After putting their luggage in the trunk, the driver slipped behind the wheel of the big Cadillac and drove off.

“Not your typical staff car,” Martin noted.

“No sir. When the General Manager of the Jefferson heard that he would be hosting two highly decorated war heroes he insisted on picking you up in the limo. It will be at your disposal for as long as you are in Washington.” Dietzel opened a compartment between his and Schuler’s seat revealing a mini-bar with several bottles of premium whiskey, ice, and glasses. “And it comes fully stocked. Drink, sir?”

“I was ready for one as soon as I stepped off the plane, Major. Do you have any bourbon in there.”

Dietzel put some ice cubes in a glass and poured a double shot of Jim Beam. “How about you, Captain?”

“No thanks. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen this city and I’d just like to take in the sights.”

“So you’ve been here before.” Martin noted.

“Yes sir, a long time ago. I was fourteen. My parents and I drove down from Long Island on our way to North Carolina to spend a few weeks of the summer with my Aunt and Uncle. Dad wanted to drive straight through, but Mom had never been to Washington before and wouldn't let him do that without stopping to see some of the more famous monuments and buildings. We took a lot of pictures, including one of me doing a handstand in front of the Supreme Court Building.”

“Doing a handstand...what the devil for?” Martin asked.

“Because it was Washington, and an opportunity to add it to the list of places I had looked at upside down. Given the decisions that come out of this place, you have to wonder if our politicians aren’t seeing the world from that perspective.”

“Viktor, you’re just full of surprises. I suppose the next thing you’ll tell us is that you were a circus acrobat.”

“I thought about it, but never followed through. Funny you should mention it though. The man who taught me to do handstands was a circus acrobat. He used to perform in his home country of Canada before immigrating to the United States. His name was Guy Marcel, my neighbor. I’ll never forget him.

“His act consisted of doing a handstand on top of a fifty foot, specially rigged, flexible pole, then sway it like a giant metronome from one side of the center ring to the other without a net.”

“Christ, he sounds like one crazy Frenchman.” Martin said. “I see now where some of your own flying stunts may have come from.”

“That’s only the half of it, Colonel. He worked with a partner, who was on an identical pole swinging in the opposite direction. They missed each other by inches as they passed in the middle of the ring with a closure speed of close to forty miles an hour.”

Dietzel and Schuler looked at each other, saying nothing. They weren't sure what to make of Kracek’s story, but suspected that it

was nothing more than a joke by a smart-ass fighter pilot and his Green Beret accomplice. What they could not comprehend, was how anyone could concoct such a fantastic tale.

But Kracek wasn't finished. Before the incredulous looks on their faces had dissipated, he added: "For a finale, on their last pass they actually switched poles!"

"C'mon Viktor," Martin said, now I know you're pulling our leg."

"No sir, I wouldn't do that. I'm just telling it to you the way Guy told it to me. To show that they actually made the exchange the poles were painted different colors, one red, the other white— colors of the Canadian flag. The color of their tights matched the pole they started on. That way the switch could be clearly seen by the audience."

"Unable any longer to keep silent, and thinking he had him, Dietzel said, smugly: "You would think an act that spectacular would have been picked up by a major American circus, like Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey."

"It was," Kracek said, ignoring Dietzel's sarcasm

"It...it was?" Dietzel stuttered.

"Yes sir. Ringling Brothers did sign the act. It's what brought Marcel to the states. Unfortunately, he was injured before they could put on their first performance."

“What happened,” Schuler asked. Did he fall while performing?”

“Nothing that dramatic. He was driving his aunt’s Volkswagen Beetle, when some kid in his father’s Packard, ran a red light and broadsided him. Fortunately, it was on the passenger side, but the impact was so great that he was pushed clear across the intersection and pinned against a light pole.

The kid had panicked and instead of hitting the brakes he floored the accelerator. With both doors blocked—the pole on one side and the Packard on the other—Guy appeared to be trapped.”

“Appeared to be?” the Colonel asked.

“Well, the doors were crushed, and the windows were jammed shut, but he did have a way out. Despite a broken left shoulder and two cracked ribs, he pulled himself through the open sunroof of the VW and slid down the back of the car. About the time his feet hit the ground the Packard’s big straight eight engine burst into flames.”

Kracek paused for a minute, expecting some response from his listeners. But, by then, everyone was too interested in hearing the rest of the story to interrupt him again. “Guy was already out, and could have simply walked away, but the kid was still in the Packard. He wasn’t hurt, but he was in shock and frozen with fear.

Disregarding the growing flames, Guy ripped open the driver’s

side door of the Packard with his good right arm, grabbed the collar of the boy's varsity jacket and dragged him to safety.

“He later said, that the crowd of people that had witnessed the crash gave him as big a round of applause as he ever got in the circus. Still a little dazed, he even bowed in acknowledgement, as he always did after finishing his act. He claimed it was only an automatic reflex, but I think the ‘ham’ in him had something to do with it.”

“The man was a hero,” Martin said, still not sure he should believe the story, but enjoying the effect it was having on Dietzel and Schuler.

“You said it Colonel. He risked it all to save the life of someone who almost took his—a pure unselfish act of courage. In my opinion, that's what being a hero really means. I, on the other hand, feel like I'm here for all the wrong reasons.”

“My friend,” Martin began; You're being much too hard on yourself. I know what you did; hell, I witnessed it—part of it at least—and I'm here to tell you, that you more than earned your place at the table. The honors you will be receiving in Congress tomorrow are not at all misplaced.”

“Thanks, Colonel, but...”

“No buts, Viktor, now finish telling us about your friend. What happened to him after the accident?”

“Yes,” Schuler asked. “Did he ever perform for The Ringling Brothers?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Marcel’s broken bones healed well enough, but he never regained full strength and flexibility in his left shoulder. The loss was imperceptible to anyone else, but he knew he could never again risk doing the pole switching stunt. It demanded split second timing and perfect coordination. And, without it in the act, Ringling Bros wasn’t interested.”

“Oh, what a shame,” she said, with genuine concern. The words came out involuntarily, surprising herself and the others. She didn’t know whether to be embarrassed, or grateful that she still had such feelings. Apparently, the Washington scene hadn’t completely politicized her.

“Yes, it was,” Kracek said. “But, don’t waste your time feeling sorry for him, Leslie, he certainly didn’t. You see, he taught me much more than handstands. Guy Marcel was not only a great acrobat, but a philosopher, a man who understood the vagaries of life and how quickly one’s fate can change.

“I was more devastated by his lost opportunity than he was. ‘My young friend,’ he would say, ‘if it was not meant to be, it was not meant to be. To dwell on what could have been will change nothing, but it could destroy the rest of your life.’” Kracek tried—with some success—to impart a French accent

to his mentor's words. He couldn't help but smile as he recalled them.

"What became of him after that," the Martin asked.

"For starters, the North Bellmore Volunteer Fire Department honored him with their highest award for bravery. It was presented to him by the mayor. They also made him an honorary Chief and invited him to join their ranks as a full-fledged fireman, which he accepted with great pride. After all, he had only recently arrived in this country, and now he was practically guaranteed the opportunity to stay. He was a happy man."

"That's a great story," Martin reflected. "But, why do I feel that there is more to it?"

"Probably because there is. With Marcel now on their team, the North Bellmore firemen became the perennial favorites at the annual Hook and Ladder competition, in which every fire department in Nassau County participated. They were never again beaten in the ladder climbing event, his specialty.

"In that event, they are timed at taking a ladder off the truck, hoisting it up to a fifth story window and getting a man inside. Guy was half way up the ladder before his teammates could place it against the building. Their closest competitor couldn't come within ten seconds of their time.

"If that wasn't enough to excite the crowd he would do a

handstand on top of the ladder while his teammates pulled it to the vertical and held it there for several seconds before leaning it back against the window. Not through yet, he would then climb down several rungs on his hands before righting himself—his signature move, and the highlight of the tournament.

The crowd, even the other teams, loved it. He acknowledged their cheers and applause by waving to them with his fireman's hat. They didn't stop until he was back on the ground and had taken his bows. For him, it was as good as the circus...better."

Martin and Schuler laughed easily, but Dietzel didn't crack a smile.

"You're full of surprises, Viktor," Martin said.

By the time Kracek had finished telling the rest of the story, the driver was turning off I-66E at the E Street exit and onto the E street Expressway. "So much for seeing the sights."

Don't worry," Dietzel said. "I thought you might like to 'recon' the area before checking into your hotel, so I instructed the driver to take us by a few of the more popular landmarks."

“Thanks, Major. I’m not a recce pilot, but I do like to check out the target before engaging.”

“Before engaging what?” Dietzel asked, a bit defensively.

“I don’t really know, but I’m sure I’ll find out tomorrow.”

27

The Jefferson Hotel

The driver turned left from “E” Street onto 17th, then made another left on Constitution Avenue—putting the Ellipse to the left and the Washington Monument to their right. A turn onto Pennsylvania Avenue brought into view a brightly illuminated White House. A few minutes later they pulled up in front of the famous Jefferson Hotel—as grand in its splendor as the some of the historic sites they had just seen.

The doorman, dressed like a World War I Prussian General, opened the rear door of the limo and stood to the side at attention. Colonel Martin got out first, followed by Dietzel, Kracek, and Schuler. The driver and bellman unloaded their bags and put them on a brass-framed dolly.

“This way, gentlemen.” Dietzel said, leading them through the hotel’s impressive entrance. The “General” held the door open for them.

A tall distinguished looking man wearing a dark pin-striped suit and a red silk cravat observed them enter the lobby. He glanced at his Rolex. *They’re late...must have hit some traffic*, he mused. “Major Dietzel, so nice to see you again, and you, Captain Schuler. I see you brought our special guests.”

“Dietzel shook Hazelton’s hand. “Let me to introduce you to Lt. Colonel Phillip Martin and Captain Viktor Kracek. Gentlemen, Mr. Anil Hazelton, General Manager of the Jefferson Hotel.”

Extending his hand to each of them, Hazelton said: “It’s an honor and a pleasure to meet you both. I can’t tell you how pleased we are to have you as our guests. Anything, anything at all that you may need during your stay here, please let me or my staff know.”

“Thank you sir,” Martin replied. “I think I speak for both of us, when I say that, while we expected to be billeted in a nice hotel, we didn’t expect it to be quite this nice.”

“Kind of you to say so, Colonel. Indeed, we are proud of the Jefferson and its historic place in this unique city. Within these venerable walls reside not only our distinguished guests, but some rare artifacts of your nation’s history.”

“You said your nation,” Martin observed.

“Yes, I did. England is my home. But, like so many of us in my career field, we are asked to take various assignments—not unlike those of you in the military. I’ve been in Washington for almost four years now.”

“Your accent and your family name make that evident, but your given name is unusual for a ‘Brit,’ isn’t it?”

“It is. “My mother is Indian. I was born in India and spent the first nine years of my life there. My father was a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force. Like you, Captain, he was a fighter pilot. He flew the Spitfire. Are you familiar with it?”

“Of course...a great airplane,” Kracek said. “The pilots who flew them in defense of Briton during World War II—though far outnumbered—shot down many German aircraft in a historic display of skill and courage.”

“Yes, they did; my father was one of them. When he can be persuaded to talk about that dark, yet glorious time in England’s history, he does so with both pride and sadness. He always reminded us that, while our victory in the ‘Battle of Briton’ denied Hitler his greatest victory, it was not accomplished without tremendous sacrifice. Many of our finest men were lost in that epic struggle, some of whom were his closest friends.”

“I can understand his feelings.” Kracek said. “Your father, and the many other pilots who fought the Germans over the English Channel, were heroes of legend. Churchill put it best when he said: ‘Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.’”

Hazelton was impressed. “I see you are a student of history. Your quote by the Prime Minister was verbatim. Although it’s one of the more often quoted passages from the many notable speeches he’s made, most people will change a word or two, even leave out much of the first part.”

“Thank you. History is an interest of mine, particularly as it

relates to aerial warfare. There is much to be learned from the past, from both the successes and the mistakes of our predecessors. If we don't make use of that knowledge we are likely to repeat the same mistakes...waste our time reinventing a perfectly good wheel.”

“I've never heard Santayana paraphrased in that quite that way, but he would no doubt approve.”

“Santayana put it more concisely,” Martin said, “but Viktor's interpretation presents the idea in more practical terms.”

Captain Schuler was listening with special interest. She had studied the Spanish born philosopher at Stanford and referenced his work, “The Life of Reason,” in her master's thesis. Thus, she felt obliged to insure that his original words were properly stated. ““Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' were his exact words,” she offered.

“Quite right, Captain Schuler.” Hazelton acknowledged. He was pleased, not only with her knowledge of George Santayana, but with the level of conversation they were engaged in. One of the perks of his job that he loved most was in meeting and exchanging views with well read people.

“Gentlemen, you’ve had a long journey and no doubt could use some time to relax, so I won’t hold you any longer. However, before I let you go, I hope you will accept my invitation for dinner tomorrow night.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Martin said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“So will I,” Kracek said.

“And you, Major Dietzel...Captain Schuler?”

“I’m sorry to say I can’t make it,” Dietzel replied. “I have another commitment.”

Hazelton looked at Leslie.

“I’d like that very much,” she said.

“It’s settled then. We’ll meet in the lounge bar at seven.”

In the elevator, Martin spoke first. “I’ve told you what I think about this town—at least, some of the people in it. Nevertheless, I have a feeling this trip is going to be very interesting. I might even enjoy it.”

“I agree with you on the interesting part. As to the second...”

“Don’t worry, Viktor. I know this is all new to you, and that you have a more challenging agenda, but I’m confident that you can handle anything they throw at you. What do you say we check out our rooms, then head down to the bar?”

“Sounds good, but I can’t stay long, I’ve still got some work to do before we go in tomorrow.”

“I think you’re working too hard, Viktor, but, then again, this is pretty much your show.”

“Maybe, but I’m damned glad you’ll be there with me.”

“I wouldn’t miss it, but not because you’re going to need me for moral support. I want to see you take on the United States Congress.”

28

Joint Session

“Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.”

The Congressional chamber erupted in enthusiastic applause for the thirty sixth President, as he entered the room to the music of ‘Hail to the Chief.’ Lyndon Baines Johnson made his way down the center aisle, shaking hands and stopping to exchange a few words with friends and former colleagues on both sides of the aisle. He knew how to work a crowd, especially this one. He was one of the most effective Senate Majority Leaders to hold the post, before being asked by Kennedy to join him on the Democratic ticket as his Vice President almost five years ago. Now, as President, his Senate friends are not quite as dedicated to his support as they once were, and his enemies are even more determined to defeat him.

His strongest antagonist, and a constant thorn in his side, was the Senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater—a blunt-speaking ultra conservative. Taking advantage of the upbeat spirit of the occasion in an impromptu display of bipartisan politics, Johnson stopped in front of an unsuspecting Goldwater to shake his hand. “Good morning, Senator...good to see you.”

“Good morning to you, Mr. President. You’re looking well.”

Bipartisanship notwithstanding, neither man was prepared to address the other by his first name.

“Ah have a hunch,” the President said, smiling, “that, on this particular day, you and I may at long last find something to agree on.”

“Indeed we may, Mr. President, indeed we may.”

Goldwater was unusually cordial with a man he didn’t like. That he himself was a Brigadier General in the Air Force Reserve, and one of his own was being honored today, probably had something to do with it.

Standing in the front section reserved for the President’s Cabinet, were Vilos and Katerina Kracek. They were flown in for the ceremony and arrived in Washington late last night—too late, they thought, to call their son. Little did they know, that he was up until two in the morning polishing his speech.

All eyes were on the President as he made his way to the podium. No one observed with more interest than the Kracek's, who, as professors of the subjects, were keenly aware they were witnessing history and political science in the making.

Johnson continued to make his way to the front of the room, shaking the outstretched hands of every congressman and senator he could reach—taking the time to stop and chat with key players, as well as his old friends. Upon reaching the dais he shook the hands of the Vice President and the Speaker of the House. Then, turning to the audience he reached into his coat pocket, took out his prepared remarks, and set them down on the podium. He never looked at them again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, honorees, mah fellow Americans. Today ah'll be performing one of the most pleasant tasks of my office, the awarding of medals of valor to two of our finest fighting men. It is a task I undertake with great pride and humility.

“Now ah don’t need to tell you that our involvement in the Vietnam War is surrounded by controversy. Indeed, it is opposed by many of you in this chamber. However, that does not make the deeds of these two men any less worthy of recognition. They are as deserving of our acclaim as any of the heroes of past wars, and ah know that you will join with me to pay proper tribute to their selfless acts of courage, to let them know that we, the government of this great country they have pledged to defend, are truly appreciative of the extraordinary sacrifices they are making on behalf of all Americans.”

Before the President could continue, the chamber erupted in sustained applause, so loud it could be heard throughout the halls of the Capitol Building. Everyone in the room was on their feet. LBJ turned to his Chief of Staff and other key members of his cabinet and winked knowingly.

“Colonel Whitfield was right,” Kracek said, “this President is one hell of a politician.”

“Not bad for a good old boy from Texas,” Martin added.

When the applause subsided and everyone took their seats, Johnson began again.

“Thank you. Ah know your applause was not for me, but for the brave men we are honoring—as it should be. We owe them that, and through this ceremony we have the opportunity to properly express our gratitude, and that of the American people. Tomorrow, however, after they have returned to Vietnam to continue to do their jobs, we must do ours.

“They will be going back to face a relentless and driven enemy, one who, despite the brave efforts of our fighting men and women, is getting stronger and bolder. Our job is not only to lend them political, diplomatic, and moral support, but to insure that they get the tools they need to do theirs. They expect that much from us...they deserve that much from us. “Thus, in a show of unity here today ah want us to let them know that, by God, their government will hold up its end of the bargain.”

The applause was deafening. Shouts of approval could be heard from every corner of the room. An animated Johnson encouraged them by joining in the applause himself. He looked at Martin and Kracek and smiled. The crafty old fox had done it again, caught his political opponents off guard.

Even Goldwater, Johnson’s political nemesis, was genuinely moved by his words. To his aid he said: “Jeremy, I believe we’re getting a lesson in political ‘arm twisting’ by the master himself. We don’t ever want to underestimate this fellow.”

“I agree, Senator. But this time he came down on our side.”

“He did indeed.”

However, not everyone was as enamored with the President’s masterful speech as Goldwater. The junior senator from New York saw it differently.

“That long-eared son-of-a-bitch just stuck it to us. Where the hell does he get off using an occasion like this to push his political agenda?”

“Come on Bobby, you knew this was coming.” a Democratic colleague standing next to him said. “We all knew it was an opportunity Lyndon couldn’t pass up. Hell, he arranged it.”

“I suppose so. But, what we didn’t know was how goddamned effective he was going to be.”

“So that’s it, you’re more pissed at his success in pulling it off than you are with him doing it.”

“No...well, maybe I am, but it’s not over yet. If he thinks this will give him his appropriations bill he’s got another thing coming. I’ll nail his ass in committee.”

“That said,” Johnson continued, “it’s time to get on with the business at hand, and for me to turn the proceedings over to the Secretary of Defense. Mr. Secretary.”

On cue, McNamara joined the President at the podium. Taking out his own notes, he looked them over briefly and laid them down. “Thank you, Mr. President. I had planned to say a few words on the same subject but, to paraphrase our city’s finest, you obviously don’t need backup. So I’ll get right to it. Our first honoree, Lt. Colonel Phillip Martin, is the most highly decorated soldier currently serving on active duty.”

The Secretary nodded to Martin, who stood up and walked towards the dais. The entire chamber applauded in bipartisan approval. Major Dietzel, McNamara’s military aid, read the citation for the award of the Army Cross:

“On December 8, 1965, Lt. Colonel Phillip J. Martin distinguished himself by his effective use of fighter support against an enemy force that threatened to overrun a U.S. Army Special Forces convoy in the Delta region of South Vietnam. “Without a flare ship to illuminate the pre-dawn darkness, and despite multiple hits to his airplane, threatening his own survival, he remained over the target directing the fighters to destroy key enemy positions, forcing their retreat. His determined effort in the face of imminent personal danger, enabled the embattled convoy to safely return to its base camp with minimal casualties.

“Col. Martin’s courage and resolve under the most difficult conditions, reflect great credit upon himself, his country, and the United States Army.”

“Colonel Martin, it gives me considerable pleasure to award this medal to you on behalf of a grateful nation.” The President shook Martin’s hand and whispered: “Now don’t go away just yet.” Turning back to the audience he said, “Ladies and gentlemen, Colonel Martin has not been made aware of what I am about to do. It’s a Texas surprise.

“Before his arrival in Washington I reviewed the Colonel’s file and discovered that he had been twice passed over for promotion. I found it hard to believe, that a man of his character, combat record, and devotion to duty would be overlooked for promotion at the earliest date of eligibility. “Now, I don’t know why, and it’s probably best that I don’t. Nevertheless, as Harry Truman would say, ‘the buck stops here.’ Effective immediately, I am promoting him to the rank of full colonel. Mr. Secretary, would you help me do the honors?”

“I’d be delighted, Mr. President.”

The huge chamber once again exploded with applause so loud it could be heard on Constitution Avenue. Johnson and McNamara each took a shoulder, removed Martin's silver oak leaf emblems and replaced them with eagles of silver. "Congratulations Colonel," the President said, shaking his hand.

"Thank you, sir," Martin replied. He saluted sharply and held it until it was returned by the President; then did an about face and walked back to his seat.

Kracek gave him a thumbs up as he approached. Only then did Martin allow himself a smile. "Let me be the first to salute our newest 'bird' colonel, he said, rendering one of his best. Taking Martin's hand in both of his, he added, "Sometimes the good guys do win."

"Thanks, Viktor. Never thought I'd see this day. I've pissed off too many senior officers in my time, and had already resigned myself to the fact that my career was essentially over. I'm not a big Texas fan, but I do like their surprises."

Looking out into a sea of smiling faces and clapping hands, Johnson was more than pleased.

"Mr. President," McNamara said, "I think you just did more for the war effort than any number of C-130's landing in Saigon with a cargo bay full of new weapons."

“Ah sure hope you’re right Mac. Now, let’s complete the show.”

The Secretary waited for the applause to taper off. He held up his hands to quiet the widely sympathetic audience. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your warm reception and enthusiastic show of support for the brave men we honor today. Our second honoree, a fighter pilot with the 429th Tactical Fighter Squadron, recognized by his peers as ‘Top Gun,’ Captain Viktor Kracek. You will soon learn why he is so deserving of the title.”

Kracek had already started toward the dais as the Secretary of Defense began his introduction. McNamara greeted him, then relinquished the platform to the President’s military aid, Air Force Colonel Jack Pollard, for the reading of the citation for the award of the Air Force Cross.

Colonel Pollard shook Kracek’s hand as he joined them and placed the folder he was carrying on the lectern. He opened it and began reading:

“In the pre-dawn hour of December 8, 1965, Captain Viktor Kracek led a flight of two F-100’s in support of an embattled U.S. Army Special Forces convoy. Despite the marginal visibility over the target they delivered their bombs with deadly accuracy, destroying the enemy’s heavy gun positions; thus forcing their retreat and allowing the convoy to make it safely back to their base camp.

“Hit by AAA fire over the target his wingman would have been captured were it not for Captain Kracek’s precision strafing, innovative tactics, and gritty determination to prevent it. With his guns jammed, and the rescue chopper about to be overrun, he dove his aircraft to less than six feet above the rice paddies and flew straight at the enemy patrol; ready to make the ultimate sacrifice to save Lt Garelli, and give the helicopter pilot the time he needed to safely clear the area.

Captain Kracek’s selfless actions and extraordinary flying skill reflect great credit upon himself, his country, and the United States Air Force.”

As he pinned the Air Force Cross on him, the President said: “Captain, that was one helluva stunt you pulled. I’ll bet they didn’t teach you that in flight training?”

“No sir, I improvised.”

“I’ll say you did. Congratulations, son; you’ve done us all proud.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

There was more applause, but before it got out of hand, Colonel Pollard took the mike: “Ladies and gentlemen, please hold your applause until after the presentation of the second award.”

The applause quieted down, but the news of a second award sent a buzz through the audience.

“I’ll be damned,” Goldwater blurted out to no one in particular. “This lad is something else. He either lives a charmed life, or he just can’t stay out of trouble...probably both.”

A Republican colleague overheard his remark: “Sounds a lot like you, Barry.”

Goldwater looked at him with a broad grin.

When Colonel Pollard began reading the citation for the second award the chamber fell silent. He read the citation to accompany the second award of the Air Force Cross:

“On December 9, 1965, Captain Viktor Kracek led a flight of three F-100’s to cover the insertion of an assault force sent in to reinforce a U.S. Army Special Forces Company under siege by a battalion of North Vietnamese regulars in central South Vietnam. His flight’s precision bombing and strafing attacks destroyed the enemy’s anti-aircraft weapons and effectively neutralized their numerical advantage, paving the way for their ultimate rout.

The Captain was not done yet. During a strafing run, he came under surprise attack by two North Vietnamese Mig-21’s. His swift reaction and aggressive maneuvering evaded the incoming missiles and forced the enemy fighters to overshoot, where both fell prey to his unerring marksmanship. The downing of the Migs was a first for the war in South Vietnam.

Captain Kracek’s superior flying skills and fighting spirit reflect great credit upon himself, his country, and the United States Air Force.”

While pinning the second “Cross” on him, the President said: “Captain, I understand that very few of these are ever awarded. You just got two in as many days—a remarkable achievement. Then again, you seem to do things in two’s. It gives me great pleasure to pin this second one on your chest.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

“No, son, I thank you...your country thanks you! Colonel Pollard told me, that downing two enemy aircraft on one mission has been accomplished by only a handful of fighter pilots. He also added, that to do so while on a close air support mission may be without precedent.”

Johnson’s words were heard over the open mike, and the applause that followed was long and deafening. Everyone rose to their feet. There were no Democrats or Republicans in the Congress at that moment, only patriots, joined in a bipartisan celebration of a true American hero.

Kracek’s parents were stunned. Until the citations were read they had no idea of what the awards received by their son really meant. Tears of joy filled their eyes as they looked on with loving pride.

“That is our son, Katerina.”

“Yes, Vilos, yes! I’m so proud of him. He stands before the President of our adopted country, in this great hall, as though he was meant to be here.”

For Johnson, everything was going exactly as he had hoped. *Now would be a good time to exit, he thought, I got all I came for.*

The standing ovation continued amidst a growing call for Kracek to address the Congress. “Speech, speech,” they shouted. Soon the demand to hear from the nation’s latest hero echoed throughout the huge chamber. Clearly, they were not going to allow the ceremony to end without hearing from the man that brought them there in the first place.

Though he would have liked to end it with the awarding of the medals, the President knew he had no choice. He and his staff had already foreseen the possibility and prepared for it. Kracek’s speech was thoroughly reviewed and approved just as he wrote it. “Captain, it seems they are not going to let us leave until they’ve heard from you. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, Mr. President.”

“Good. Nothing to worry about. Compared with some of the things you’ve been through, this should be like a warm ‘Texas breeze.’ This time, however, everyone in the ‘combat zone’ is on your side,” a smiling Johnson added.

Kracek stood at the dais and looked into the sea of approving faces. He waited until the applause subsided. Reaching into his coat pocket, he took out the speech he had written and placed it on the podium. Not until it was completely silent in the hall did he begin.

Johnson turned to McNamara and whispered: “This boy is good. Look at him work the crowd. He has a natural sense of drama and timing. I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

“Mr. President, members of Congress, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen...to have these awards presented to me by my President, before this illustrious body, is an honor I could have only imagined. Not until the citations were read, and President Johnson pinned the medals on my chest, did the reality of it truly sink in.

“You honor me today as a hero. Yet, I don’t feel like a hero. Frankly, I don’t know how a hero is supposed to feel. I do know that, if I am one, there are thousands more like me in Vietnam, men and women who put their lives on the line every day to protect the freedoms our great country symbolizes to the world. I doubt they consider themselves heroes either, but simply soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen, who were given a job to do and are doing it—despite the hardship, despite the danger, despite even the controversy surrounding this unpopular war.

“What an odd phrase. Has there ever been a popular one? I should hope that war never becomes popular. God help us if it ever does.”

That brought more applause from a widely appreciative audience. He waited for it to let up.

“I am as aware as you of the differences of opinion that divide our nation over our involvement in Vietnam. Nonetheless, as long as the debate does not degenerate into riots and anarchy, I will honor my oath to protect the rights of our citizens to speak out against it—with my life if necessary.

“That is my charge—mine and the thousands of other men and women in the armed forces. Yours, as elected representatives of the people, is to insure that we get the support we need to carry it out. For, if we are not prepared to win this war, then we must be prepared to lose it.

“Regardless of where you stand on the issue, for or against our involvement, we are there. American lives are at risk! Continue your debate if you must. It is in fact an affirmation of our democratic ideals. But, please, do not forget those of us whose lives hang in the balance.”

Long seconds went by in silence. The initial applause was weak, coming mostly from the Republican side of the Congress. Soon, however, everyone was joined in a sustained, if not enthusiastic ovation. Barry Goldwater, initiated it, and was the first one on his feet. The others soon followed his lead. No politician who hoped to be reelected could afford to be seen on national television sitting down in the midst of a standing ovation for an American hero.

No one knew this better than Lyndon Baines Johnson. It was why he insisted that the ceremony be held in front of a Joint Session of Congress with full media coverage.

“Mr. President,” McNamara said, “You just pulled off a major political coup.”

“Thanks Mac, but I’m a little concerned. The response to the Captain’s speech was slow in coming, and a bit forced; certainly not as spirited as we heard earlier. If Goldwater hadn’t taken the lead, it could have been very embarrassing for all of us. Ironic, isn’t it? My biggest political adversary got us off the hook.

“Tell my staff we’ll meet in the oval office as soon as we get back to the White House. We need to reassess our plans for the Captain, in light of what transpired here today, before he and the Colonel join us for coffee.”

“Yes, sir.”

The President and his entourage left the chamber as the same way they came in, shaking the hands of well wishers as he slowly made his way up the aisle. Once again he stopped in front of Senator from Arizona and shook his hand. “How did ah do, Senator?”

“Fine, Mr. President...just fine. Politics aside, what you did here today was a good thing.”

“Whah, thank you Barry. That’s mighty generous of you.”

Anyone within hearing of their conversation would be left with the impression that he and the senator were of one mind on the appropriations bill, perhaps swaying a few more votes his way.

Goldwater saw through his ploy, but also knew that he had as much to gain from the innocent deception as Johnson. “Mr. President, remind me never to play poker with you.”

“What ah hear Senator, is that you play a pretty mean hand yourself.” Johnson smiled, then winked at his political foe and walked away.

Goldwater watched him disappear through the exit. “You’re right about that, Lyndon.”

Kracek and Martin started to leave as soon as it was announced that the President left the building, but were stopped by the Vice President, the Speaker of the House, and the Senate and House Leaders, who wanted to personally shake the hands of our latest heroes.

“Gentlemen,” Humphrey said, “let me add my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to those of the President. Your battlefield deeds are truly magnificent, and your bravery unquestioned. I’m honored to be a part of this special occasion. Never have I been more proud to call myself an American.” His sentiments were echoed by the others. Kracek anxiously waited for them to leave, then hurried to his parents and hugged them both. The expressions on their faces meant more to him than all the awards and praise he just received. “Mom, Dad...I’m glad you could be here for this.”

“We are so proud of you Viktor, not just because of the honors you received here today, but because of the man you have become.”

“Your mother always was better at expressing herself in words than me, son; yet, mere congratulations are not enough. Your performance before this august body was as powerful and as triumphant as were the deeds that brought you here. Beaming with pride, and with tears in his eyes, Vilos hugged his son warmly. “I have a feeling this is only the beginning for you, son.”

“Thanks, Dad.” He embraced his father again, while trying, unsuccessfully, to fight back his own tears. His admiration and respect for his father was immeasurable. He has always been his hero, and his mother his heroine. He took her in his arms again. “I love you, Mom.”

Observing the poignant family scene was Colonel Martin. He was happy for his young friend, and a little sad that his own parents couldn't be here to share their son's special moment. They died more than five years ago—his father of a massive heart attack, his mother a year later. The doctors said it was a stroke, but many believe that she simply died of loneliness.

“Mom, Dad, I'd like you to meet my good friend, Colonel Joe Martin.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Kracek, it's a real pleasure to meet you both. I know you must be very proud of your son. He's one of the best fighter pilots I've ever seen. As you heard, we were awarded our medals for the same mission, one in which I witnessed his flying prowess and courage up close. Because of him and his wingman, Lieutenant Garelli, many lives were saved that day.

“However, it wasn’t until our trip back to the states that I had a chance to get to know him personally. I have seen how he conducts himself in any situation, and that there is more to him than his ability to fly an airplane—as he demonstrated again this morning. He’s obviously a man of many talents and concerns. I can see now where it comes from.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” Vilos replied. “It’s kind of you to say so. But, let us not forget your own heroism in this war, and those past. Among the many ribbons on your chest is the Medal of Honor. We know what it takes to earn such an award; many who did paid the ultimate price. It is we who are humbled by your long and dedicated service to our country, and regret that your mother and father could not be here to see you receive this latest honor.

“Thank you, sir, but how did you know about my parents?”

“The President’s secretary—Miriam, I believe is her name—briefed us on what to expect this morning,” Mrs. Kracek revealed. “We thought it curious, that your mother and father were not going to be here, and asked why. We are so sorry for your loss.”

“It was almost five years ago, but I appreciate your kind words.”

“Mom, Dad, I’m sorry to interrupt, but Colonel Martin and I have to be going. The President has requested our presence in the Oval Office.”

“Of course son, we didn’t know,” Vilos said.

“Do you have any plans for tonight?” Viktor asked.

“None. We weren’t sure what to expect; that is, how much free time you would have,” Vilos said. “We arranged to stay in Washington an extra day on the chance we could spend some time together.”

“I have several appointments at the Pentagon after our meeting with the President; which will take up most of my day, but I’m free tonight. I was hoping you could join Colonel Martin and me for dinner at our hotel.”

“Of course, we’d love to,” Katerina said.

“Good. We’ll meet in the hotel lounge of the Jefferson Hotel at seven tonight. I should tell you, that this is by invitation of the General Manager of the hotel.”

“Are you sure it will be all right?”

“Absolutely. Had he known you were here when he made the invitation, he would have insisted you join us. Mr. Hazelton is an intelligent man of the world who enjoys good conversation. The three of you will have a lot to talk about. Besides, if you don’t come, I’ll have to cancel. I’m not going to let you to spend your last night in Washington alone.”

“I’ll vouch for that,” Martin said. “I would personally love to see you there. It would give us an opportunity to know each other better.”

“Thank you Colonel,” Katerina said. “So would we. Our son knows very well how difficult it is for us to turn down an invitation for dinner, particularly one that holds out the promise of a lively discussion.”

29

The Oval Office

The President of the United States is most vulnerable to attack when traveling by limousine on public roads. The more unknowns that can be inserted into the location equation the better. Thus, three different routes are chosen, all of them secured. And, to further complicate a would be assassin's problem of locating his target, duplicate limousines and security vehicles are often used.

Today, two identical convoys were put into play. One returned to the White House by way of Independence Avenue west, turning north on 17th Street; the other, carrying Johnson, turned off on Pennsylvania onto Constitution Avenue going west, then north on 15th Street to the White House. The decision as to which route to use is made at the last minute by the Secret Service Team Leader.

In the Oval Office, Johnson found the big leather chair at his desk to be most accommodating for his large frame. He was also keenly aware that it was the seat of the most powerful position on earth, and that the man who occupied it was seen in the same light—a perception he used to his advantage when meeting with political opponents, foreign or domestic.

On the other hand, if he was to have a frank and open discussion with anyone from whom he wanted candid information and advice, he would have to appear less intimidating. On those occasions he would sit in a chair at the head of the lounge area in the oval office used for that purpose.

“Have a seat, gentlemen; I’ll get us some coffee.” Using the intercom on his desk, Johnson said: “Miriam, would you have some fresh coffee sent in please?”

“Coming right up, Mr. President,” she replied.

Jack Valenti, the Press Secretary, took a seat on one of the two sofas closest to the President's chair. Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, sat opposite him. Vice President Humphrey, Defense Secretary McNamara, and Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach took seats on either sofa, but in no particular order. They were all considered part of Johnson's inner circle of advisors, but Rusk and Valenti were the President's closest confidants and accorded special privileges.

"Gentlemen," Johnson began, "I called this meeting to get your opinions on what took place at this morning's Joint Session. As you know, I wanted to have the ceremony on the 'hill' so we could get some favorable media coverage for a change. Thanks to Jack, all the major networks were there and, I think we can all agree, the response was positive."

McNamara spoke first. "It was indeed, Mr. President, better than we had anticipated."

"I'll second that," Rusk said. "The message sent out to the world today was of a nation, and a government, standing united behind its President. Ho Chi Minh has to be a bit more concerned that commitments of military and political support from Russia and Falcon will continue at their present level."

“I agree,” Humphrey said. “It was a brilliantly executed political coup. Your exchange with Goldwater was a nice added touch, Mr. President—the icing on the cake, if you will. You took the old warhorse by surprise.”

“Yes, I enjoyed that part too, but compliments are not what I’m looking for.” Humphrey’s body language reflected his rejection. “Let me be more specific: One, have we improved our political capital enough to insure the votes we need to pass a war funding bill? And two, what did you think of Captain Kracek’s speech?”

“I don’t think there is any question that our position has been enhanced,” McNamara quickly replied, “and I’ll bet my unused Edsel, that we swayed enough fence sitters to put us over the top on the votes we need.”

On that point everyone agreed.

Before McNamara could answer the second part of the question, Rusk offered his assessment. “As for the Captain’s speech, I thought it was quite good and effectively delivered. Nevertheless, some of the things he said, however much they needed to be heard, did not go over well with many of the Congressmen.”

“Your absolutely right about that, Dean,” Johnson interrupted. “Nevertheless, they needed to be said; that’s why I approved the speech as he wrote it. No one else but a bona fide hero of this bloody war could have spoken so forthrightly and gotten away with it. Like it or not, coming from the Captain they had to accept it. Any other reaction from them would have been seen as downright unpatriotic.”

Johnson’s political acumen never ceased to amaze his staff. While they pondered his words, White House servants brought in the coffee and placed it and two silver trays of brownies and macaroon cookies on the coffee table. They poured the freshly brewed coffee into fine Falcon cups bearing the Presidential seal.

“Help yourself gentlemen. I hope you like brownies and macaroons as much as I do.”

Katzenbach had remained silent to this point, content to just listen and analyze what was being said by the others; but with an attorney's meticulous attention to detail. His ability to break an issue down and get to the heart of the matter was the unique strength he brought to these meetings. It's what made him a very successful trial lawyer. "Mr. President, the Secretary of State's assessment of Captain Kracek's speech is dead on. Even if it did bruise the egos of a few Congressmen, it had an overwhelmingly beneficial impact. I also believe, that you and Mac are right about the vote count swinging in our favor. His Edsel is safe."

"Thank you, Nick...thank you all. That's what I was hoping to hear. There is one more item; that is, having the Captain testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee. What are your feelings about that, given what happened at the Joint session?"

"Frankly," Katzenbach said, "while I believe the Captain would give a good account of himself, it would be a mistake to allow him to testify."

"How so?"

"Because it would be unnecessary. There's nothing more to be gained by it than what we already got from his speech."

"I agree," Humphrey said. "Why give Bobby Kennedy a chance to shoot at us from the vantage point of the Senate Armed Services Committee?"

“My feelings exactly,” Johnson said. “Do the rest of you agree?” Each of them either said yes, or a nodded their approval. “Then it’s settled. I’ll tell the Captain when he and the Colonel join us.”

“Mr. President.” It was Miriam’s voice over the intercom. “Colonel Martin and Captain Kracek have arrived. Shall I send them in?”

Johnson nodded to Valenti, who walked over to the President’s desk and told Miriam to see them in, then seated himself at the end of the sofa. Rusk also relinquished his position to join him there.

Johnson got up to greet the two men as they approached and shook their hands warmly. “Glad you could join us, gentlemen. Please, sit here.” He motioned them to the seats just vacated by Rusk and Valenti. “I believe you’ve met everyone. We’ve been discussing the awards ceremony. The consensus is that it was a huge success.”

One of the servants poured their coffee.

“Yes sir,” Kracek answered. “Although, they did seem to be a little less enthusiastic about my closing remarks.”

“Indeed they were, but that’s because you caught them off guard. They weren’t prepared to hear the hard truth about the war from one of its heroes; one who has certainly earned the right to speak out, as you so eloquently did. That takes another kind of courage, and I admire you as much for it as I do for your exploits on the battlefield.”

“Here, here!” The others responded.

“Thank you, Mr. President, but I’m no public speaker.”

“You’re far too modest, Captain. You just faced one of the toughest audiences in the world and beat them at their own game, on their playing field. If you’re not a public speaker you do a great impersonation of one.”

Kracek wisely remained silent. *I didn’t vote for this guy, but maybe I should have. He’s smart, tough, and knows how to get things done...the kind of man the job needs.* He also noted, that Johnson didn’t speak with the same heavy Texas drawl in private as he did in public.

“In fact,” Johnson continued, “everything we hoped to accomplish by bringing you to Washington was achieved largely because of your speech. It was so effective, that we’ve decided not to have you testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee. There’s no added benefit to be gained by it.

“On the other hand there are some senators on the committee,

opposed to our Vietnam policy, who would use the wider public audience you would draw to further their own political agendas.”

“I understand, sir. I’m both relieved and disappointed at the same time. I was kind of looking forward to it.” Kracek’s reaction came as a surprise to everyone...everyone except the President and Colonel Martin.

“Did you hear that, gents? This a man that doesn’t run from a fight, be it with words or bullets. Part of me wants to let him do it, if only to see him take on Bobby.”

“Mr. President,” Martin said, “I’ve had the good fortune of seeing Captain Kracek in action. Were it not for him a lot of good men wouldn’t be with us today. He calls himself a fighter pilot and he is certainly that. But, in his heart, I believe he is also a true ground warrior. And we have all seen how his words can be as sharp as his sword.”

“Well put, Colonel,” Rusk said. As a former university professor, he could appreciate Martin’s insightful characterization of the Captain.

“If he had been a member of the Ford ‘Whiz Kids’ when I was there, the Edsel would’ve been a success,” McNamara said, realizing his verbal faux pas as soon as the words left his lips.

“Hell, Mac,” Johnson said, “if he had been there, there wouldn’t have been an Edsel in the first place.”

They all laughed. McNamara, however, wasn't quite sure how to take it. After all, he was one of the last holdovers from the Kennedy administration, in which Johnson, as Vice President, was never made a part of JFK's close circle of advisors. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would be asked to resign, that his job as Secretary of Defense was currently safe only because of the war. LBJ noticed his unease, but said nothing.

Johnson turned to Kracek. "That settled, Captain, I think it's time you gave us a first-hand account of the two missions that were merely summarized in the citations read this morning. You may not know this, but I was a fighter pilot in the Navy during World War II. Naturally, I'm very interested in knowing the details of how you got those two Migs. I'm even more curious about the spectacular flying you did over that rice paddy.

"I'm also well aware of your reluctance to talk about this sort of thing, but I don't want you to hold anything back. Think of it as if you were debriefing your Commander-in-Chief, which of course, I am. Do I make myself clear?"

"As a bell, Mr. President." Kracek gave him the blow by blow account he asked for, but kept it objective. He didn't attempt to play down his role, nor did he embellish it. Yet, despite his dry, carefully worded rendering of events, what he did staggered the imagination of all present.

“That’s an amazing story,” Valenti said. “If it were a piece of fiction, no one would believe it.”

“I surely agree with that,” Humphrey said. “After hearing it from the Captain for the first time, I have a true appreciation of what he did.” Rusk and McNamara nodded in agreement.

“Thank you for sharing that with us,” Johnson said. “What you did in two short days was remarkable...probably unprecedented. I’m as impressed as everyone else. I am also damned glad you are on our side.”

“Thank you sir, but I was really just doing my job, a job I’ve trained to do by some of the best instructors in the best Air Force in the world. Frankly, I am humbled and embarrassed by all the attention I’ve been getting because of it. Were it not for the opportunity I was given to pursue my dream of becoming a fighter pilot I wouldn’t be here today.

“I also meant what I said this morning about the other ‘heroes’ in Vietnam. Granted they can’t all be brought to Washington and put up in a fine hotel, but they should at least know that their country will support them as long as they are out there...that they will not be forgotten when it’s over.”

“Insuring they continue to get the support they need is one of the reasons you’re here, Captain. No, let me be completely honest, it’s the primary reason. And I promise you this, that as long as I am the President of these United States they will have my full support, and they will never be forgotten.

“One more thing. Some in my position might have taken personal affront to what you just said. I didn’t, not because of your heroism in Vietnam, but because you are obviously a man who cares deeply about his fellow soldiers, one with the courage to speak his mind, even to his Commander-in-Chief. I respect that...I respect that immensely. I also want you to know, that I care as deeply about our country and the men and women who serve it as you do. When you return, if you would tell them that for me, I would be mighty grateful.”

Kracek was surprised by the President’s impassioned response. Although he meant nothing personal by his remarks, he realized how they could have easily been misinterpreted and silently admonished himself. *Christ, what am I doing? This is the one man who can change the course of the war.* He saw the other’s faces take on a more somber look, except for Martin, who winked his approval. “Mr. President, there was nothing personal in my last remark. I only wanted to...”

“To help your comrades get through this awful war. I know that, son. You needn’t apologize. I only wish I had more like you and Colonel Martin to advise me on what’s really going on over there.”

A relieved, Kracek said: “I appreciate your understanding, sir, and I would be honored to carry your message back to the troops.”

“Thank you. And, please add this: Tell them that I’m devoting all of my time and energy...doing everything in my power, to bring the war to an honorable conclusion; that, as long as I am in office, I will allow nothing to divert me from that objective.”

“I will, Mr. President. You can count on it.”

“I am. Now, as much as I would like to continue our visit, I’m afraid we don’t have the time. My appointment schedule is always full, and the Soviet Ambassador is waiting in the outer office for a meeting that was supposed to start ten minutes ago.

“Don’t you worry none though, Anatoly is good for at least another ten with Miriam there to fix him a good cup of tea.”

He stood up and offered his hand to Kracek, then to Martin.

“Gentlemen, your presence here has meant a great deal to me, politically and personally. The political part we’ve already discussed. Personally, because having met and talked with both of you, I am more confident than ever of our chances of bringing the war to a successful conclusion.”

Kracek and Martin saluted, and started to walk out. Valenti got up to whisper in the President's ear before they made it through the door.

"Captain Kracek," the President called, "I almost forgot. When you see Johnny tomorrow night tell him that Lyndon said hello. Tell him too, that he still has some work to do on his golf swing."

"Will do, Mr. President.

30

Dinner With Anil

They entered an already crowded lounge and made their way to the few unoccupied seats at the bar—an unusual piece of carved mahogany and brass railing. A wood burning fireplace on the opposite side of the room added to its natural warmth. The walls were paneled with the same dark wood from floor to ceiling, and the overhead chandeliers of fine crystal gave off just enough light to create the unique ambiance of the Jefferson Lounge. Some of the most recognizable figures in Washington came here to relax and talk politics.

Kracek and Martin settled into the plush leather-clad bar stools and wondered how long it would take to get a drink.

“What’ll it be, gentlemen?” He was a big man, wearing a red vest, white shirt, black bow tie, and a smile revealing a perfect set of white teeth that seem to brighten up the dimly lit room.

“Name’s Washington. I’ll be your bartender tonight.”

Martin had to take a second to analyze Washington’s last words. *What else could he be?* “Of course,” he replied. Make mine a bourbon on the rocks.”

“Scotch and water for me, Washington,” Kracek said.

“Coming right up.” Despite his size he moved with a practiced ease and magically produced two ice-filled glasses out of thin air, or so it appeared. Before they could figure out how he did it, he was simultaneously pouring bourbon in one and scotch in the other, with bottles that seemed to materialize in his hands. He added a splash of water to the scotch and put the drinks down in front of them. “Here you go gents.”

“Quite a show.” Martin said. He placed a large bill on the bar.

“Will this cover it?”

“Yes sir, but your money’s no good here.”

“Why not?”

“I mean I can’t take your money. Mr. Anil gave strict orders. Everything for Colonel Martin and Captain Kracek is on the house.”

“Really? That’s very generous of him. But, how did you know who we were? You’ve never seen us before, and we’re in civilian clothes. Of course, it was the haircuts, right?”

“No, not really, though it helped some. As a bartender, particularly in this hotel, I get to meet and observe all kinds of people from every walk of life, from all over the world. It has made me a keen student of human nature. I watched you when you first entered the bar.

“You looked the place over as if you were recording the layout of the room for future reference, saw that all of the tables were taken and made an immediate decision to sit at the bar. A lawyer, or politician—as most of my patrons are—might study a new environment with the same careful detail, but he wouldn’t be nearly as decisive. The way you two walked in gave me other clues: upright, square-shouldered, purposeful...military all the way.”

“Impressive,” Kracek said, “you really are a student of human nature.”

“Not really, sir. There was one other detail that tipped me off.”

“And what was that General?” he asked, attaching a nickname to a man he hardly knew, but was beginning to like.

With an even bigger smile, he said: “I heard you call you him Colonel.” Kracek and Martin just shrugged their shoulders and laughed. “Now, I have a question for you, Captain. How did you know my first name?”

“I didn’t. It just seemed to fit.”

“Fit what.”

“Your last name, for one.”

“Oh? Why not George, or President? Most people would have picked one of them.”

“They did come to mind, but they didn’t fit the Washington I see. I see a big man who loves life and his job, who knows his people and how to take care of them, and who oversees his domain with a commanding presence. Now that sounds like a general to me.”

A beaming Washington pointed his finger at Kracek. “You got me right back, Captain. You’re good, real good. Have you ever considered tending bar for a living?”

“Can’t say I have, but I wouldn’t rule it out. You never know when you might need a job.”

“That’s so true,” Colonel Martin said.

“Sorry Colonel, that was insensitive of me.”

“Forget it Viktor, that was yesterday. This morning’s events changed all of that. I feel like a new enlistee...like I’ve been reborn.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Kracek raised his glass: “Here’s to a long, even more rewarding career.”

“Thanks, Viktor. And to you my friend, the best damn fighter pilot I’ve ever seen.”

They emptied their glasses and put them on the bar. Washington refilled them without waiting to be asked.

“Kracek picked his up. “A toast...to President Johnson.”

“To the President,” Martin repeated.

As they touched glasses, a female voice from behind them said: “May I join you, gentlemen?”

They turned to see a striking woman with dark, shoulder length hair that framed her fine features and lovely smile. She was wearing a black, form fitting evening dress cut just above the knees, black pumps, and a single strand of white pearls with earrings to match her natural beauty.

“Captain Schuler?” It came out as a question, not because he didn’t recognize her, but because he was simply amazed at her transformation from the serious, plain looking woman that greeted them at the airport.

“You seem surprised.”

“I am. I mean, you look so different in civilian clothes, without your glasses...your hair let down.”

“Really. Shall I take that as a compliment?”

“You may, but I can do better. You look beautiful!” As soon as he said the words he realized that they might be misinterpreted. He preferred a time when a gentleman could say such things to a lady without having to apologize. Still, he never backed away from speaking his mind and wasn’t going to start now.

Leslie Schuler was indeed an advocate of the feminist movement, and his words did give her pause, but she wasn’t offended. Coming from him they seemed natural and unaffected. Much to her surprise, she was even flattered. *This isn’t supposed to happen to me*, she mused. *What is it about him?* “Why, thank you, Captain. I don’t mind telling you, however, that were it any other man, I could have easily been offended by your remark.”

“Oh, why not me?”

“I’m not sure...your smile, perhaps.”

Forgotten in their brief tête-à-tête, Martin had been observing quietly from the background. “Is this a private conversation or can anyone join in?”

She was so absorbed in conversation with Kracek, she didn't recognize the Colonel from behind. My apologies sir. It was rude of me to..."

"Not at all, Leslie, I was enjoying the show." He moved over to the next bar stool and motioned her to take the seat between them. "Please join us. What are you drinking?"

"Thank you Colonel. Obviously, I'm in the company of gentlemen. Make that a coke."

Washington had been looking on with interest and, before the Colonel could ask, filled a glass with ice and poured her coke. "Here you are, mam."

"Thank you, but please don't call me mam. I haven't been around long enough to have earned the title."

"What should I call you, mam? I, mean..."

"Leslie will do fine," she said, extending her hand.

"Leslie...I like that name." His hand met hers over the center of the bar. "They call me General."

"It suits you."

"We thought so too," Martin said. "While we're on the subject, I suggest we drop the formalities tonight. My friends call me Joe."

"And I prefer, Viktor." Raising his glass, he said: "To new friends."

"To new friends," they repeated together.

As they were making their toast, Vilos and Katerina Kracek entered the bar with the General Manager of the Jefferson Hotel.

Martin saw them come in. "Viktor, is that your mother and father with Mr. Hazelton?"

Kracek turned. "It sure is." Excusing himself, he went over to meet them. "Mom, Dad, it's good to see you." He gave each of them a warm hug. "I see you've met Mr. Hazelton. How are you, sir?"

"Fine, Captain. Yes, I was in the lobby when they came in. Anytime such distinguished looking people walk into my hotel I'm naturally curious as to who they are, and I took the liberty of introducing myself. One thing led to another, and here we are. Ah, the others are here too, good. Seeing that there were no empty tables he suggested they proceed to the restaurant."

Kracek waved Leslie and the Colonel over to join them. "Leslie, I'd like you to meet my mother and father, Katerina and Vilos Kracek. Mom, dad, this is Captain Leslie Schuler."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Leslie said. "I'm happy you could be here to see your son receive his medals. You must be very proud."

"We are," Katerina replied. "Thank you." To Martin, she said: "It's good to see you again Colonel."

"And I you, Mrs. Kracek."

“Captain Schuler, which branch of service are you in?” Vilos asked.

Kracek answered for her. “She’s in the Air Force dad, same as me; works in Pentagon Intelligence as a political analyst. You two should have a lot to talk about.”

“Indeed.”

Seeing the question in Leslie’s face, Kracek added: “Dad is a professor of political science at Hofstra University. Mom teaches European history at the same school.

“I can’t think of two more intriguing fields of study,” Leslie replied. “I’ll look forward to an interesting exchange of views.”

“Yes. Perhaps, we can even pry a few secrets from you,” Vilos said.

“Why, Mr. Kracek, now I know where your son gets his sense of humor.”

They all laughed as they left the bar for the restaurant. Hazelton and Martin led the way, followed by Vilos and Leslie, Kracek and his mother.

“Viktor,” Katerina said quietly, “she is a beautiful girl...so intelligent.”

“Yes, she is mom.” He pretended not to understand her meaning.

“Are you and she...”

“No, nothing like that. She was assigned by the Air Force to help us navigate through the Washington maze.”

“You mean, like a guide?”

“That, and more. She met us at the airport, arranged for transportation, booked the hotel rooms, and kept us on schedule. She’s been very helpful.”

“I’m sure she has. You know I am not one to interfere in your personal life, son, but...”

“Yes, I know,” he interrupted before she could finish her thought.

She continued, ignoring his unease. “I only want to say, that if you ever decide to bring her home for a visit she will be most welcome.”

“Thanks, mom. I know you mean well, that you only want what’s best for me, and I love you for that. But it’s not going to happen. I’ll be leaving Washington in a few days, and in two weeks I’ll be back in Vietnam.” He wanted to tell her about Renee, but it was not the time, or the place.

“It’s been almost three years now, Viktor. Erin would want you to...”

“I know. She also worried about my being alone, should something happen to her. For the first two years I just couldn’t do it. The memories of her and our life together were too strong. They are what gives me the strength to go on with my life.”

“And now?” Katerina asked.

“Now, although her memories are just as strong, I think I’m ready for another relationship. But, it has to be the right one.”

‘What do you mean?’

“What I mean is, that I want the same kind of special relationship that Erin and I had, yet unique in its own way. Do you think that’s asking too much?”

“No, not at all. What you and Erin shared was wonderful, and impossible to replace, but I do believe there is another woman out there for you, someone who can fill the void she left...someone who could make you happy.

Kracek put his arm around his mother. “I hope you’re right, Mom.” He was about to tell her about Renee, when they arrived at the restaurant.

The maitre d’ greeted them at the entrance. “Good evening Mr. Hazelton. You’re early.”

“Good evening, Franz. Yes, the bar is quite crowded. I thought it best to come here straight away.”

“Of course sir, your table is ready.” Franz escorted them to a table in the back of the room. Mr. and Mrs. Kracek took the leather covered bench seat against the wall. Kracek, Leslie and Colonel Martin took the chairs opposite them. Hazelton sat at the head of the table where he could more easily confer with Franz.

“We’ll have the wine now Franz.”

Franz looked over his shoulder and waved his hand. The waiter, who had been standing near the kitchen entrance appeared with two bottles of chilled white wine, each in its own bucket of ice. He set them on stands at the end of the table. Taking one from the ice he showed it to Hazelton.

“Excellent vintage, Enrico,” you may pour. When everyone’s glass was full, Anil stood up. “My friends, please join me in a toast to two men who, through their battlefield accomplishments, have earned their country’s and our gratitude. Their heroism inspires all of us, and we at the Jefferson are honored to have them as our guests. To Colonel Joe Martin and Captain Viktor Kracek.

“That is the only speech I will make tonight. However, I think it only appropriate that our honored guests be given the opportunity to say a few words. Viktor, you can be first.”

Kracek remained seated as he spoke. “Thank you Anil, for the kind, if not flattering words. I don’t know that I truly measure up to them. Nevertheless, to the degree that I do, I owe it to two other people at this table, my mother and father. This has been a memorable day for me, and having them here to share it has made it even more so.”

“To Vilos and Katerina,” Anil offered in toast, joined by the others.

“I have another toast,” Kracek added: “To Colonel Joe Martin, for his long overdue promotion to full colonel, made so today by the President himself—who knows a good man when sees one.”

That toast, and another to the President, emptied their glasses, which Enrico quickly refilled.

“Thanks, Viktor. You’re becoming a hard act to follow.” Switching his attention to the others at the table, Martin said: “However, after seeing him in action in Vietnam, and now in the United States Congress, nothing he does surprises me anymore. I’d also like to thank you, Mr. Hazelton, for your generous hospitality.”

“You’re most welcome Colonel. But, please, call me Anil. Now that the speeches are over, perhaps we can all relax and call each other by our given names. The chef has prepared an exceptional treat for us, baked salmon—his personal favorite. I hope you like it.”

Franz wheeled in a cart with a silver urn and six small soup bowls and ladled the consommé into their bowls. A waiter followed with freshly baked rolls, and salad seasoned with a special house dressing.

“Bon appetite,” Anil said.

“Bon appetite,” they all replied.

The next few minutes passed in silence as they savored the delicious soup and salad, not to mention the excellent German wine.

Half way through the salads, Anil broke the silence. “Viktor, I hear that you will appearing on the Tonight Show. Is that true?”

“Yes. I fly into New York tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“I’m looking forward to it. The Tonight Show is a favorite of mine, and Johnny usually has some interesting guests.”

“Viktor,” Katerina said, “you didn’t tell us.”

“Sorry mom, but with everything else going on today I hadn’t given it any thought until Anil mentioned it.”

“Of course, you have a good time. We’ll be watching.”

“How about you Joe? Vilos asked.

“I wasn’t invited. It’s just as well. I’ve got plenty to do here before going back to ‘Nam’; which should be the day after Viktor’s return from New York. Is that right, Leslie?

“It is. You’re scheduled to leave from Dulles at 0830 hours on the 15th.” Viktor, however, will be heading out to Las Vegas for about two weeks before returning to Vietnam.”

“Really, Viktor...Las Vegas?” Vilos asked.

“No, not really, dad; I’m going to Nellis Air Force Base, which is just outside the city. Col. Blesse, the Commander of the Fighter Weapons School, invited me there to present my study on F-100 Tactics in South Vietnam—a work in progress. Nonetheless, he wants to make sure that his school is teaching the latest and most accurate information, because that is what the current crop of instructor graduates will be passing on to every operational and training squadron in the Air Force.”

“That’s wonderful, Viktor,” Katerina said. “It must feel good to have your work recognized.”

“It does, mom. And, as an added bonus, I’ll probably get to fly a few training missions while I’m there.”

The waiters brought in the main course—interrupting their conversation. The aroma issuing from their plates set before them was as intoxicating as the wine, exciting their taste buds. As promised, the salmon was delicious.

Little else was said during the meal. But, after a wonderful dessert of Black Forest cake—another specialty of the chef’s—and a cup of rich European blend coffee, they were ready for a more serious discussion.

“The salmon was delicious,” Vilos said. “Our compliments to the chef.”

“You’re welcome,” Anil said. He’ll be delighted to hear it. But, it is I who must thank you. Your presence here tonight honors our hotel. Viktor mentioned that you teach political science at Hofstra. I’m not familiar with that university.

“It’s located in Hempstead, Long Island.” Katerina and I have been teaching there since 1938. If you’re ever in New York, we would love for you to come by and visit. It would give us the opportunity to repay your generous hospitality.”

“I’d like that. As a matter of fact, I get up to New York City at least once a month on business.”

“Then we will look forward to it. Of course that invitation is open to you, Colonel Martin, and to you Leslie, should you ever pass our way.”

“That’s very kind of you, professor,” Leslie said. “But, I’m curious...you joked earlier about prying some secrets from me. Is your research taking you into areas I should know about?”

“I don’t know. Is there one of particular interest to you?”

“There is, although Vietnam takes up most of my time these days.”

“Of course, it would,” Vilos agreed. “It is a major concern for all of us. But, when you’re not occupied with that part of the world, to where do you turn your attention?”

“The Middle East,” she said, without hesitation.

“The Middle East, well, that is a coincidence.” Vilos tried not to reveal his delight, but his face always gave him away—like his son. He started to say something, but was interrupted by Katerina.

“My dear, you just said the magic words. Vilos and I have been studying the Middle East problem for the past three years—he from a political perspective, and I from the historical. We are also collaborating on a book—a fascinating subject.”

“As it is one of great importance.” Vilos said, his tone decidedly more serious. “It’s a region fraught with complex political problems, made almost impossible to resolve, because they are driven by the intractable positions of two major religions, Islam and Judaism.”

“You’ve summed it up very well,” Leslie said. “Yet, we can’t begin to understand what’s going on in that part of the world, or what motivates them, without a thorough knowledge of their history, culture, and religion—not to mention the economics of oil. The Arabs control nearly half of the world’s known reserves.”

“Yes, oil is a major part of a very complicated equation. Katerina and I are not ready to draw any conclusions, but given the world’s dependency on it for its growing energy needs, and the billions of dollars it generates for the Arab rulers, we would not be at all surprised to find that it was indeed the dominant factor—notwithstanding their attempts to use religion as moral justification for their immoral actions.”

“I think you’re right, dad. But let’s not forget that it’s the Christian west, that drills their wells, pumps their oil, and buys it for resale in our markets. It is a situation that we—in collusion with the corrupt dictatorial regimes of these oil rich nations—created with one objective in mind, to line our pockets, ours and theirs. And this “unholy alliance” has been working just fine for both parties.

“Notwithstanding public displays of political, moral, and religious indignation over the plight of the Palestinians and their cries for peace, these Middle Eastern potentates have no incentive to change the status quo. They may all worship the same God, but it’s not Allah, or Jehovah, or the father of Christ, it’s the almighty dollar.”

Everyone was stunned by Kracek’s scathing response—none more than his mother. “Viktor, you seem so cynical...so angry. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“Sorry, mom. But, I’ve become less trusting of people’s motives since leaving home to the join the Marines thirteen years ago. I’ve seen and experienced too much to remain as naive as I was then.”

“Viktor’s right,” Martin said. “Military service matures a person faster than most other professions, and war accelerates the process. I also agree with him, that greed, not altruism, is the underlying motivating factor that dictates policy decisions made by the major players in the Middle East.”

“Well, that theory would certainly simplify the issue and explain much of what’s going on in that region,” Vilos responded, “but I’m not ready to accept such a premise. I believe it to be more complicated than that; that a comprehensive understanding of Arab history, culture, language, and religion—as Leslie pointed out—is critical to finding a workable solution to the problems of the Middle East.”

“Dad, I’m not sure it’s possible for a non Arab to ever fathom the Arab mind, no matter how knowledgeable he or she is in these things. If Colonel Martin and I are correct, such an understanding, even if it were possible for a Westerner, would still not bring about the desired change—not as long as the power to effect such change remains in the hands of a privileged few.

“I believe, that if it were left to the people—not the princes, politicians, businessmen, or religious leaders—to find a way to live in peace, they would. Until the cries and aspirations of the common man and woman are heard, and heeded, we will never have peace in the Middle East, or anywhere else in the world.”

“It is true,” Katerina said. History teaches us, that if there is to be real change in an unjust and oppressive society, it will not come from the ruling class—whose power and fortune depend upon maintaining the status quo—but from the people who, driven to despair and seeing no other way out of their misery, turn to revolution.”

“Unfortunately,” Vilos lamented, “the only thing they really succeed in doing is to change one set of tyrants for another. Their lot not only does not improve, it often becomes worse.”

“Sadly, that’s true,” Katerina acknowledged, “but there are a few notable exceptions, the American and French Revolutions for example.”

“And let’s not forget India,” Anil added.

“Yes India, the largest democracy in the world. It, and the United States share the distinction of having thrown off the same oppressor. Interestingly, despite its heavy handed colonialist history, England is, today, one of the world’s free and most open societies, its government a model of stability and justice.”

Vilos was watching his wife as she talked. He had enormous respect for her as an historian. Moreover, he loved her as much now, if not more, than he did when they first met as students at Charles University in Prague.

“You see, Viktor, this is why I’ve kept your mother around all these years. I needed a good historian to help me put things in proper perspective.”

“Yes, I do see, dad. I also saw that there was more in your eyes when you were looking at mom than professional respect. You’re not fooling anyone, least of all your wife.”

“Am I that transparent, son?”

Katerina answered for him: “Yes, my husband, and your son shares the same personality flaw. It is one of the things I love about you both. It also makes it very hard for either of you to keep secrets from me.”

Father and son look at each other, shrug their shoulders, and smile.

Kracek remembered how Erin would tell him the same thing, in the same way. “It’s worked well for us hasn’t it dad?”

Vilos acknowledged his son with a wink.

The others may have been wondering the same. Leslie was particularly moved by the obvious love and closeness the Kracek's shared. She missed her father, and found herself being drawn to the man sitting next to her. He was a constant surprise—a man who reads something other than Playboy, who has obviously given serious thought to subjects other than flying. *If only we had more time*, she mused. “I agree with everything that's been said, but Viktor's dissertation is very disturbing. It leaves us with little hope for positive change.”

“On the contrary,” he said, “there's always hope. I believe things can and will change for the better, but not tomorrow, or the day after, or anytime in the near future.”

“What then?” She asked. “Are we to continue making wars, and accept the suffering and waste of human life they bring?”

“Of course not. I don't have the answer you're looking for, Leslie, but I do know that we must never accept war, or any other man made scourge, as an inevitable and unchangeable blight on our human condition. This has got to change.”

“But, how...when?”

“When those same power hungry men and women who control our lives finally realize that their greed, left unchecked, will bring them down with us. After all, we depend on the same planet for our existence, we breath the same air and drink the same water. Where will they go if they finally succeed in destroying these things?”

“Where, indeed,” Vilos said. But, isn’t there a danger that their greed and thirst for power will blind them to this truth? Will they be aware enough to see it in time to pull back before the damage is irreversible?”

“That’s a good question, dad. So far, at least, they have. There’s no guarantee it will continue to be true, but the human race—perhaps due to its innate survival instincts—has managed to survive other critical episodes in its history: the bubonic plague, the dark ages, Nazi Germany, the atomic bomb, to name a few. Today, the United States and the U.S.S.R. have enough nuclear warheads between them to annihilate the world many times over, yet neither side has dared to use them. We’re still here.”

“That may be true,” Leslie said, but we did use atomic weapons against the Japanese in World War II.”

“Yes, we did,” Katerina interjected, “but Viktor’s point is well taken. President Truman’s decision to use the bomb to force Japan’s surrender may have done far more than save the hundreds of thousands of American and Japanese lives that would surely have been lost in an invasion of that island nation.

“Thanks to Viktor’s insights and your reminder, I now understand—that despite...no, because of the unbelievable horror and devastation it inflicted upon the Japanese people, it served to demonstrate to the world the terrifying power of the atom as nothing else could.

“Humanity was shaken to its core. For the first time in our history, we had to think the unthinkable...the real possibility of the extinction of the human race. It was a lesson we would not forget.”

“Apparently, our leaders did not,” Vilos pointed out, “which may explain why nuclear weapons have not been used since. Hiroshima and Nagasaki made it painfully clear, that to do so would threaten their own survival.”

“If I am hearing all of you correctly,” Anil said, “and, if what you say is true, then perhaps the only reason the world as we know it exists today, may be because of the tens of thousands of people that were sacrificed to the atomic bomb almost twenty years ago.

My god, what a sad testament to the human race, that it would take a catastrophic event of such magnitude to bring us to our senses.”

“On the other hand,” Martin said, “we literally owe those people our lives. Indeed, we owe Truman our lives. But does anyone really believe that we have matured enough since then to feel confident it could never happen again?”

“That is *the* question, Joe,” Vilos said. “Nonetheless, the idea that we are here to debate the issue, only because the bomb *was* used in our recent past, is an intriguing one. I don’t know of anyone who has put forth such a hypothesis before. You should submit a paper on the subject, Viktor.”

“I don’t think so, dad, not me. Even if I thought I could, I would defer to mom. She made the connection between what I said about our instincts for survival and Leslie’s comments about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The idea never occurred to me. She should have that honor.”

“Thank you Viktor,” Katerina said, her heart filled with love and pride. *He is so like his father*, she thought. “If I ever should develop that thesis for a paper you and Leslie will be given due credit.”

Franz approached Anil and whispered something in his ear.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I’m sorry to interrupt such a thought provoking dialogue, but I’m afraid a matter of some importance has come up that requires my personal attention. I apologize for having to leave so suddenly; but please, stay as long as you wish. If you should need or want anything Franz will take care of it. I sincerely hope to see all of you again.”

With Anil’s departure, the tone of their conversation reverted to more mundane affairs.

31

A Fateful Decision

Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam, 13 Dec 1965, 1430 hours (2:30am, N.Y.)

Captain Brown stopped at the operations counter to check the next day's schedule. He knew he wasn't on it, but it was his habit to do so—his and every other fighter pilot.

Monzone and Towlan, were copying the mission information on flight data cards when they saw him come in. They greeted him in unison: "Good afternoon, sir."

Their greeting took him by surprise. He wasn't expecting friends of Kracek to speak to him in anything other than an official capacity. He didn't know that Kracek himself made it clear to them that every pilot in the 429th had earned the right to be there and Brown was no exception. His exact words were: "On any given day, anyone of us could be flying with any other pilot in the squadron. If we can't at least be civil to one another we have a serious problem."

To his credit Brown responded, even if reluctantly. "Good afternoon," he said, his voice rather clipped. Uncomfortable with the situation he quickly turned away to check the board. He saw that Whitfield was scheduled for the 1120 mission tomorrow, flying an F-100F with an empty back seat.

"Hello, John," Captain Janrette said. "How's it going?"

"Not bad Ed...you?"

"Couldn't be better...another full day tomorrow."

"Yeah, I see that. Looks like you have a back seat open."

"Kracek was originally scheduled for it, but had to leave left for Washington earlier than expected. Do you want it?" Janrette never liked to see a seat go empty.

As much as he hated to play second fiddle to Kracek, Brown loved flying too much to pass up the opportunity. He was also curious as to just how good the “old man” was in the F-100. “Sure, why not? Can’t see wasting a perfectly good seat.”

“It’s all yours, John.

32

New York - Vietnam

New York City, 13Dec1965, 11PM

“And now, heeeeeeeeres Johnny!” The Tonight Show host came through the center curtain, jokingly fumbling with it as he stepped on stage. That got the usual laughter and applause from an audience anticipating a fun evening. Ed McMahon had already gotten them warmed up, but Johnny Carson was a master at turning up the heat.

Taking a page from earlier TV star, Milton Berle, Johnny milked the applause by holding up one hand in a mock attempt to quiet the audience, while urging them on with the other held low at his side. When he had enough he raised both hands to quiet them. “Thank you, thank you,” he said, but they continued to applaud until he repeated himself several times.

“Wow, what an audience we have here tonight. Where did you find these people Ed, “Happy Hour” at Dempsey’s?”

Before the laughter died down, Johnny started his patented monologue, using practically all of the unique facial expressions that made him one of the most popular celebrities in the world to mimic. Impressionists love him. His political satire was never more sharp and he kept the audience, and McMahon, in stitches for a full five minutes.

“We’ve got a great show for you this evening, ladies and gentlemen, ‘a really big ‘shoe.’” He couldn’t resist doing his Ed Sullivan impression. “First up is a very talented actress, who has made some of the best musical comedies to come out of Hollywood, such as “Singing in the Rain,” and “The Unsinkable Molly Brown,” in which she is currently starring on Broadway. Debbie Reynolds is with us tonight.”

More unrestrained applause from an audience eager to be entertained.

“Okay, okay, I take it you like Debbie. We all do, including our next guest. You’ve probably read about him in today’s papers, or seen him in the recently televised Joint Session of Congress. He is a highly decorated hero of the Vietnam War, Captain Viktor Kracek.” This time the applause was more polite than exuberant.

Johnny made a mental note of it and continued without pause. “Also with us tonight, is the sometimes controversial, always interesting, newly elected Mayor of New York City, John Lindsey.” More applause. “Now, let’s hear it for Skitch Henderson and the band.”

The announcements completed, Johnny finished off with his trademark golf swing, sans club, then walked over to his desk as the station cut to a commercial.

During the break Ed McMahon leaned over to Johnny and, keeping his voice low so as not to be overheard by the studio audience, said: “It might have been a mistake having a Vietnam vet on the show. Did you notice the lukewarm reaction from the audience?”

“Of course I did, Ed. But you know I don’t have the final say on every guest we have on the show. In this case I wasn’t even asked. The studio execs had already made that decision—if, in fact, it was their decision. Nevertheless, if they had asked me, I would have approved wholeheartedly.”

“You would?”

“You’re damn right. You know I don’t like this war anymore than you do, but we’ve got to make the distinction between the politics that got us into Vietnam and the dedicated men and women we sent there to fight it. They’re putting their lives on the line every day and, as long as they are, they need and deserve our support, if for no other reason than to bring them home in one piece. Moreover, Captain Kracek is a genuine hero. The very least we can do is pay him the respect he’s earned.”

“Of course, you’re right,” McMahon said, quickly changing his tune. “I hadn’t really thought about it in that way.”

“That’s the problem, Ed. Too many people view the war only from the political perspective and forget the human element. Well, now we have an opportunity to present that side of it, and that’s what I intend to do.”

The director held up both hands signaling ten seconds to air time. With the casual air of an old pro Johnny turned to the camera with the red light on and said: We’re back ladies and gentlemen, and gentlemen, and standing just offstage waiting to be introduced is none other than Miss Debbie Reynolds.”

Needing no encouragement the audience burst into applause as she ran across the stage into Johnny's welcoming arms gave him an 'air kiss' on each cheek, and then planted a big wet one right on his mouth. It took him completely off guard. He blushed. One of things that so endeared him to his fans was his homespun naïveté. He could still be embarrassed by a public display of affection—or so he made it appear.

Unfortunately for him Miss Reynolds harbored no such inhibition, and was too good an entertainer not to capitalize on Johnny's uneasiness. Still holding him, she went into her Za Za Gabor impersonation. "Dahling, why I do believe you're blushing. I like daht in a man; its soooo cute."

Holding his hands out to his sides, Johnny turned to the audience with a perplexed look on his face. "Folks, I swear I didn't put her up to this. I don't know what's going on, but I know that if it doesn't stop soon I'm gonna be in big trouble when I get home."

"Dahling," Debbie said, continuing the Gabor impersonation, "don't you worry. Just tell your vife daht I only used you for a few minutes. She vill have you for the rest of der night."

With that bit of advice, the audience went wild, Johnny cracked up, and Ed McMahon was laughing so hard he almost fell out of his chair.

“Only used me for a few minutes; did I miss something?” He went into another classic Carson facial expression to pretend his innocence. But, false modesty aside, he knew a good thing when it was dropped in his lap, and this was Debbie at her best. He kept feeding her lines to encourage her comedic responses, to which she was more than willing to oblige.

They kept their impromptu skit going for several hilarious minutes. The audience was in stitches. If they weren’t warmed up after Johnny’s monologue they were on fire now. But Debbie and Johnny knew when to quit and walked back to his desk while the laughter and applause was still at its peak

Always the gentlemen, McMahon got up to greet her with a handshake before she took the chair nearest Johnny’s desk.

“Debbie Reynolds ladies and gentlemen. Isn’t she something?” Johnny said, gesturing to the petite star. “So, Debbie, what have you been up to lately? I heard you just finished a new movie.”

“That’s right, Johnny, ‘The Singing Nun.’ It’ll be released next year.”

“Your studio sent us a film clip. Will you set the scene for us before we roll it?”

“Of course, isn’t that why I’m here, silly,” she teased.

Johnny rolled his eyes and threw his hands up, inadvertently launching the pencil he was holding in his right hand. It went flying behind him, barely missing an out of sight stage hand. “Ed, help me out here. What am I paying you for? Besides selling dog food, all you do is sit around and laugh your fanny off.”

“That *is* what you pay me for, Mr. Carson.” McMahon wasn’t sure how Johnny would react. Nevertheless, it got more laughs.

Johnny looked into the camera with his hurt little boy expression. “You see, I get no respect. We’d better just run the film.”

After viewing the film clip, he said: “That was a funny scene. We’ll be looking forward to the picture’s debut. Speaking of debuts, how about the one coming up for you right here in the ‘Big Apple?’ I heard you were in New York to star in the Broadway version of the ‘Unsinkable Molly Brown.’ Is that true?”

“Now, Johnny, you know it is. I told you about that before the show.”

Like the kid who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Johnny shook his head and laughed. Uncharacteristically at a loss for words, he wisely said nothing.

Debbie let him stew awhile, then added: "I've never been more excited about a project. This is my first Broadway musical, and I'm really looking forward to working in front of a live audience. I'm also a bit nervous."

"No need to be," he said. Your performance in the movie won an Oscar nomination, and New York audiences are the best in the world. They love you here." More applause and cheers from the audience.

"If they're anything like the wonderful people in this studio, I must agree." She threw them a kiss.

"You see what I mean," Johnny said, "You've got lots of fans here, and it's time we brought out one of your biggest. Ladies and gentlemen please join me in welcoming one of the Air Force's finest fighter pilots, a man whose recent combat exploits have earned him the personal recognition of the President of the United States, Captain Viktor Kracek."

Bien Hoa Air Base, 14Dec65, 1120 hours (New York,
13Dec,11:20PM)

The three F-100's pulled onto the parallel taxiway in staggered trail formation, each one bearing the distinctive Black Falcon on its tail. On the runway, a flight of F-5's were on takeoff roll..

“Skoshi Tigers,” Whitfield said over the aircraft intercom.

“Nice little airplane, but it can't carry much.” Brown said.

“Doesn't have much range either,” Whitfield replied, “but it handles like a sports car in the air, and it's deadly accurate.

“I'll give it that, sir. But air to air combat is where it really shines.”

“On that we agree. I'd like to take one up to see how it well it performs.

And I'd like to be there when you do, Brown mused.

They pulled into the arming area at the end of the runway. Lead took the first slot, offset thirty degrees from the runway heading for safety. As the crew chief guided them in, Whitfield raised the canopy full open and placed his hands on the railing, visible to the chief and weapons personnel. Brown did the same, signaling the ground crew that all armament switches were off and it was safe to work under the aircraft.

Two and Three parked parallel to Lead and duplicated his actions, as Whitfield and Brown observed. Each flight member would check the other as their weapons were armed—a standard safety procedure.

Soon, the armament crew chief appeared in front of the lead aircraft displaying pins with red streamers in one hand and a thumbs up with the other. Whitfield returned the gesture and lowered his canopy full down. He waited until his wingmen did the same before switching the flight to channel two.

“Falcon, check in.”

“Two...Three.”

“Tower, Falcon is number one for takeoff.”

“Roger, Falcon, cleared onto the active...winds 2-2-0 degrees at ten Knots.” Major Thompson put his mike down and picked up his binoculars to check them as they taxied onto the runway.

Whitfield added only enough power to get the F-100F rolling, then pulled it back to idle before starting his turn to keep his jet exhaust from blasting the ground crew. He stopped on the runway centerline, with Two on his left wing and Three on the right. A circular motion of his hand signaled them to run up their engines.

“Falcon, this is Tower,” Lafitte called. “Request you expedite takeoff...flight of three approaching the break.”

“Will do, Tower.” Whitfield checked his wingmen for a thumbs up and released brakes. “Falcon One on the roll.” He moved the throttle into afterburner and braced himself for the jarring impact of sixteen thousand pounds of explosive energy that surged through the airplane and them.

The sudden start forward pressed them against their seat backs. The F-86 he flew in Korea was a great airplane, but it couldn't match the raw power of the F-100. He felt years younger. "Gets your attention, doesn't it, John?"

The Tonight Show, New York City, 13Dec65, 11:20pm

Henderson's band played a rousing rendition of the Air Force's "Wild Blue Yonder" as Kracek walked in wearing his dress blue uniform decorated with four rows of ribbons, including his recently awarded medals.

Johnny greeted him warmly in front of his desk. Debbie also stood up to meet him and shake his hand. Her uncharacteristically reserved behavior contrasted sharply with her initial entrance. It was not politically motivated. No one knew where she stood on the issue of Vietnam, since she has never made a public statement regarding it. If asked about the war by the press she would simply say: "I am an actress and entertainer, not a politician."

She met the Captain before the show, expecting an egocentric, vainglorious fighter pilot, bursting with his own self importance. Instead, she found him to be an unpretentious, strong-willed man who spoke softly, but with a confidence and sincerity she was not accustomed to seeing in Hollywood.

That he was handsome as well as charming didn't hurt either. She liked him. More importantly, she respected him, and would never do anything in public that might embarrass him.

“Captain Kracek, Johnny tells me you're my biggest fan. Is that true?”

“Miss Reynolds, if Johnny told you that, then it must be true.” Standing in front of the same beautiful girl that had smiled back at him from a picture she sent him when he was a young marine in Korea, he realized that the occasion called for something more than a handshake. Kracek gently took her hand and kissed it.

Debbie was surprised and genuinely flattered. Trooper that she is, however, she quickly regained her composure and eased into her Scarlet O'hara impersonation. Smiling demurely, with fluttering eyelids, she said: “Whah, Captain Kracek, ah had no ideah that fighter pilots were so gallant.”

“Madam,” he replied, in a rather clumsy Rhett Butler, “as a rule we are not, but your dazzling beauty brings out the finest in me.” He then sat her in her chair, shook Ed’s hand, and sat down in the chair nearest Johnny’s desk.

Debbie was speechless—a rarity for her. She was also blushing—even more rare. Johnny, meanwhile, was going through his patented repertoire of mannerisms and facial expressions. He was enjoying the show, as was everyone in the studio.

McMahon couldn’t hide his amazement over the audience’s reception of the war hero and silently regretted having said anything about it to Johnny. Thankfully, everyone was so busy watching Debbie and Kracek, no one noticed his open-mouthed stare—no one, that is, except his boss, who pointed a finger at him as if he were aiming a pistol. McMahon smiled sheepishly and settled back in his chair.

“Well, Captain,” Johnny began, “you did tell me you were a big fan of Miss Reynolds. Until now, however, I hadn’t realized how big. You took us all by surprise, especially Debbie. With the exception of her films, I’ve never seen her blush. This has got to be a television first.”

“Johnny, you are bad,” Debbie protested.

Turning to her, Kracek said: “Miss Reynolds, if I embarrassed you I apologize.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” she said. “I was very flattered. But please, call me Debbie.”

“I will, if you’ll call me Viktor.”

“And you can both call me Johnny. Now that that’s settled, I think the television audience would like to know more about Captain Kracek. I was told that you are originally from New York.”

“That’s right, Johnny. I was born in Brooklyn, just six months after my parents arrived here.”

“So, your parents are not from this country.”

“No, they are from Czechoslovakia...Prague, actually. They taught at the university. My father teaches political science, my mother, history.

“Really? What made them want to leave all that to come here?”

Johnny already knew the answers to the questions he would be asking all of his guests. His research team had already provided him with all the background information he needed to ask the questions that would be of most interest to the viewing audience.

“It’s a long story, but I’ll make it brief. My parents had been following the Nazi movement in Germany with more than academic interest, and when Hitler’s actions began to match his rhetoric, it became clear to them that he wouldn’t be satisfied with Germany alone.

“After he was made Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and given near dictatorial power, they decided it was time to leave Czechoslovakia. It took some time to get visas, but with the help of some American friends at Columbia University—who also found them teaching positions there—they were able to leave the country in June of that year. My mother was three months pregnant with her first son.”

“So you were conceived in Czechoslovakia and born in America. That’s interesting...unique—like so many other things about you; which brings us to why you’re here tonight.”

Johnny spoke into the camera “For you folks out there in television land, and those of you in the studio, who may not know, Captain Kracek has just returned from Vietnam, where he was involved in two of the most incredible missions of the war, missions in which his courage and flying skills turned the tide of battle and saved many American lives.”

The audience interrupted with polite applause—some chose not to.

Johnny took note. “Because of this he was awarded the Air Force Cross for each mission—our nation’s second highest award for valor—and flown back to Washington to receive his medals from the President himself.

Turning his attention back to Kracek, Johnny said. “That happened yesterday at a Joint Session of Congress. Now you’re here in New York, where it all started, so to speak.”

“Actually Johnny, if you ask my parents, they would probably tell you that it really started in Prague.”

“And they would be right. But, what about you? Where do you go from here? ”

“I’ll go back to Washington for a day or two, then Las Vegas.”

“Las Vegas?”

“Not the “Strip,” but Nellis Air Force Base; more specifically the U.S. Air Force Fighter Weapons School, my alma mater. Like the people I’ll be Briefing in Washington, they want a first-hand account of my missions before I go back to Vietnam.”

“Wow,” Johnny said, “that’s quite a schedule. At least they gave you tomorrow off. That was good of them, wasn’t it?”

“And I’m happy to get it. There are some people in the Pentagon who are very anxious to talk to me. I was surprised they let me do your show.”

“I’m not. They were overruled by the President.”

“The President?”

“You bet; he had Mr. Valenti call the studio execs to set it up.”

Kracek recalled Johnson’s words as he left his office. “I should have guessed. By the way, the President asked me to say hello. He’s probably watching the show right now—assuming he hasn’t been distracted by some new world crisis.”

“He did?” Johnny was pleased with the unsolicited endorsement. “You know, he was also on the Tonight Show, back when he was still the Senate Majority Leader. A charming man, but I wouldn’t want to lock horns with him over a political issue.”

“I got that same impression. He leaves no doubt as to who’s in charge. Oh, there was something else he wanted me to pass on to you.”

“Am I in trouble?” Johnny pretended to be nervous by letting another pencil fly out of his hand, then slumped back in his chair.

“No, but he did ask me to tell you that your golf swing needed more work.”

“He did? Did you hear that, Ed? I want you to find me the best golf pro in this city and schedule me for lessons for the next two weeks. When the President of the United States takes the time to critique my golf swing the least I can do is act on his advice.”

“You’re absolutely right, boss.” McMahon kept their impromptu skit going. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Enough already,” Debbie interrupted. I don’t know what you boys see in that silly game anyway. Viktor’s story is far more interesting, and I’d much rather hear him tell it.” She appealed to the studio audience. “Wouldn’t you?”

They responded with applause.

“Okay, I never argue with a lady, especially one as unsinkable as “Molly Brown. This would be a good time to show you an actual film clip of the Captain’s mission, in which he shot down two Mig-21’s. It’s an edited copy of the actual gun camera film taken by him. The Pentagon sent it over by courier this morning.”

“They sent you my gun camera film?”

“It blew me away me too. Like you, I assumed it would be classified, but apparently the White House was anxious to have it aired on tonight’s show. Viktor, would you explain what we are seeing as we go through it?”

“Be happy to, Johnny.” The lights were dimmed in the studio and the film was started. “The film starts where I was just completing a high ‘g’ barrel roll, forcing the Migs into an overshoot. You can see the leader slide out in front, followed by his wingman. That small circle of lighted diamonds with the dot in the middle is my sight aiming reticle.

“I’ll slowly move it onto to the wingman, then open fire. Those intermittent streaks of light you see are tracer rounds. They illuminate the flight path of the 20mm cannon shells impacting wingman’s aircraft.”

“Holy cow!” Johnny exclaimed. “What was that?”

“Debri from his plane. I had to pull up sharply to avoid flying through it, otherwise I might shot myself down at the same time. One of the ironies of war, a friend of mine would say.

My evasive maneuver put me out of gun range for a clean shot at his leader, but not for long. I selected full afterburner and quickly closed the distance. As you see, it didn’t take long. It was only able to fire a short burst, but every round found its mark. The The Mig was badly damaged, but still flyable, and the pilot was heading straight for Cambodia.

I moved in to finish him off, but my guns wouldn’t fire. As I looked through the cockpit to find the problem I had apparently not fully released the trigger, which is why the gun camera is still recording here. While I didn’t need the film to confirm the second kill, it does give us a great shot of the pilot ejecting. He barely made it into Cambodia when he did.

The film clip ended there.

Vietnam, 14Dec1965, 1145 hours (New York, 13Dec, 11:45am)

Approaching the target area, Whitfield contacted the Forward Air Controller. “Sparrow this is Falcon, how do you read, over?”

“Loud and clear, Falcon...how me?”

“Five by. What have you got for us?”

“A Vietcong ammo storage dump located about fifty meters inside the trees to the east of the clearing. Do you have me in sight?”

“Roger. We’re about four miles northeast at ten thousand feet. We’re three F-100’s carrying 750 pound bombs and 20mm.”

With the skill of the fighter pilot he is, Captain ‘Jaz’ Jazinski rolled into the target and fired off a smoke rocket—the only ordnance carried by the O1E. As he pulled out of his dive he said: “Drop on my smoke.”

“Falcon flight, check switches hot. Lead is in from the southeast.”

Brown watched the fighter ace roll the aircraft inverted and pull it through the horizon into a fifty degree dive angle, placing the nose of the F-100 well short of the target, as he eased the throttle back to control his acceleration rate. He observed how he allowed the sight aiming point to slowly drift up to the target, so it would arrive there at precisely the same time his dive angle stabilized at forty five degrees, his airspeed hit four hundred and fifty knots, and his altimeter read forty five hundred feet.

Those parameters met, he released his two inboard bombs and pulled up, banking sharply left to complicate the Vietcong gunners tracking problem.

Falcon Two began his attack before the dust from Lead's bombs had a chance to settle. "Two's in from the northeast."

"Roger, put them right on top of Falcon Lead's," Sparrow directed.

"Nicely done, Colonel," Brown commented. Did you see the tracers as we pulled off?"

"I did, but they were well behind us. They haven't adjusted to our faster delivery speed yet, one of the first changes Kracek made after he joined the squadron."

"Kracek again. Brown wondered what he had to do to get out from under his shadow.

"Captain Brown...John," Whitfield didn't get an immediate response.

"Yes sir...sorry...I was distracted for a second."

"Why don't you make the next bomb run?"

"Me? From the back seat?"

"Why not? You're an experienced instructor pilot."

“But, I never delivered a live weapon from the back seat. I... I can’t see the sight reticle from here.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll talk you through it.” Whitfield didn’t wait for his acceptance. “You have the airplane,” he said, shaking the stick—the signal for Brown to take control of the aircraft. Those four words were never given, or taken lightly by any pilot, and were understood more as a command than a request.

Without hesitation, Brown took the control stick. *I wanted to learn something from him on this mission, but I never expected this.* “I hope you know what you’re doing, Colonel.”

“I generally do,” he said, taking no offense to Brown’s remark. While he would never tolerate obvious disrespect from his people, he allowed, even encouraged them to speak freely. He didn’t want a bunch of “yes men” around him who carefully measured every word they said for fear of displeasing the boss. Some commanders might like that sort of thing, even promote it—not Bill Whitfield. He believed such nonsense stifled innovative thinking and insured the preservation of the status quo.

He wanted his people to express themselves openly and challenged them to “think outside the box.” Only then could they realize their full potential and thus maximize their contribution to the squadron. Nothing mattered more to him than molding his people into the best fighting unit in the Air Force. Giving the controls to Brown was simply a practical expression of his leadership philosophy. “You know of course, that if this were anything other than a routine mission I wouldn’t be doing this.”

“Yes sir, I do, and I apologize.”

“No apologies necessary. You’ve got a lot of time in the back seat of an “F.” Just fly it like I know you can.”

“Thanks, Colonel.” *I’m definitely learning something from him on this flight, and it’s not just a new flying technique.*

Falcon Three saw the first two bombs hit and dropped his twenty meters further east. As he pulled off target, he looked back in time to see the shock wave from his bombs part the jungle trees like the hand of an invisible giant. Two secondary explosions told him that his bombs had found the arms cache. “That’s what we came here to do,” he told himself.

“Sparrow...Falcon Three, did you see the secondary explosions?”

“You bet. Falcon flight, did you see the fireworks?”

“Falcon One has them.” Brown acknowledged.

“Two, roger.”

“If you drop your remaining bombs within ten meters of Falcon Three’s that should just about wrap it up.”

“You got it, Sparrow. Falcon One is in from the west.” Brown rolled in to the target aggressively. Flying back seat with limited visibility to the front, and no reference to the sight, he wanted as much tracking time as he could get. As he rolled his wings level, he reduced power and scanned the instruments: airspeed 350 knots, altitude 8500 feet, dive angle fifty degrees. “How does it look up front, Colonel?”

“Not bad. You’re about 150 feet short and slightly left of the aim point. Turn right about three degrees.”

“Roger.” With a slight bank and a touch of right rudder, Brown made the correction.

“That’s got it, but your airspeed is low.”

Brown moved the throttle forward a few percent to correct, and double checked the speed brakes by moving the switch up. When he did, he heard the familiar sound of the brake slamming shut against the underside of the aircraft. “Damn, it was partially down,” he chided himself.

He corrected the problem, but the distraction was enough to cause him to go through his release altitude by two hundred feet. However, the altitude error was offset by the lower airspeed at release, and his bombs hit close enough to trigger another secondary explosion bigger than the first.

Realizing he had pressed the attack, Brown pulled up into a hard straight ahead climb to insure a safe recovery. This delayed his turn away from the target area and gave the VC marksman a clean shot with a shoulder held heat seeking missile. It flew right up their tailpipe, blowing apart the aft section and rupturing the hydraulic lines.

As soon as it impacted, Whitfield instinctively took the controls. "I've got the aircraft...you okay, John?"

"Yes sir, but it is getting a little warm back here."

Sparrow was so focused on the target he never saw the missile homing in on Falcon One. "Nice shooting, Falcon," he reported. "You must have hit the mother lode. The shock wave from the secondary damn near tore my wings off."

"Tell that to the guy who just drove a missile up our tailpipe," Whitfield quipped.

When the Vietcong shooter saw his missile strike home he started to celebrate his victory with his buddies, but their joy was short-lived. Falcon Two's bombs turned their smiling faces into death masks of bloody horror.

The Tonight Show, New York City, 13Dec1965, 11:40PM

"That was some piece of flying," Johnny said. "I've never seen anything like it. Have you Ed?"

"Heck no. I'm still trying to figure out how so much could happen in so little time."

"Me too," Debbie said. "But, Johnny said you shot down two Migs. Your film shows the Leader getting away."

"It does. We had to break pursuit to avoid crossing into Cambodia, so I couldn't film it with my gun camera. However, we saw the pilot eject. His plane crashed about one hundred meters from where he himself landed. His chute was being drawn into the heat of the fireball, but he managed to steer away from it. He was unhurt."

"My God, I'm glad of that," she said.

Kracek noted of her concern for the fate of the enemy pilot. "So am I. By the way, his wingman also ejected safely, but he wasn't as fortunate as his leader. He was still over South Vietnam, and taken prisoner immediately after landing."

An always curious Johnny had to ask: “Captain, did I hear you correctly? Did you say that you were glad the Mig Leader got away?”

“No, Johnny. I said that I was relieved he wasn’t injured.”

“But he was trying to kill you.”

“And I him. That’s war, and all of the other nasty things that go with it. It is by nature an ugly, inhumane business, but that doesn’t mean we have to be. We are, after all, human beings, even if there are some on both sides who would have us think otherwise.

“When this war is over—just like every other before it—we’ll go back to our homes and families to resume our lives, diplomatic relations will be reestablished, trade between our two countries will be resumed, and old enemies will become new friends. That’s the way it’s always been, and it will be no different this time. We live on an ever shrinking planet, and life is far too short to waste on vengeance.”

Johnny was a bit unsettled by Viktor’s impromptu lecture. He took a few seconds to collect his thoughts. *Christ, I only asked a simple question. But there is a lot of truth in what he says.* “I agree. I’ve read the works of scholars who hold similar views, but none expressed them as succinctly as you just did. I think I understand now what they were trying to tell me.”

“Living through two different wars has given me some invaluable insight into the subject, Johnny. And, maybe, because I am not a scholar, my blunt explanation is more easily understood by my most people.”

“I also believe that war is dehumanizing,” Debbie said, “but only to the extent we allow it to be. That’s why listening to a hero of this war, express that truth with the understanding and sensitivity as only a man who has been through it can is a good thing. We needed to hear it. Moreover, we needed to hear it from you.”

Kracek looked at her and smiled. Despite the distraction of her beauty and talent, he always suspected her to be a woman of more depth than her Hollywood persona.

Johnny and McMahon were bowled over by her perceptive remarks. There was a noticeable pause in the dialogue, as Johnny tried to digest the apparent contradiction. “Wow, where did that come from Debbie? As long as I’ve known you I’ve never seen this serious side.”

“Oh, It’s been there all along, Johnny. I just never had anyone push the right button before. I have to thank Viktor for that. Do you do this to all the girls you meet, Captain?”

“No, Miss Reynolds, only those who have the right button to press.”

With the mood once again lightened, Johnny introduced his next guest.

Vietnam, 14 Dec65, 1150 hours (New York, 13Dec, 11:50pm)

“Falcon Flight, Lead has been hit. Our engine is coming apart and we’re losing hydraulic pressure...have to eject.”

“Falcon Lead, this is Sparrow, there’s a clear area about a mile west.”

“Roger that.” Whitfield turned the crippled aircraft toward the clearing. “John, on my call, pull the handles and go.”

“Isn’t there some other way we can resolve the problem, Colonel?” Brown wasn’t too keen on jumping out of an airplane—even one that was falling apart around him—but his forced humor couldn’t hide his fear. This was every pilot’s worst nightmare.

“None. When you get down head for the trees to the west. I can’t guarantee the Vietcong won’t be waiting for us there, but at least we won’t be running back to where we know they are. Now go, or you’ll be flying solo.”

Falcon Three was about to join on his Leader’s right wing when he saw the canopy jettison from the aircraft, followed by Brown, then Whitfield. He circled to keep them in sight. “They’re out with two good chutes.”

“Two has them in sight. I’m closing on your right wing, Three.” Olsen looked for hung bombs as he moved in. “You’re clean.”

“Roger, so are you.” Three confirmed. “Check your bomb switches safe and gun switch on. Say your fuel.”

“Two has 5000 pounds...switches off, guns hot.”

“That gives us less than twenty minutes of loiter time. Call me when you reach bingo fuel,” Three directed.

Olsen watched the chutes collapse on the ground. “They’re down...landed about fifty meters of each other.”

Whitfield unbuckled his parachute harness and took out his emergency radio. “Falcon Three, this is Lead, do you read?”

“Loud and clear...everyone okay?”

“We’re good here, but...” Whitfield stopped in mid-sentence to stare in amazement at Brown sprinting toward him like a gazelle. His feet barely touched the ground. *Christ, he can run*, he thought. “...we’ll be needing a ride home.”

“A rescue chopper and fighter support are on the way,” Sparrow replied.

“Roger that, Sparrow, but if we don’t get out of this clearing we won’t be alive to greet them. We’re moving into the jungle west of us.”

“Good call. I spotted a Vietcong patrol moving towards your position from the east.”

“Lead, this is Three. I’ve got a visual on the bad guys. Hold your position until you hear my guns. We’ll keep them busy until you’re safely in the trees.”

“Copy that,” Whitfield replied. Looking at Brown, he said: “Are you ready to dance, John?”

“All I need is the music.” The sound of Falcon Three’s 20mm cannons suddenly filled the heavy air like crackling thunder.

“That’s my song, Colonel.”

They sprinted into the jungle as Falcon Two laid down a second wall of steel between them and their Vietcong pursuers. Whitfield stayed with his younger charge step for step as they dove into the brush. They stopped momentarily to catch their breath. “Jesus, Colonel, I didn’t know you could run like that.”

“Never had to before today, John. It’s amazing what a little motivation will do.”

“Motivation...right. There’s plenty of that around.” Brown was even more impressed with Whitfield’s cool under fire than he was with his running ability. “What do we do now?”

“We can’t stay here. Our guys can hold them off only as long as their ammo holds out—five minutes, maybe. We’ve got to keep moving.”

“But, what about the rescue chopper? How will they find us?”

“The chopper won’t do us much good if the VC get to us first. Our best bet is to make it to another open area, or find a hole in the jungle canopy big enough for them to hoist us out.” Whitfield took the UHF from his G-suit pocket. “Sparrow, Falcon One.”

“Go ahead, One.”

“We’re heading deeper into the jungle...need a bearing to the next clear area big enough for a cable extraction.”

“Roger that. There is a smaller opening less than a mile northwest of your position.”

“Thanks, we’ll keep in touch. Don’t go away.”

“Not a chance.”

“Falcon One, this is Three, we can only hold them another five minutes.”

“That should be enough.” Whitfield replied, with little conviction.

The Tonight Show, New York, 13 Dec65, 12PM

“This would be a good time to bring out our next guest,” Johnny said, “a man who, himself, is a World War II Navy veteran. He was Manhattan’s 17th Congressional District’s Representative since 1958, and is now about to take on one of the most difficult jobs in the world, Mayor of New York City. Please help me welcome Congressman and Mayor Elect, John Lindsay.”

A tall, slender, impeccably dressed man, exuding charm and poise, strode on stage as though he owned it. He waved in acknowledgment of the audience’s applause; which was more polite than enthusiastic. In Lindsay’s case, however, the controversy centered around the man, rather than the events surrounding him.

Johnny stood up to greet him, and shook his hand.

“Congratulations on your recent election, Congressman.”

“Thanks, Johnny.” Before taking the seat vacated by Kracek, Lindsay took Debbie’s hand—she was standing to greet him—and kissed her on the cheek, then gripped Kracek’s hand firmly in his.

“...pleasure to meet you, Captain.”

“The pleasure is all mine, sir.”

He shook McMahon's hand before taking his seat. Although a registered Republican, John Lindsay is viewed as a maverick who never hesitated to break party ranks if he disagreed with its position on key issues. He made that clear from his first day in Congress, rankling more than a few partisan feathers during his tenure in Washington.

A strong advocate of civil rights, he publicly reproached the President for not fulfilling his campaign promises and admonished his brother Bobby, the Attorney General, for disregarding civil liberties during his overzealous crackdown on organized labor.

Rather than compromise his principles, he even refused to endorse his party's candidate for president when Barry Goldwater made a run for the oval office in 1964—although, it's unlikely that his opposition was solely responsible for Goldwater's rout.

The lukewarm support given him by the liberal wing of the Republican Party contributed more than their fair share. Party factionalism aside, it was Goldwater himself, with his uncompromising, give no quarter attitude towards his political enemies, and a campaign promise to end the war by bombing Hanoi, who insured his own defeat.

He was the political antithesis of Lindsay; but both men were equally willing to suffer the consequences of their beliefs and had more in common than either of them would admit. And, like Goldwater, you either liked John Lindsay or you hated him. There was no middle ground.

Kracek admired them both—although he differed with both of them on some of the politics they espoused.

“Congressman,” Johnny said, “You’re looking as dapper as ever. How does it feel to be Mayor Elect of our fair city?”

“It feels great, Johnny. I’m looking forward to taking over one of the most demanding political positions next to the Presidency. As you know I thrive on challenge, and there is certainly enough of it in New York City to keep me fully occupied.”

“I don’t doubt that. But how do you feel about leaving Washington, and all of the excitement and political machinations that are so much a part of that scene?”

“Some of it I’ll miss; much of it, I won’t. No doubt, I’ll find enough of both right here to keep me from getting homesick. Even more exciting to me is that, as Mayor, I’ll be directly responsible for all of the good people in this city, not just the 17th District, which I represented in Congress for four terms. New Yorkers have honored me once again by electing me as their Mayor, and I will do everything in my power to justify their trust.”

This time when the audience applauded they held nothing back. A smiling Lindsay looked at them and nodded his thanks.

“Sure, they like your act here, but will it play in Peoria?”

Johnny said, paraphrasing an old vaudeville joke to bring things back to a lighter note..

Lindsay—as much a showman as he was a politician (some say the difference is imperceptible)—knew the routine and played along. “I don’t know about Peoria, Johnny, but they loved me in Harlem and the Bronx, and that’s good enough for me.”

“He’s right about that folks. They went for him there big time, despite the fact that the Democrats outnumbered the Republicans by four to one.”

“Enough about me Johnny, I didn’t come here to discuss politics, or to play your straight man—much as I enjoy doing both. As you know, Mayor Wagner would have been here himself, but he had a prior commitment that couldn’t be broken on such short notice and asked me to substitute for him. When I heard what it was for, I was more than happy to oblige.”

“As we are to have you on our show, Congressman. The floor is all yours.”

Lindsay reached behind his chair to retrieve a plaque with an oversized gold key mounted on it. Standing to face Kracek—who was briefed on what to expect and also stood—he said: “Ladies and gentlemen, before I give this to the Captain, I’d like to read you the inscription: ‘To Captain Viktor Kracek, from the people of New York City. For you, our door is always open.’ December 13, 1965.”

He handed the plaque to Kracek and shook his hand. “Captain, on behalf of Mayor Wagner, and the city of New York, I am honored to present you with the ‘Key to the City.’ It is especially gratifying to give this to a native son. Congratulations.”

The audience burst into applause and cheers.

“Thank you, Congressman. Please convey my thanks to Mayor Wagner.” Looking into the camera, Kracek said: “And, to the people of this great city, thank you. I haven’t called New York home for many years, but my roots and my heart are still here. To be recognized by one’s own makes this honor very special.” He held the plaque up to the camera.

Lindsey then added: “The ‘Key’ has been given to heads of state, visiting dignitaries, sports stars, and other famous heroes, but none more deserving of it than you.” More applause.

Aware that they were blocking Debbie from the audience's view, they took their seats. "Sorry, Miss Reynolds," Lindsey said, touching her hand.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Mayor," she said, "the audience has already seen enough of me...maybe too much. Besides, I had the best seat in the house to watch a unique exchange between two remarkable men."

"You are quite a lady, Miss Reynolds."

Johnny wasn't sure what to make of it all, but he liked what he was seeing and hearing. The audience's response was all positive, and he was more than content to let his guests carry the show for the next few minutes. *This is good. It can't hurt our ratings either,* he mused.

Lindsey turned to Kracek. "Captain, I saw the film clip on the monitor backstage and heard your commentary. I've never seen anything like it. I was particularly impressed with the casual manner in which you described the extraordinary things we were viewing. It was almost as though you were debriefing someone else's mission."

"The truth is, sir, I'm lucky to be alive. If my wingman hadn't warned me when he did I wouldn't be here now. Thanks to him I was able to dodge that 'bullet.' The rest was training and instinct."

“Yes, I know. You were just doing your job. I’ve been told that about you. I’ve also heard—from those same people—you do things in an airplane that few other pilot’s are familiar with.”

Sort of like comparing my golf game to that of Jack Nicholas,” Johnny suggested. That drew laughter from everyone, including the technicians and stage hands. Johnny feigned surprise at their reaction. “I guess there are a few golfers in the studio who can relate to the idea.”

“Not a bad line, Johnny. You don’t mind if I use it do you?”

“Be my guest, Mr. Mayor...no pun intended.”

Debbie noticed Kracek’s uneasiness with personal praise and redirected the conversation. “There you go, Johnny, back to golf again. What is this fixation you boys have with that little white ball? It’s not healthy you know.”

Johnny shrugged, sheepishly. “I give up. What would you have us do, a song and dance?”

“I thought you’d never ask. I’ll bet the audience is ready for some good old fashion entertainment. What about it folks?” Their applause, and calls for her to sing, answered her question.

“Apparently they are, but we have nothing prepared for you,” Johnny said.

“What’s to prepare? We’re not doing a Broadway musical here. I’m sure the band can play just about anything. Isn’t that right Mr. Henderson?”

“You name it, Miss Reynolds, we’ll play it.”

“Okay Debbie, you win. What will you do for us?”

“Let’s leave that up to our honored guest. How about it, Viktor?”

Kracek responded with the first song that came to his mind, “Singing in the Rain,” from one of his favorite movies.

“Wonderful choice. You know how to pick them ‘flyboy.’”

Debbie walked to the mike at center stage while the band played the introduction. She sang a chorus with the same vivacity she brought to the original movie—even added a little soft shoe.

The audience loved it, but she was just getting warmed up. She went back to Johnny’s desk, took Kracek by the hand and pulled him out of his chair. He was shocked. “Come on Viktor, I need a partner. You can sing Gene’s part.” He tried to tell her that he couldn’t, but she would not be denied. “Sure you can. I heard that you love to sing, and I’ll bet you know all the words.”

At center stage, a second mike was given to him as the band replayed the chorus. Debbie flowed right into it with a natural ease. “I’m singing in the rain, just singing in the rain...”

Still in shock, Kracek just stood there until she gave him a gentle elbow to the ribs and a big smile. It was all he needed. He found his place in the music and joined in. “I’m laughin’ at clouds, so dark up above, I’m singing, just singing in the rain.” Once he got into it, he felt less self conscious, and found himself enjoying it. After all, how often does a guy get to sing a duet with Debbie Reynolds?

A beaming Debbie looked at him, surprised at how easily he got into the music and how well he sang. She applauded and the audience joined in. “Doesn’t he have a great voice? Keep it going Viktor, I’ll be right back.”

The stunned look on his face when she left him standing there alone was, itself, entertaining. When she came back, she had the Mayor Elect in tow. Unlike Kracek, he needed little coaxing. He loved show business.

Together they sang one last chorus of ‘Singing in the Rain,’ with Debbie in the middle of her two partners, arms interlocked. It brought back images of her, Donald O’ Conner, and Gene Kelly in that widely successful Hollywood musical. Their impromptu performance brought down the house.

Johnny could not have more pleased, and McMahon, who had earlier voiced his reservations about having a Vietnam war hero on the show, was visibly relieved. It was an evening that would be remembered and talked about for a long time.

After the show, Ed reached across Johnny's desk to shake his hand. "You did good, John."

33

The Capture

Vietnam, 14Dec 1965, 1300 hours

Brown checked his lensatic compass. “This way.” He pointed to a big tree about forty meters away. The jungle undergrowth wasn’t thick at first, but it became more dense the further in they ventured. At the next tree he recalculated their heading. “It’ll be tough going from here, Colonel.”

“It will. But the ‘Cong’ won’t have it any easier, and it will provide us better cover.”

“I like the way you think, sir. I just wish I was as sure about it as you.”

They started out again, but each step forward was a struggle, and they were unable to get another good compass fix on anything more than ten meters away. That made it impossible to stay on course—especially when forced to detour around impassable objects. It took them forty minutes to reach a small break in the overhead canopy. It wasn't the opening they were heading for, but the light that filtered through was a welcome sight. Tired, and soaked with sweat, they sat down with their backs against a huge tree.

“We'll rest here a minute,” Whitfield said. “We need some water.”

They unzipped the survival kits taken from their parachute harnesses. The kit formed part of the cockpit seat cushion and contained the essential survival items: water, food rations (dried meat bars, coffee, sugar, candy bars, etc.), knife, fishing gear, UHF radio, a small .22 caliber rifle with a folding stock, first aid kit, matches, sewing kit—everything needed to stay alive in almost any environment.

Three weeks of rigorous survival training at Stead Air Force Base in Reno, Nevada was physically and mentally demanding, yet worth the time and discomfort. Unfortunately, the snow packed slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains did little to prepare them for the steamy jungles of Southeast Asia. The survival school in

the Philippines would have; but, ordered to deploy on short notice, the 429th was not afforded that opportunity.

Something in the brush caught Brown's attention. He couldn't see what it was, but he had heard the stories about tigers in the jungles of Vietnam. He went for his .45 Colt automatic pistol, but before he could clear the holster a hail of bullets impacted high on the tree they were sitting under, sending chunks of shredded bark down on their heads. He looked at Whitfield, his eyes filled with as much question as fear.

"Put it away John. They've got us."

Brown dropped his weapon and, following Whitfield's lead, raised his hands. The shooting abruptly stopped and the Vietcong guerillas stormed out of the brush. One of them snapped an order in Vietnamese to take their weapons and equipment and tie their hands behind their backs.

"What are they going to do with us," Brown asked, worriedly.

"I don't know, but if they didn't want us alive we would have been dead with the first volley."

"Very perceptive of you, Colonel." The words, spoken in heavily accented English, came from behind them.

"You speak English," Whitfield said, and was promptly smashed in the back with the stock of an AK-47, wielded by one

of the men who had tied their hands. The pain was so excruciating it momentarily blurred his vision, but he did not go down.

“You fool!” Lt. Than screamed at the soldier in Vietnamese. “I told you they were not to be harmed.” His icy glare sent the man away cowering.

I was right, Whitfield noted, they have something else in mind for us.

“My apologies, Colonel,” Than said. “We have orders to take you alive and unharmed. But, my men have endured much in recent days. Our efforts to capture another of your pilots a few days ago cost us in lives lost, and wounded. I will deal with this one later.”

Whitfield was impressed with how the Lieutenant handled the situation. *I wouldn't have done it any differently, he thought. So they were directed to capture an American pilot and recently failed...Garelli? Can this be the same man that squared off against Kracek in that rice paddy?*

“This way, Colonel,” Than said, pointing to a small clearing ahead. He motioned him to follow his number two man in trail, then fell in behind him. They sandwiched Brown in nearer the end of the column to keep them isolated. When they entered the brush on the other side, they were joined by the rest of Than's platoon.

Young as he is he knows his tactics, Whitfield observed. We never had a chance.

“Follow my men, Colonel. Our journey is long.”

“Where are you taking us?”

“To our base camp, but no more talk. When we get there, I will ask the questions.”

Whitfield couldn't believe the pace they were able to maintain through a jungle that seemed no less dense than the one he and Brown had just gone through. He estimated they had covered about two miles. He could also tell, by the changed angle of the sun's rays that occasionally punched through thick jungle canopy, that they were now headed due north. At that point, blindfolds would take away the luxury of sight. They would not be removed until they reached the base camp.

Than watched as Whitfield and Brown were tied to individual bamboo posts driven deep into the hard dirt floor of a small hut. When the guard finished binding their feet, he ordered: “Give them some water, and bring the Colonel to me in one hour.”

34

The Waldorf

The Tonight Show limousine dropped him off at the Park Avenue entrance to the stately Waldorf Astoria. It was near two in the morning, and he looked forward to a hot shower and a good night's sleep.

However, once he stepped inside the hotel—isolated from the clamor and frantic pace of New York City's crowded streets—Kracek felt as though he were transported back in time to a quieter, more genteel world. In the foyer he paused momentarily—as though seeking to absorb its soothing ambience—before climbing the short flight of stairs leading to the lobby's front desk.

The sound of the clock striking two startled him as he crossed the large art deco tile mosaic. He looked up at the unique two ton 19th century time piece. It bore the carved likenesses of seven American presidents and Queen Victoria, and was originally crafted in 1893 for an exhibition at the Chicago World's Fair by a company in London whose name the concierge could not recall.

The desk clerk handed him his room key and an envelope. "This came in while you were out, Captain...from Washington, I believe."

"Thank you." Kracek took the envelope and started to walk away.

"Captain Kracek." The clerk called, stopping him before he took more than a few steps.

"Yes?" He said, turning.

"I watched the show. Most of us do every night here. You were very good. Everyone's talking about it. Have you ever done anything in theater before? You have a great voice."

"Thanks. No...well...some high school stuff is all. Miss Reynolds deserves all the credit. Her personality and talent can make anyone look good. And, she is as nice in person as she is on the screen."

“You’ll get no argument there, sir. Everybody loves Debbie.”

The same concierge who had greeted Kracek earlier saw him and hurried over. “Captain Kracek, nice to see you again.”

“You’re working late, Mr. Evans.”

“A little. I got sidetracked watching the Tonight Show. It was one of the best Carson shows I’ve seen. And you were terrific.”

“Embarrassed, Kracek ignored the compliment. “It was a fun evening. Johnny has a way of putting his guests at ease.”

“Yes, I’d say that you were very relaxed, Captain. May I buy you a drink before you turn in?”

“Thank you, but no. It’s been a long day and I’ve got to fly back to Washington this afternoon.

“Another time, perhaps.”

“Kracek started to walk away, then stopped. “By the way, the name of the company that built that clock was Goldsmith.”

“Goldsmith...yes, I remember now. But how...?”

“The doorman told me.”

In the elevator Kracek opened the envelope. The message read:

CALL AS SOON AS YOU RECEIVE THIS,

NO MATTER THE TIME. URGENT. MARTIN

Kracek made the call as soon as he got to his suite.

“Hello,” a wide awake voice on the other end said.

“Colonel Martin, this is Viktor.”

“Viktor...you got my message.”

“What’s going on, sir? You said it was urgent.”

“I can’t give you any details over the phone. Something has come up and they want us back in Vietnam as soon as possible. We’ll talk when you get here. You’re booked on the eight thirty flight out of JFK this morning. Pick up your ticket at the Eastern Airlines check-in counter. I’ll meet you at Dulles with a car and driver. We’ll be going straight to the Pentagon.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is. But that’s all I can tell you now. Sorry to spoil your fun. Get some rest.”

“Not much chance of that.”

“Couldn’t be helped. By the way, I saw the show and you were...”

“Terrific, I know,” Kracek interrupted.

“Well, no...I wouldn’t go that far. I was going to say, pretty good for a fighter jock. Now Debbie was terrific!”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For bringing me back to earth. I was beginning to believe my own revues. But you’re right about Debbie.”

“Goodnight, Viktor.”

“Goodnight, sir.”

35

Not My Enemy

The guard escorted Whitfield to a hut commandeered by the Vietcong platoon leader for his temporary headquarters. Lt. Than was sitting behind a small unpainted wooden table, his hands clasped in front of him. With the exception of the empty chair opposite him, and an old straw mat on the dirt floor to his right, the room was bare. A lighted oil lamp on the Lieutenant's desk provided some illumination, and unintentionally added a measure of warmth to the drab surroundings.

He saw that Whitfield's hands were still tied. "Remove his bonds," he ordered.

The guard, a mere boy, hurriedly complied, then stepped back with his AK-47 held at the ready.

“Please, sit down Colonel.” Than gestured to the chair in front of his improvised desk.

Whitfield remained silent, and stared into the eyes of his interrogator, trying to read his next move. Than met his stare with equal resolve. He too wanted to get some sense of the man in front of him before beginning.

He broke eye contact first, but only to scan through several pages of the manila folder lying on his desk. Closing it again, he looked up at his captive with the confidence of a man who seemed to already have all the information he needed without asking a question. When Than made a suggestion he wasn't expecting, Whitfield's stoicism was visibly breached.

“Before we begin Colonel, let us have some tea.” He motioned to the guard, who ushered in a peasant woman carrying a metal tea pot and two small white ceramic cups. She bowed to Than, who acknowledged her presence with an almost imperceptible nod.

Her hands shook as she poured the tea. After filling both cups, she bowed again, then took her leave. Whitfield saw the fear in her eyes, and felt compassion for her, and the others like her whose lives were being turned into a nightmare by a war that should have never been.

His mind travelled back to Korea, when a North Korean pilot allowed him to float to the ground in his parachute, unharmed. *There may be honor among warriors, he reflected, but there is no honor in war.*

“Drink Colonel, the woman makes very good tea.” Than picked up his cup and drank to show him that there was nothing more in the pot than tea. “There, maybe that will reassure you.”

Whitfield conceded a slight smile and thirstily emptied his cup. Than refilled their cups. “Perhaps, now, you can tell me your name.”

“William T. Whitfield, Lt. Colonel, United States Air Force, service number 1-2-0-3-2-6-8-2-3, date of birth June 6, 1922.”

“What unit do you command, Colonel?”

“William T. Whitfield, Lt. Colonel, United States...”

“Yes, I know. The Geneva Accords require that you only give your name, rank, service number, and date of birth. It is your duty to offer nothing more. I understand. However, I had hoped you might be as interested as I am in knowing more about the enemy, not as prisoner and jailer, but as a human being.” He paused, waiting for a response, but got none. Nonetheless, the look in Whitfield’s eyes told him that he had tapped into the older man’s intellectual curiosity.

Than reopened the manila folder. “Never mind, I will tell you. It appears there is little that Hanoi intelligence does not already know about the Commander of the 429th Squadron, and the infamous ‘Black Falcons.’ You have been a subject of interest for them since your arrival in Vietnam almost three months ago. The combat effectiveness of your unit was soon noted and reported to our leaders. It was not difficult to compile this dossier. Most of it is a matter of public record.”

Whitfield displayed no emotion, but he was surprised by the thoroughness of North Vietnamese intelligence gathering. He was even more impressed with the sophistication of the Lieutenant’s interrogation technique—very mature for one so young. Than was also right in assuming that he would be interested in knowing more about “the enemy.”

“According to this, Colonel, in World War II you shot down twenty eight German aircraft, making you an ace five times over. Quite an achievement for someone who could not have been any older than I am now. And, seven years later, during the Korean conflict, you shot down another fifteen Migs. With such an outstanding personal record, it is not difficult to see why your squadron is one of the most respected in Vietnam.”

Than paused momentarily to turn a few more pages in the folder. “I could go on, tell you where you went to school, what sports you excelled in, that you were number one in your aviation cadet class, and more, but it isn’t necessary. You see my point.”

“Yes, I do, and you can see mine,” Whitfield replied, no longer able to hold back—nor wanting to. In a free democratic society—as we enjoy in the United States—such information is relatively easy to obtain. Admittedly, at times like this, it puts us at a disadvantage. However, no American would forfeit his freedom merely to protect against the small advantage it may give an enemy.”

Whitfield’s candid response pleased Than. He tried not to show it, but a slight smile gave him away. “You need not fear revealing any secrets, Colonel. “There is little we do not know about every American combat unit in Vietnam, the weapons and tactics they use, and their fighting capabilities.

We have not only survived your superior arms and technology, we have grown stronger. Eventually, no matter how long it may take, we will win this struggle because we believe in our cause. Do you?”

Whitfield pondered Than’s remarks. *He’s right. We may not have the will to see this war through to the end, to win it! All he had to do to reach that conclusion was read our newspapers and watch our television.*

“Your silence gives me my answer, Colonel. In a way, I sympathize with you. You are a hero of two very different, yet justifiable wars fought by your country; wars in which the lines were clearly drawn and the goal was victory. You know, perhaps better than I, that is not the case here, and that is your weakness, one that will ultimately lead to your defeat.”

“I don’t need, nor do I want your bloody sympathy, Lieutenant. I have questioned every war I’ve ever been in, and this one is no different. I too have beliefs. I believe in freedom and democracy...that these things are the birthright of every man, woman and child on this planet—good, honest people who want nothing more than to be allowed to live in peace, to express themselves without fear, and to grow without the oppressive weight of any form of dictatorial government.

“This is why I am in Vietnam today. It was why I was in Korea, and why I fought in World War II. I am a soldier who loves his country, ready to give my life to protect the democratic ideals it represents—not only for my people, but for yours. Can you assure me that the communist regime you are trying to install in South Vietnam will guarantee these freedoms for its citizens?”

An angry Than sprung to his feet, knocking over his chair. The guard, confused by his commander’s reaction, stepped forward with his rifle raised to strike the prisoner, but was waved back by the Lieutenant. Whitfield’s impassioned discourse took the guerilla leader by surprise, and he silently cursed himself for showing emotion. He took a deep breath, picked up his chair and calmly sat down, allowing himself a few seconds to regain his composure.

Whitfield watched him with studied interest. “Your reaction, is my answer, Lieutenant.”

“Not quite, Colonel. I too am a soldier who loves his country, who also believes in freedom and democracy. That is precisely why we fight, because the corrupt administration in Saigon—illegally installed and supported by your government—denies us these very things. Nothing is black and white, as you Americans say. Everything is colored in many shades of gray.

“Freedom is a precious gift, you are right; which is why it cannot be doled out to anyone not ready, or unwilling to accept the responsibility that comes with it. In any society, freedom without individual accountability leads to anarchy. Ours is an agrarian culture largely populated by illiterate peasants, who are more concerned about feeding their children than they are with what form of government sits in Saigon.

“These people—my people—view time in terms of centuries, not years. They are not ready for a fully democratic, one man one vote political order. Vietnam is better suited for a system that can channel the energies and talents of its people in a direction in which each of us can best contribute to the growth of our society, to raise it, and us, to the next level. Karl Marx put it best: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.’ That system is communism.”

Whitfield was impressed with Than’s logic and grasp of communist ideology. *He is not simply repeating propaganda fed to him by Hanoi, he believes it*, he thought. “Your defense of communism is admirable Lieutenant, but it has one serious flaw.”

“And what is that, Colonel?”

“It doesn’t work. Communism, as it was envisioned by Marx and Engels more than a century ago, does not exist anywhere in the world.”

“But, you are wrong. What of the U.S.S.R., Falcon, Cuba...?”

“Dictatorships all, and not of the proletariat, but of one man, who rules with an iron fist. The people have no say in their government. In countries where they do have the vote they have no choice. They either vote for the candidate selected by the Communist Party leadership, or they do not vote at all. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of travel, the right to bear arms, and so many other freedoms that democratic societies take for granted are denied to them.”

“It is true,” Than admitted. “Communism is not yet practiced in its pure form—although China’s commune system may come close. However, it is still new. It simply needs more time.”

“New? The idea was first put into practice in Russia in 1917. Can it be said, that the people of the U.S.S.R. are any better off now than they were under the Tsar? I don’t think so.”

Than felt the anger rise within him again, but held it in check. “I do! All we need is time. Fifty, one hundred years...this is nothing.”

“Measured against the universal clock you’re right. Maybe your people are willing to wait centuries for the ideal to become a reality, but it’s not likely. Human history suggests the opposite; that they will not wait forever for their promises to be fulfilled. Their tolerance is not without limits, and they will eventually act to dispose of the existing government—if not by vote, than by force.”

“You surprise me, Colonel. I did not think you to be a revolutionary.”

“My country was born out of a revolution nearly two hundred years ago. Every American citizen has a responsibility, indeed, a duty to protect against the loss of his or her rights and freedoms, whether they are threatened from without, or from within.

“Are you saying that revolution is not only inevitable, but a duty? Interesting...very interesting.”

“If it is the only way left open for the people to reclaim their freedom, yes. But that’s not the point I wish to make here.”

“And what is the point, Colonel?” Than asked, impatiently

“For pure communism to exist, or any other ideal from of government, it must have perfect people...totally unselfish human beings who put the good of the whole above themselves, their friends, even their families.

“They must live, eat, and breathe its precepts; which are not unlike those of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and all the other major religions. In the million or so years human beings have roamed the face of this earth, few, very few, have measured up to that ideal.”

“But communism is not a religion. It in fact, renounces it.”

“Isn’t it? If you examine the great religions closely you will find that they all make the same demands and require the same unquestioning devotion and allegiance of their followers as communism. The only real difference is they believe in a god; one that is sometimes merciful, sometimes vengeful, but always loving. You do not, and that makes your task of creating an ideal society all the more difficult and less likely to succeed.”

“You make a compelling argument, Colonel, but nothing you have said has changed my belief that a communist government, under the wise leadership of President Ho Chi Minh, is the best one for a unified Vietnam. As to whether it can, or will prevail...”

“You seem very sure of victory in this war, Lieutenant.”

“I am, and for the reasons I gave you earlier. I noticed that you had little to say to refute them, notwithstanding your patriotic diatribe. We are through here. Guard!”

“Wait.”

“You have something more to say, Colonel?”

“Yes. What do you intend to do with Brown and me?”

“I see no reason not to tell you what you must have already guessed. Our leaders in Hanoi believe that the Commander of the infamous ‘Black Falcons,’ the renowned hero of two previous wars, will be of great propaganda value. They want you in North Vietnam.”

“What about Brown?”

“He will go with you. As a black American, and one of your pilots, he will also be useful. Our radio propagandist, the woman you call ‘Hanoi Hanna,’ is broadcasting word of your capture as we speak. When my people hear it they will rejoice, and their spirits will be lifted. You will be seen as one of our finest victories.

“For me it is more personal, not because of the recognition and reward I may receive, but for what it cost us in lives and broken bodies to achieve. I can only hope that this will provide at least partial redemption for the men who followed me into a rice paddy a few days ago in a costly attempt to capture another of your airman.”

Whitfield was stunned. *This is the same man Kracek spoke of.*

“Yes, I know about that, and I also regret the loss of life. As a commander, I know how you feel; but you must not blame yourself. You and I were only doing what we had to do; you, to carry out your orders, and I, to bring one of my men home safely. On that day we prevailed. Today, you did.”

“You are an unusual man, Colonel; as unusual, I suspect, as the man I faced in that rice paddy. Were it not for him we would have captured your pilot, and the helicopter crew as well. But, he flew like a man possessed, thwarting our every attempt to reach him. Never have I seen such flying. He is one of yours, is he not?” Than had already concluded as much, but he wanted confirmation.

Whitfield didn’t speak. He didn’t have to.

“I’d like to meet him.”

“You would? But, he was trying to kill you.”

“Yes, and I him. But he didn’t, and I must know why.

“On his final strafing pass he dropped so low to the ground that his jet exhaust lifted the water from the rice paddies high into the air. It appeared as though a giant water-breathing dragon was descending upon us—a vision so terrifying my men threw themselves to the ground in fear. I could not fault them. It was a sight we will never forget.

“Apparently he lost the use of his guns and was ready to do anything to keep us from reaching his wingman, even if it meant sacrificing himself. I was so frustrated. so filled with rage, that there was no room left in me for fear. In a futile attempt to shoot him down I emptied my AK-47 at him, then waited for the impact of his aircraft against my flesh.

“Instead, he pulled up at the last second, missing me by inches. I was thrown down by the force of his jet exhaust and the mass of water that followed, but was on my feet in time to watch him fly off. As he turned away, the Black Falcon painted on the tail of his aircraft was clearly visible.”

“You knew all along.”

“Yes. It was my hope that, by telling you these things, I could learn more about the man in the flying dragon.”

“You know I cannot, and will not, give you any information about him. However, I can tell you that his description of the encounter was remarkably similar to yours. Indeed, he was relieved he did not have to take your life.”

“Yes, I knew it! It was as though I was in the airplane with him and he on the ground with me. We were of one mind.”

Whitfield was struck by the remarkable parallel between two men from opposite sides of the world. “I understand.”

“Yes, Colonel, I believe you do.”

36

Face of the Enemy

The villagers had never seen an American before, and they all gathered in the small square to watch him as he was escorted back to the hut where he and Brown were being held. The guard strutted proudly, smiling at them as if he had captured the American single-handedly. “He is my prisoner and he will pay for his crimes against our people.”

The people, mostly older men, women, and children, were strangely quiet. They were seeing the face of the enemy for the first time, yet took no pleasure in his misfortune. There were no jeers, no taunts, no attempts to strike out at him. Everything they had been led to believe about Americans—that they were heartless, bloodthirsty killers—did not seem to apply to this man. He walked tall, with his head held high, and looked into their eyes, not in defiance, nor in fear, but with compassion. They sensed this in him, and merely looked on passively.

Strange, he thought. After the thousands of bombs we rained down upon them, destroying their homes and killing their loved ones, I would expect them to take their wrath out on me now. Yet, they seem impassive, content to just let me pass. Not all.

A little boy, no more than six years old, picked up a sharp edged rock and hurled it at the American pilot. It struck him on the left cheekbone, opening a small flesh wound. Blood trickled down his face. He turned to confront his tiny assailant and, looking into the boy's eyes, saw the hatred, the anger, the fear. *My God, he silently agonized, how can one so young be filled with so much anger and hate? No child should ever have to bear such a burden. Can any war justify the taking away of a child's innocence?*

He and the boy stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity—although it was only seconds. In those ‘eternal seconds’ the two of them formed an extraordinary bond. “I know, son,” Whitfield heard himself say. “I know.”

The lad couldn’t understand his words; he didn’t have to. The meaning was reflected in the older man’s eyes. He tried to fight back the tears, to be a brave soldier, but just before he turned to run away, Whitfield saw the tears streaking down his unwashed face. He didn’t know that the boy’s father was one of the men killed in Than’s failed attempt to capture Garelli.

When the guard saw what happened his cockiness turned to fear. *The Lieutenant warned me that no harm must come to the prisoners. If he learns of this he will skin me alive.* He quickly put himself between Whitfield and the crowd and rushed him back to the hut. After securing his bonds he hurried out, mumbling to himself.

Brown watched anxiously, waiting for the guard to leave.

“Jesus Christ, Colonel, what did those bastards do to you?”

“It’s nothing, John, I’m okay...just tripped over one of those blasted chickens running loose around the village and fell against a post.” He couldn’t bring himself to tell him about the boy.

Brown was skeptical, but didn’t press the issue. “Let me take a look at it.”

Whitfield turned to show him the left side of his face.

“It looks nasty, but I don’t think you’ll need stitches. It does need is to be cleaned and dressed.”

“I don’t think they have any antiseptics or sterile bandages here, John. It may have to wait until we get to Hanoi.”

“Hanoi? Did you say Hanoi?”

“Yes, Lt. Than, the VC Commander, told me we would be moved there. His superiors see us as valuable propaganda assets and want us there as soon as possible.”

“Damn, Colonel, we’ve got to make our break before they can do that or we’ll be spending the rest of this war in the ‘Hanoi Hilton.’”

Before Whitfield could respond a woman entered the hut, followed by the guard. It was the same woman who brought the tea. This time she was carrying what looked like a wine bottle, a ball of cotton, and a small cloth pouch.

She knelt beside him, poured some cloudy liquid onto the cotton, and cleaned his wound. Its smell and appearance brought back memories of his first introduction to a similar brew, Korean rice wine. After sterilizing the cut she took some dried leaves from the pouch and carefully placed them over the injury while it was still wet.

Afraid to speak, her eyes told him that he would be all right. Whitfield thanked her in Vietnamese. She acknowledged with a slight nod; then gathered her things and left as hurriedly as she came in. The guard rechecked their bonds, saw that they were still secure, and took a position just outside the door.

Keeping his voice low, Brown asked: "What went on in there, Colonel? What else did Than tell you?"

"Before I get into that, let me say that I was not mistreated, quite the contrary. In fact, Than reassured me that no harm would come to us. We are a prize catch for them, and they want us delivered in good shape for their propaganda efforts. Hanoi Hanna will really have something to crow about now.

"You're right, they not only captured two pilots from the squadron they love to hate, they got the goddamned squadron commander. Brown quickly apologized. "Sorry sir, I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"Forget it, John, we've got bigger problems. Than will be calling you in for questioning soon and there are some things you should know about him that may be helpful."

"I'm listening, sir."

“Our conversation—that’s what it really was—went beyond the requirements of the Geneva Accords. I’ll explain why another time. As a result of it, however, I was able to learn about their plans to move us to Hanoi. More importantly, I discovered some interesting things about Lt. Than.

“He’s young, but intelligent, well read, and very perceptive. His English is good and, like his education, apparently self taught. If you lie to him he will see through it, so play it straight. If you feel you shouldn’t answer a question don’t. You’re only required to give him name, rank, serial number, and date of birth.

“Do not let his youth lull you into thinking he’s no match for you in a debate. He more than held his own with me, even with the handicap of a second language. His reasoning ability is first rate. Whatever stereotypical image we may hold of the Vietcong, he does not fit the mold. By any measure, he is a formidable interrogator and should not be taken lightly.”

Brown listened intently to his every word. “Thanks, Colonel. There’s obviously nothing wrong with your perception either.” Brown’s respect for Whitfield’s presence of mind and courage under pressure grew with each exchange of ideas. “Now, I won’t feel so ‘naked’ when I face him.”

“He may use a different tactic with you than he did with me. Indeed, you should expect it. Bear in mind, he’s under orders not to harm us. Consequently, that psychological advantage has been taken away from him. So, regardless of what he may throw at you, stay calm.”

They did not speak again for several minutes. Brown used the time to prepare himself for his encounter with Than, while Whitfield mentally reviewed a half dozen different escape scenarios, none of which he liked.

He knew, that if they didn’t make their break within the next few days, they would have to attempt it while being moved. The jungle would provide better cover, but they would also be under tighter security. No, their best chance of escape would be before they are moved from the village.

The guard returned and untied Brown, who looked back worriedly as he was being led away. Whitfield nodded his assurance.

37

Pentagon Briefing

Dulles International was filled with morning commuters who pushed and jostled their way through the crowded terminal in a frantic rush to make their next flight, or hail a taxi.

Kracek felt like an NFL running back jinking his way through a series of defensive lines. He managed to make it to the exit on his feet and stepped outside. Before he could finish taking in a breath of fresh air he heard his name called.

“Viktor,” Martin yelled, “over here.”

He turned to see the Colonel and his driver standing beside a dark green army staff car with its trunk open. He saluted, tossed his bag in next to Martin's, and shook his hand. "How are you, sir?"

"As anxious as you Viktor. Were you able to get any rest?"

"Not much. I'll catch up on the flight back to Nam."

"Me too. Hop in, I've got a lot to tell you."

The driver waited for his passengers to fasten their seat belts, then cautiously pulled away from the curb and into the flow of traffic. He was assigned to the Pentagon right out of basic training; a post not usually given new recruits. But, Private First Class Jeremiah Rawlings graduated basic training near the top of his class and had demonstrated a maturity that belied his eighteen years.

The fact that he was a D.C. native and knew every street and traffic light in the Capitol may have also had something to do with the Army's decision.

"How long to the Pentagon, Rawlings?" Martin asked.

"Depends on the traffic sir, but we should be able to make it in about forty minutes."

"See if you can shave a few from that."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Kracek couldn't hold back any longer. "Colonel, what's going on?"

"It's your commander. He..."

"Colonel Whitfield? What about him?"

"He was captured by the Vietcong."

"Captured...how?"

"He was pulling off a target in the Delta, when a Russian Stinger nearly blew off the tail section of his aircraft."

"Is he alright?"

"Got out clean, so did Brown."

"Brown?"

"He was in the back cockpit...originally your seat, I'm told; that is, until General Simmons grounded you. Ironic isn't it? I'm beginning to think you lead a charmed life."

"They ejected safely over an open field and headed straight into the jungle, but not before a VC patrol spotted them. They made their way to a clearing suitable for a helicopter extraction, but the patrol got to them first."

"I should have been with him, not Brown." Kracek mumbled under his breath.

"What?"

“I said I should have been with him. I talked him into scheduling that mission for me.” He was angry with himself, and felt he had let his mentor down.

“There was nothing you could have done, Viktor. You know as well as I, that in combat the cards fall where they will. Now, we have to focus on getting them back.”

“What do you have in mind, sir?”

“I’ve got some of the finest jungle trained fighters in Vietnam working on it right now. Captain Chan is selecting his team and devising a plan as we speak. He’s the best, most experienced man I’ve got, and he knows the Delta like the back of his hand...even speaks fluent Vietnamese. If anyone can get our guys out my men can. You can trust me on that.”

“I do, sir. I also have a special request.”

“Request?”

“To go in with the rescue team.”

“No way. I know how you feel about Whitfield, but you’re not trained for this kind of operation.” *You’ll only get in the way,* Martin thought.

“Colonel, you know I can handle myself as well on the ground as I can in the air. I’ve seen combat with the Marines in Korea, and I’m familiar with every weapon you carry. Besides, you’ll need someone on the team to coordinate with the rescue aircraft and direct fighter support.”

“No, I can’t allow it. You’re taking this far too personally.”

“You’re right about that, sir. It is personal. Colonel Whitfield is more than a commander to me. He’s been looking after my interests ever since I joined his squadron—like the older brother I never had.

“As a young cadet, before I ever met him, I had the greatest admiration and respect for him as a fighter pilot. He was all I wanted to be. And, now that I know the man, I want that even more. We’ve got to get him out, and I must be on the team!”

“Viktor, I...”

“No, Colonel, I am going! You said you owed me one. This is it!”

Martin didn’t respond immediately, but it was clear, from the intense determination he saw in Kracek’s eyes, that he would not be denied. *I do owe him one*, he admitted to himself, *and he may be right about the fighter support*. “Okay, I can see there’s no talking you out of it. And, as you reminded me, I am in your debt. You’re on the team. I only hope I don’t regret this decision.”

“You won’t, sir.”

That settled, Kracek began mentally processing several different rescue scenarios, quickly realizing that he didn’t have enough information. “Where are they being held?” He asked. “How tight is security? Have we determined the best escape routes, extraction points...?”

“Hold on, you’re going too fast,” Martin said. “I’ve told you all I know. Intelligence will provide answers to most of your questions in the briefing we’re about to attend.”

The driver pulled up to the front entrance to the Pentagon, a massive five sided structure that rose four stories above the ground and covered twenty nine Virginia acres—a sprawling maze, consisting of five concentric rings of buildings (A-E), and more than seventeen miles of corridors. A first time visitor would find himself hopelessly lost without an experienced guide. Colonel Martin, however, was intimately familiar with the Arlington facility. Rawlings got out to open the door.

Stepping out of the car, Martin instructed him to find a place to park nearby. “Wait for us...we shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

“Yes sir,” he acknowledged, saluting sharply.

They were met at the security check point by Captain Schuler. She handed them visitors badges and walked them through. “Colonel Martin, Captain Kracek...good to see you again. I wish it was for a different reason.”

“So do we,” Martin said.

“The briefing will be held in the Chief of Staff’s conference room.”

“That’s on the second floor, as I recall.”

“It is sir, not far from here.”

When they entered the mahogany paneled room it was already filled with people, military and civilian. They were standing around the huge rectangular conference table in small groups, most of them attached to a cup of coffee. Their conversations created a drone-like buzz that reflected the urgency of their gathering. They saw them enter.

“Isn’t that Martin and Kracek?” One of them asked.

“Yeah, now maybe we can get this show on the road.”

“That won’t happen until McNamara and Garrett get here.”

His friend replied.

An always observant Major Dietzel saw them come in and walked over to greet them. “Colonel Martin...how are you, sir?”

“Fine, Major,” he said, shaking his hand.

“Captain Kracek, glad you could make it. Sorry to spoil your New York visit.”

“New York will still be there when I get back, Major. I would have been more annoyed if I hadn’t been called in.”

“Yes, I know; Colonel Martin made that very clear. He insisted you be here for this briefing. Now, if you will excuse me, Captain Schuler will show you to your seats.”

Dietzel walked to the front of the room to make a call. Putting the phone down, he announced: “Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. I’ve just been informed, that The Secretary of Defense and Army Chief of Staff will be here shortly.”

A few minutes later, McNamara and Garrett came hurrying in. The grim look on their faces made it obvious that this was not going to be a routine briefing. The room wasn’t called to attention, and no one stood up, as per McNamara’s standing instructions. In the board rooms of the Ford Motor Company such things were considered superfluous, and he saw no reason to do them here.

Dietzel took a step back as the Secretary stepped up to the podium, but remained standing to his left. The General took a position behind and to the right of McNamara, just in front of the American flag.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen.” McNamara began.

Scanning the faces at the table, he located Martin and Kracek.

“Colonel Martin, Captain Kracek...glad you could make it.

“I know you have all heard the news, but let me recap: “Last night, at approximately 2350 hours our time, Lt. Col. William Whitfield and Captain John Brown were shot down after completing their second bombing pass on a target in the Delta region of South Vietnam. Falcon Three reported that they were hit by a shoulder launched heat seeking missile, probably a Russian Stinger. They both ejected safely, but were later captured by a Vietcong patrol.

“Normally, my office would not be involved with such an event. Pilots get shot down in wars; it’s an inherently risky business. But, this is no ordinary pilot. This is the Commander of the famous Black Falcon Squadron. Scarcely a day goes by when they are not vilified in the radio propaganda coming out of North Vietnam. Indeed, they are one of ‘Hanoi Hanna’s’ favorite ‘whipping boys.’”

“Colonel Whitfield also happens to be the most highly decorated pilot in the Air Force—a multiple ace in two separate wars. He’s practically a legend among fighter pilots. That makes him a prize catch, and you can bet they will milk this for all the propaganda value they can get—starting, no doubt, with a public parade through the streets of Hanoi with coverage by the international media.

“We believe they will be moved to North Vietnam in the next few days. As of this moment he and Brown are being held in a small hamlet taken over by their Vietcong captors and used as a temporary holding facility. The details surrounding their capture, and the latest intelligence information, will be provided to you by Captain Schuler in her briefing.

“Needless to say we must get them back, and it must be done before they can be moved north. I am here at the behest of the President, who insisted I personally explain to you the critical nature of this mission. I can assure you that he and I will be monitoring this one very closely.

“He has also made it very clear, that the rescue must be accomplished with little or no civilian casualties. It would be counter-productive if, in rescuing our people—thus denying the enemy their use in the propaganda war—we are charged instead with the massacre of innocent civilians. The North Vietnamese would get as much, if not more mileage out of that, and it would be far more sympathetic.”

McNamara paused momentarily to study the faces around the table. He was looking for any trace of disagreement. He saw none and continued. “I know that this condition will complicate an already difficult task, but I am also confident that we have the people here, and in Vietnam, who can get the job done. General Garrett will oversee this critical mission. He has the authority to provide you with anything you need to insure its success. I know of no other man who understands this particular situation better than he does.”

Turning to Garrett, he said: “General, it’s all yours.” He then walked out of the room as abruptly and as unceremoniously as he walked in, with his aid, Major Dietzel, following close behind. General Garrett waited for them to clear the door before he spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve just heard the Defense Secretary describe the situation and the importance of getting these men back. The President will be monitoring this one with more than

passing interest. I understand his concern, and that of Mr. McNamara. The propaganda value that Ho Chi Minh could wring from this would no doubt undermine the effectiveness of our own psy-war efforts. They must also consider the political fallout. I, however, am concerned with only one thing...getting our people out, and getting them out alive!”

General Samuel Garrett, survivor of the Bataan Death March and three years of ruthless interment under the Japanese, knows what it means to be a prisoner of war. The horrors he personally witnessed, and experienced, still haunt him. Many of his comrades, too weak to keep up with the forced march of wretched souls were shot, bayoneted, or beaten to death by their Japanese captors—their bodies thrown to the side of the road like discarded trash.

Thousands died on that infamous march, and thousands more died in the concentration camps of malnourishment, disease, torture, or of simply being worked to death.

Garrett can never forget what they did to him and his friends, and the Filipino men, women, and children who marched with them. He didn't want to forget, and even named his son after the incident to insure he didn't. Nor, despite the well meaning advice of family, friends, and psychiatrists, could he ever bring himself to forgive. He believed that to do so would only make it easier for them, or others, to commit such atrocities again.

Intellectually, he could understand the liberal reasoning that his captors were merely the products of the society that spawned them—that they were only following orders, but he could never accept it. He believed that, while it may explain their behavior, it did not excuse it, or exonerate them. Moreover, it held Japanese society at large equally responsible for their crimes—a society still steeped in the ancient traditions of the Samurai warrior—a people who worshipped an Emperor-God and, like their Nazi counterparts, espoused the superiority of the Japanese race.

It was that kind of cultural indoctrination, that not only made it easier for their soldiers to inflict such inhuman acts against people in every country they invaded, it made it inevitable. The hands of the conqueror are always bloody, but never more than when they see the conquered as less than human. No one else in the room had ever shared a similar experience, but they all knew where the General was coming from.

“Colonel Martin’s special forces unit,” he continued, “has been tasked for this operation. They are planning the rescue tactics as we speak. What they need from us is ‘real-time’ intelligence, technical support, and access to Army, Air Force and Navy resources. Colonel Martin has already compiled a list of those requirements.

“There’s no time to waste. Our best chance of getting them out is before they can be moved from the village. At this point, I’ll hand the meeting over to Captain Schuler. She’ll fill you in on the details of the shoot down and other critical aspects of the mission.”

Leslie walked to the podium as Garrett seated himself in a vacant chair at the head of the table. “Good morning gentlemen. I’ll try not to repeat what you’ve already heard and focus instead on the facts as we currently know them.” She uncovered the tripod stand in the center of the briefing platform to reveal a 1:250,000 scale map of the Delta region in South Vietnam. It would provide enough detail to retrace the sequence of events leading to their capture.

She pointed to a spot on the map—a small clearing in the jungle. Falcon One ejected over this area, as reported by Captain Larsen, the element leader. Colonel Whitfield established radio contact with as soon as he was on the ground, and was warned by Sparrow, the Forward Air Controller, that a Vietcong patrol was moving towards the crash site.

“He and Brown ran into the west tree-line here, under the covering fire of Falcon Three and Two.” She pointed on the map.

“They continued into the jungle on a northwesterly heading toward the nearest open area, about a mile away. Forty minutes later Whitfield radioed the FAC to tell him that they stopped to rest near a small clearing in the jungle, thinking it was the one to which Sparrow had directed them. That was his last transmission.

“However, the clearing they were trying to reach was almost a half mile further west. Apparently, the heavy undergrowth made it impossible to maintain a straight course, diverting them to the north. That would put them right about here.”

“You said that Colonel Whitfield made his last call from that position,” Kracek interrupted. “Is that where they were captured?”

“We believe it is.” Making eye contact with Kracek distracted her for a brief, but noticeable moment. She found herself wondering if there might not have been more for their relationship if he were not already involved with someone else. Suddenly conscious of the obvious pause in her briefing, she pretended to brush back a non-existent loose strain of hair and uncovered the next exhibit—a series of photos taken by RF-101’s one hour after Whitfield and Brown were shot down. Clearing her throat, she continued: “Additional recce sorties were flown over the same area every four hours until sunset.

“You won’t be able to see the small details in these photos from where you’re sitting, so I have included copies in each of your files. She waited for them to open their folders. “In the first series of shots you can see that none of the six hamlets in the search area show any unusual activity. Now look at the next group of photos taken four hours later. Take particular note of frame number three.” Leslie gave them time to study the picture.

“You can see the increased activity in that village. In this next photo, we can see two people carrying weapons, and several others squatting around a fire, cooking their dinner. The weapons beside them were identified as AK-47’s.”

“That tells us there are Vietcong in that village,” Colonel Martin said, “but it does not confirm that Whitfield and Brown are with them.”

“You’re right, sir. However, subsequent flights over the hamlet strongly suggest they are. One photo in particular, number 4B in your folder, shows an armed guard standing outside the hut in the southwest side of the village. He wasn’t there before.”

“Still not conclusive,” Martin replied.

“We wanted more assurance as well; which is why we waited for a visual confirmation by our agent on the ground. He has not only confirmed their presence, but that they are being held inside the hut we just looked at.”

“I stand corrected, Captain...nice piece of intelligence work.”

“Thank you, Colonel, but the credit belongs to the pilots who took the photos. They made our job relatively easy.”

Refreshing, a Pentagon bureaucrat who doesn’t mind sharing the credit with someone else, Martin thought. He was pleased to know there were still some like her in Washington.

“Captain Schuler, wouldn’t the multiple reconnaissance flights over the hamlet have tipped the Vietcong off that we are on to them?” Kracek asked.

“An excellent question, one that concerned us as well, but we had no choice; we needed photo intelligence. However, to minimize that possibility, the RF-101 pilots avoided flying directly over the village by using their side-looking cameras. They also made their photo runs at irregular intervals, single pass only. A U-2 aircraft was used to get the overhead shots we needed from high altitude.

“To answer your question, we don’t know. What we do know is that Whitfield and Brown will be moved north as soon as arrangements can be made. Exactly when is uncertain. Our agent believes it will be in two to three days.”

“Then, assuming they haven’t been spooked by our recon aircraft, we should have time to get our extraction team in there.” Kracek said.

“We’re betting on it.” Schuler paused a moment to examine at her notes. “Ladies and gentlemen, I believe Captain Kracek has just summed up my briefing. Unless there are any further questions, I’m through.” She looked at each person sitting around the table. None responded. “Good. Before leaving let me point out, that in your folders you will not only find additional information, but a list of useful contacts and telephone numbers. Thank you.”

Leslie took her seat. General Garrett stood up, but didn't bother to use the podium mike. "You now know as much about the situation as we do. Captain Schuler will provide you with intel updates as she receives them. What I need from you is a detailed support plan, one that will provide our special forces team with everything it needs to bring these men home; and I want it on my desk by fifteen hundred hours today. I also want a Plan B."

"Plan B?" Someone asked.

"Yes, Plan B. In the event the rescue attempt is not successful, I want to know what we are going to do to offset Ho Chi Minh's propaganda coup. That may be even more difficult than the rescue. So, it behooves all of us to make sure we don't need a Plan B. Any other questions?"

Garrett gave them a minute to respond. No one did. Turning to Schuler, he said: "Captain, I'd like you to work closely with the planning group to provide them with intelligence updates as they come in, and to keep me informed of their progress."

"Yes sir."

"Colonel Martin, I'd like to see you outside before you leave."

Garrett left the room, followed by Martin. This time military protocol was observed and the room was called to attention.

In the corridor, Garrett handed Martin a paper. “Joe, I received this teletype message shortly before the meeting. It’s a list of the personnel selected for the extraction team. As you can see, my son is on it. Like every other man in your unit, he volunteered.”

“I’m not surprised, sir. This is the kind of mission every Green Beret wants to be a part of. Most of the men on this list owe their lives to one of Whitfield’s pilots.”

“Kracek.”

“Yes sir. They’d walk through fire for him, and your son would be right out front. He was in charge of the convoy that would have been overrun were it not for Kracek. The ‘Berets’ remember their friends, and always repay their debts.”

“I’m aware of that, but he is my only son. I know he’s capable of taking care of himself and I’m not asking that he be given any special consideration. I am asking that you stay on top of this operation and keep me posted every step of the way.”

“I will sir. And, you needn’t worry about Bat. He’s one of the finest soldiers I’ve ever had the privilege to command. Moreover, the man he’s following into that hamlet, Captain Chan, is the best of the best, and he has picked his team with deliberate care.”

Martin held up the list the General handed him. “Your son couldn’t be going into battle with a more capable group of soldiers.”

“I’m sure of that, Joe, and I am grateful too that his first combat assignment is under your command.” The General took Martin’s hand in both of his. “God speed to you and your men.”

As he watched his friend walk away, Martin pictured him standing tall among the hundreds of others who marched with him at Bataan. *Despite all he’s been through he still carries himself with honor and dignity.*

The thought stayed with him as he walked back into the conference room. Handing Lt. Schuler a folder, he said: “Leslie, Viktor and I have to leave. This paper lists our support requirements and other information needed by the planning cell. Please see that everyone gets a copy.”

“Of course, sir. If there’s anything else I can do...”

“We’ll call you. Thanks, Leslie. It’s been a pleasure working with you these past few days. We couldn’t have accomplished half the things we came here to do without your help.”

“My sentiments exactly, Colonel,” Kracek said. Thanks to you, Leslie, our time in Washington was not only productive, but enjoyable.”

“It’s kind of you to say so gentlemen, but the pleasure has been all mine. I don’t get out of my stuffy office very much, and this has been a welcome change. I’ve not only enjoyed your company, I’ve learned some things from both of you that have given me a fresh perspective on the war. I’m sorry I can’t accompany you to the airport, but the least I can do is escort you to the door.” She didn’t want to say her final goodbyes in a crowded conference room.

In the hallway, Martin said: “Perhaps, when this is over, you can visit us in Vietnam...get a look at the war first-hand.”

“I’d like that very much, Colonel, but you know the Pentagon; they’ll never let me out of my cage long enough to make the trip.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. You were too busy to notice, but you just made a friend of one of the most influential generals in Washington. I saw how he reacted to your briefing. He was obviously impressed with your performance. I’m willing to bet that, if you asked him, he would make it happen.”

“Thanks for the insight, sir, but I would only approach General Garrett with such a request if I could justify it as being necessary to my job.”

“I’m not surprised to hear you say that. However, I’m sure you’ll find enough justification for your request. There’s no doubt in my mind, that observing the war up close would not only be very educational for you personally, it would enhance your value to us as an intelligence analyst. Moreover, I believe General Garrett will also see it that way.”

“You make a convincing argument, sir. *There is more to this man than his battle exploits*, she mused. “Then, I will look forward to seeing you in Vietnam in the near future.” She looked at Kracek. “I’ve never flown in a fighter jet, Viktor...think I could get a ride in the F-100 during my visit?”

“You just get there, Leslie, I’ll take you up myself.”

She smiled. “Now I’m really excited about going. Speaking of flying, I believe you two have a plane to catch.” She shook their hands. “Have a safe flight, gentlemen. Washington won’t be the same without you.”

Standing alone in the corridor, she watched them walk away. Two men, two very unique men, who had come to mean so much to her in only a few short days, were leaving her.

A sense of loss and sadness tugged at her heart with each step they took. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced since she was a little girl, and her fighter pilot father went off to fight another war. He was shot down over North Korea and never heard from again—one of the many still unaccounted for in that conflict. "Please," she said, almost as a prayer, "keep them safe."

Before going back into the conference room, Leslie wiped away the wetness in her eyes. It had been a long time since she felt a tear on her cheek.

38

Kracek's Surprise

Special Forces Camp, Vietnam, 17 Dec 1965, 1300 hours

Minutes after landing at Tan San Nhut Air Base, Kracek and Martin transferred to a Huey helicopter and were soon en route to the 3rd Special Forces Camp in the Delta. They were absorbed in their thoughts as they watched the lush green, deceptively peaceful jungle landscape slip beneath them. The familiar sights and smells of Vietnam were curiously rejuvenating.

“Strange, isn’t it, sir?”

“What?”

“Vietnam. I mean, from up here it looks so beautiful. You’d never know there was a war going on.”

“You’re right, Viktor. But, we have the advantage of seeing it from a unique perspective, and the luxury of being able to contemplate its beauty even as it’s being torn apart. However, I see it from the ground, as well as the air, and I know what’s going on under that jungle canopy.”

“Yes sir, I’m sure you do, but there’s something else I’m feeling.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure. We come from a country half a world apart, yet, I feel like I’m coming home. No, it’s more than that...I feel more alive here. Does that make any sense to you, Colonel?”

“You bet it does. For the soldier, whose job takes him to many different countries, home is pretty much wherever he happens to be at the time, and war ties him to his new home like nothing else.”

“I don’t understand, sir. I would have thought it to be just the opposite. Most people can’t wait to get back to the ‘real world.’”

“They may say that, and some—particularly those in non-combat roles—may actually believe it. But for those of us who have tasted battle, who put our lives on the line every day, it’s not that simple.

“In the crucible of war a bond is forged between soldiers that unites us like no other human endeavor...stronger than family, thicker than blood. Once you’ve stood shoulder to shoulder with another man and faced death together in mortal combat you become part of a larger, much closer family—a brotherhood of warriors that can only be truly united on the battlefield. That’s what you intuitively sensed when you said you felt more alive here.

“It reminded me of something an old first sergeant in Korea told me just before we made our final assault of Heartbreak Ridge. We were having a philosophical conversation similar to the one you and I are having now. But, he put it more simply. He said: ‘Son, a man is never more alive than when he is closest to death.’

“His words repeated themselves in my mind as I led my platoon up that godforsaken piece of real estate. I could hear them clearly, despite the roar of our fighter jets overhead and the bombs that shook the ground under our feet...above the automatic weapons fire, and the screams of valiant men—ours, and theirs. A third of my men were killed on the side of that hill, another third were wounded, but we finally took it.

“I made it to the top without a scratch, and looked upon an unbelievable scene of death and destruction. Hundreds of mutilated bodies were scattered across the landscape, some no longer recognizable as human. The pungent smell of napalm filled my nostrils, and the silence...the eerie silence.

He suddenly stopped. Kracek saw the pain in his friend’s face, and waited for him to “come down from the hill.”

“The strange thing is, Viktor, that amidst all of the horror, I experienced an exhilaration I had never felt before, or since. It haunts my conscience to this day. Yet, in that moment, I knew exactly what my first sergeant words meant.”

They didn’t speak for a long while—neither man wanting to compete with the incessant noise of the helicopter’s rotating blades. Kracek spoke first. “Looks like Can Tho ahead.”

“It is,” Martin confirmed. “That’s the Song Han Giang River to the north, one of the five main branches of the Mekong—the only good landmarks in the Delta. That short air strip west of the city is where I park my airplane. Our camp is another twenty two miles southwest.”

From Can Tho, the pilot followed the Song Hau Giang tributary until it veered to the west; then suddenly dropped down to tree top level. The speed of the helicopter and the low altitude turned the beautiful jungle into a green blur. The people in the sampans looked up as they flew over them.

A sniper on the ground would have no time to track them as they sped by his position. The alternative approach was to stay above three thousand feet, out of the effective range of small arms fire.

Steve Morris took the low road today, and it was obvious, by the way he was handling his aircraft, that he knew his way around the Delta. He flew the Huey as deftly as Kracek flew the F-100.

“This guy knows how to fly a chopper,” Kracek said.

“You bet he does,” Martin replied. “Captain Morris is one of the best we’ve got, which is why I selected him for this mission. He’ll be taking the rescue team into the drop zone before first light tomorrow. His number two man, Captain Frank Cannova, is every bit as good. He flew in ahead of us.”

“There it is just ahead, sir.” Lieutenant William Nolan, Morris’s co-pilot, gave himself a mental pat on the back for calling it out first. He was new to the theater, and still vying for the respect of the veteran pilots in the squadron, particularly the one sitting to his right.

“I see it, Willy.” Morris said. “Camp Forsaken in sight, Colonel. Be on the ground shortly.”

He circled right to check out the tiny landing pad inside the compound before committing himself to land. Originally designed to accommodate only one Huey, it would be a tight fit. Cannova had landed on the far edge, leaving just enough room for a second chopper. It was all Morris needed.

Flying a short, steep final approach, he landed it on the opposite side of the pad with less than six feet separating the blades of the two helicopters. He looked over at his co-pilot and winked. “I’ll let you try that next time.”

Swallowing hard, Nolan felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. *He must be kidding*, he thought.

“Nice landing,” Kracek remarked over the intercom.

“Thanks. Coming from you, ah consider that a real Texas compliment.”

Martin jumped out first, followed by Kracek. They walked in a slight crouch until they were clear of the rotating blades.

Captain Chan was waiting for them at the edge of the pad. He greeted Martin with a salute. “Welcome back, Colonel...heard about your promotion. Congratulations.”

“Thanks Ed. I brought a friend along. This is Captain Kracek.”

Chan extended his hand. “I’ve heard so many stories about you since the ambush I feel like I already know you.”

“I’ve heard about you as well, Ed, and the feeling is mutual.”

Edward Chan was born and raised in San Francisco’s Falcon Town, but his parents were from the old country. They left there with his older brother as soon as they had saved enough money to bribe the right officials to obtain passage on an unregistered transport ship. That was 1933. Ed was born the following year.

Mr. and Mrs. Chan worked long, hard days to provide for them—she in a laundry sweat shop, and he on a fishing boat owned by an Italian who had lost his only son to the sea just three weeks before Chan approached him for a job. Franco saw the pain and need in his eyes. He also saw the strength and dignity of the man. He hired him that day and never regretted it.

The tall, strapping Chinaman learned fast and was soon doing the work of two men. He, and the old Italian became close friends. Franco thanked God every day for giving him back his son.

His mother and father never spoke of the hardships they suffered during the three weeks they spent in an overcrowded, sweltering cargo hold, but his brother—who was eight years old at the time—told him as soon as he was old enough to understand. The accounts of their grim ordeal, and the indignities they endured were burned into his memory. Ed Chan can still feel his brother’s pain whenever he recalls the story.

Though only thirteen when he told his younger brother about that fateful voyage, Jame’s Chan’s anger and bitterness remain with him to this day. Even a successful career with one of the most prestigious law firms in San Francisco could not mitigate his deep seated hatred for the “slave traders” who brought them to America.

Nevertheless, thanks to a mother and father who were too grateful for the opportunity to start a new life in America to allow anger or bitterness prevent them from achieving their dreams, and a sister, who loved and cared for him as a baby with the tenderness of an angel, Edward Chan was spared the emotional baggage carried by his brother. He vowed to repay their sacrifices by becoming a stronger man, one who could provide for them—and protect them—in a new, sometimes hostile land.

“Are the men assembled,” Martin asked.

“Yes sir...in the chow hall.”

“Good, let’s not keep them waiting.”

At the dining hall, Captain Chan pushed the door open for the Colonel, who was greeted by a sharp call to attention by Lt. Garrett.

“At ease, men,” he said, walking over to Lt. Garrett and shaking his hand. “I talked to your father, Bat. He sends his best.”

“Thank you, sir. How is he?”

“He looks great. The Pentagon bureaucracy hasn’t mellowed him in the least.”

“Sounds like Dad.”

Martin winked knowingly and turned to his men. “It’s good to be back among the finest group of soldiers I’ve ever had the privilege to serve with. “Let me introduce you to our guest, Captain Viktor Kracek, the man who literally pulled our butts out of the fire last week when our convoy was ambushed.”

Before he could continue his men let out a rousing cheer and rose to their feet, applauding. Martin made no effort to cut them off. They needed to express their gratitude to the man to whom many of them owed their lives, and he was grateful to give them the opportunity. He waited patiently for the applause to subside and the men took their seats.

“Looks like you’ve got a few fans here, Viktor.” Addressing his men he said: “You’ll have a chance to meet him later. First, I’d like to say a few words about the about the mission. Captain Chan has already formed his team and finalized the planning for tomorrow’s operation. Picking a team was, no doubt, the harder of the two tasks, since every one of you volunteered. As always, you do me proud. “I want to see the team, including the Huey pilots, in the briefing room shortly after we finish here.”

Martin paused. “There is one more thing.” He waited until he had the full attention of everyone in the room. “Captain Kracek will be going in with us.” The surprise announcement started a buzz among the men, which stopped almost as quickly as it started. In an aside to Chan he said: “Sorry, Ed, this was a last minute decision. There was no time to notify you before we left Washington.”

“I understand, sir. We’ll work it out.” Chan didn’t like the idea of taking an outsider on such a critical mission—one that would take split second timing and teamwork—but he would never question his Commander in front of the men. Moreover, he trusted his judgment. He knew the Colonel would never take any decision that might jeopardize the operation.

Nevertheless, Martin felt that he owed Chan and the men an explanation. “I expected you to have reservations about bringing in someone who is not trained in special ops. I turned him down the first time he asked. He reminded me that, as a Marine infantryman who has seen combat in Korea he could handle himself as well on the ground as he can in the air. And we all know what he can do at the controls of a jet fighter.

That last remark got a roaring “hoo-rah” from the men.

Smiling, Martin continued. “When I asked him why he felt so strongly about personally taking part in the operation, he told me that Colonel Whitfield is not just a squadron commander to him, but a friend and mentor.

He also feels—since he was originally scheduled to fly with Whitfield on a mission he himself requested—that he is somehow responsible for what happened.

“I assured him that he wasn’t and turned him down a second time. Then he reminded me of the promise I made on our trip back to Washington, when I told him that, after what he had done for us, we owed him one. I also said that the Green Berets always repay their debts and never forget their friends. Was I right?”

The men responded with a another enthusiastic “hoo-rah!”

Kracek noted the care Martin took to explain to his people the reasons for his decision. Most commanders would not have bothered. They would simply assume, that once an order was given it would be carried out without question. But they would miss the point. Martin wasn't giving his men the right to vote on, or veto his decision. By taking the time to explain it, however, he satisfied their natural curiosity and drew them into his confidence.

As skilled, intelligent fighting men of an elite branch of the United States Army they deserved no less. Asked to put their lives on the line they have a right to know they are following the best course of action—as does every soldier. When taken into the confidence of their leaders, such men do not merely carry out orders, they execute them with an unwavering determination that transcends mere chain of command.

Martin was a commander who understood this better than most, because he never forgot that he once stood where they are now.

“Colonel,” Kracek interrupted, “may I speak to the men?”

Martin gave his friend a puzzled look. “They’re all yours, Viktor.”

“Thank you, sir. Gentlemen, you’ve heard Colonel Martin explain how I came to be here...how I ‘convinced’ him to allow me to accompany the extraction team. Yes, I did call in an I.O.U. to force his decision, and I regret doing it. It was wrong to pressure him in that way. When I first heard of Colonel Whitfield’s capture I let my emotions cloud my better judgment.

“My only defense for that breach of military protocol, is that the man we are going in to rescue tomorrow is more than a commander to me. I have as much admiration and respect for him as you do this man standing beside me, a man I am also proud to call my friend, a man for whom I have the greatest respect.”

He paused, then looked into the faces of everyone in the room before beginning again. “So, as much as I want to be a part of this mission, I cannot allow myself to go under these circumstances.” Turning to Martin he said: “Colonel, I withdraw my request with apology.”

Kracek’s unexpected announcement left them speechless. Seconds passed in silence. Many of the men were eager to speak, but held back, waiting for their Commander’s response.

“Christ, Viktor, you managed to surprise me again. But I won’t accept your apology, because you have nothing to apologize for—except maybe a loyalty that’s all too rare in today’s world. As for withdrawing your request, and taking me off the hook, thanks; but I won’t make that decision. I’ll leave that to Captain Chan and his team to decide.”

It was all the opening Garrett needed. “Sir, may I speak?”

“Of course.”

“Well sir, except for you, I think I’m the only other man in this room who knew Captain Kracek before this meeting; and the only one to see him in action on the ground. I can vouch for his ability to take care of himself in hand to hand fighting. He has some moves that even Captain Chan would appreciate. And we all know how tough the Marines are. He would be an asset to the team, and I would be honored to go into combat with him.”

Garrett was hardly finished when a tall, broad shouldered Norseman rose to his feet. “I’m Staff Sergeant Ostlund, Ian. I agree. I was with Lt. Garrett when we were ambushed. Going into battle with Captain Kracek would be an honor.”

Then another stood and boldly stated: “Sergeant Tanaka, Hiro. I too was there. He has earned his place on this team.”

And another who, with a mischievous smile and a twinkle in his eye, announced: “Sergeant McQueen, Patrick. Having seen the Captain in action I wouldn’t want to leave home without him.”

“Specialist First Class Saldana, Jesus. Had he been around for the ‘Bay of Pigs,’ my brother wouldn’t be rotting away in a filthy Cuban prison. I say he comes.”

When the last member of the team stood up, he commanded everyone’s attention. The huge, powerfully built black man—with a physique that would make Mr. America envious—spoke softly, but with unwavering conviction. “PFC White, Andrew.” Looking straight into Viktor’s eyes, he said, almost in a whisper, “Captain Kracek is my man. I’ll take good care of him.”

Kracek was stunned. He felt both proud and humbled to have these men speak in his behalf. Except for Garrett they were all strangers, yet they accepted him like one of their own. White’s words were especially poignant. They were spoken with an unshakable resolve...more like a pledge.

Soon, every man in the room raised his voice in approval.

Chan was almost as surprised as Kracek at the show of support. “We have our answer, Colonel. Any reservations I may have had were answered when the Captain offered to withdraw. Still, I thought it important to the mission—as I’m sure he did—that the men were one hundred percent in agreement. “Welcome aboard, Viktor.”

“Thanks, Ed...the honor is mine.”

“It’s settled then,” Martin confirmed. “Assemble the team for a final briefing at 1530 hours.”

“Yes sir. That gives us about an hour to take care of one last item.” Chan waved to a figure standing in the kitchen door. “Bring it in Minh.”

The diminutive cook, affectionately nicknamed ‘Little Minh,’ wheeled in a serving tray with a large cake decorated with the unit colors. The inscription read:

CONGRATULATIONS

Colonel Joe Martin

from

The Men of the 3rd S.O.C

39

The Rescue

Third Special forces Camp, Vietnam, 18 Dec 1965, 0430 hours

Chan double-timed the rescue team to the helicopter pad as Martin looked on. His face reflected the pride he felt for his men, but not the concern he held inside.

The choppers were waiting with engines running. Chan stood to the side as Ostlund, McQueen, and Saldana climbed aboard the lead chopper flown by Captain Morris and his co-pilot, Lieutenant Nolan. Garrett, Tanaka, Kracek, and White took the number two ship, flown solo by Captain Cannova. His co-pilot, Lt. Langston, contracted a case of stomach flu the night before and had to be grounded. There was no time to get a replacement.

When all of his men were on board, Chan climbed into the lead aircraft and donned a radio headset. “All set back here, Steve.”

“Roger. We’ll lift off as soon as Two checks in.”

A few seconds later: “Python One, Two is on, ready to go.”

“Roger, One lifting off. Two join on my left and fly slightly high.”

“Wilco.” Cannova was a stickler for radio discipline and kept his calls short and concise. “Say what you’ve got to say in as few words as needed, then get the hell off the air,” is what he would tell his students.

Morris turned to a heading of 0-2-8 degrees and pressed the timer button on the instrument panel clock as he accelerated to 110 knots.

“Python Lead, leveling at three hundred, steady on 0-2-8 degrees.”

“Copy that, Lead...Two’s on your left.”

It was only twenty one miles to the drop off point. At a ground speed of just under two miles a minute they would be there in ten minutes. The DZ was a rubber plantation owned by Jon Lavasier, a French colonialist who willingly allowed his land to be used by friendly forces in exchange for the security they could provide. They say he did the same for the enemy, some of whom once worked his plantation. In fact, many of the older family members, as well as the wives and children of the Vietcong, still do.

Odd as it may seem, Lavasier is no traitor, nor is he a communist sympathizer. Vietnam is a different kind of war. Like everyone else in caught up in it, he was simply trying to hang on to something he worked all his life to build, and only doing what he had to do to protect his family...to survive. He's good man, who treats his workers with kindness and respect. That, no doubt, is what has, thus far, kept the "wolves" from his door.

An almost full moon was partially obscured by the clouds. This was good. At their altitude and airspeed darkness was a welcome asset. Less than a mile out, Morris called: "DZ dead ahead."

"In sight," Cannova acknowledged.

Kracek saw the huge French chateau standing in the northern half of a large clearing carved out of hundreds of acres of rubber trees. To the south of it was a long rectangular swimming pool. The light of the moon reflected brightly off the pool's calm surface. It looked as inviting as the beautifully landscaped grounds surrounding it. The tennis courts were to the right side of the pool, and the riding stables on the left near the tree-line, as they approached from the east.

The grass runway started one hundred meters south of the estate grounds, and cut a fifty foot wide, one thousand foot long swath through the largest stand of rubber trees.

“Python Two, Lead, we'll land in the southern third of the strip.”

Morris checked with his half of the team over the intercom: “Everyone ready back there, Ed?”

“Roger, just get us down in one piece.”

“No problem.” Morris gently raised the nose of the Huey, just enough to stop its forward momentum at the same time it touched down. Chan's feet hit the ground before the chopper fully settled on its skids. The others were right behind him. Staying low until they cleared the rotating blades, they double-timed into the trees west of the runway. Garrett and his half of the team deplaned at the same time and quickly joined them.

Chan took a visual head count as they came in. “We’re all here. Our objective is about two miles in that direction. Saldana, take the point. The rest of us will follow in the order briefed. Move it out. We need to get there before first light.”

Saldana, an ace tracker, set a fast pace through the rubber grove. Half a mile later they were in the jungle. It slowed them down some, but provided good cover. They would be most vulnerable crossing the open areas and rice paddies. Fortunately there were only two, neither one more than a hundred meters across.

Chan stopped the team before each clearing, studied the terrain to pick out the best route across, and listened for sounds of human life as he waited for the moon to slip behind the next passing cloud. “Now, Sal...go.”

Saldana moved into the clearing in a low crouch. The others followed, maintaining five yards separation between them. They stayed on top of the dikes, which allowed them to move faster with less noise, and minimized their exposure in the open area.

With the moon shielded by clouds, the darkness, and their camouflage uniforms, made them practically invisible against the shadow-less landscape. They were more likely to be discovered by sound than by sight; which is why Chan kept them out of the water filled rice paddies.

Kracek lost his footing on a wet patch of the dike and splashed a foot into the paddy water. Chan signaled him to freeze, and the others to stay down. When he was sure they weren't detected, he moved them out again. White reached down to grab Kracek's wrist and pulled him up.

On the other side of the clearing, Saldana took another compass reading before pressing on. Nearing the hamlet the undergrowth was not as dense, making it easier for them to move with less noise. Countless excursions by village hunters and Vietcong patrols had trampled it down. Thankfully, there was no sign of either.

Chan hoped that would be the case when he chose the timing for the operation. He also knew that guards would be posted around the perimeter, and would have to be 'neutralized' before going in. They stopped forty meters short of the village. He nodded to Saldana, who slipped off his radio pack before continuing ahead to scout the village.

Ten minutes later he returned to report his findings. He cleared away the debris covering the ground and used his knife to draw pictures in the dirt as he described what he saw. “There is one guard here, straight ahead, another thirty meters to the right, and one more to the left about the same distance.” He then drew the location of the huts inside the hamlet perimeter. “This is the only hut with a guard posted...probably where Whitfield and Brown are being held. I couldn’t get close enough to confirm it.”

“Good work, Sal. It’s the same one shown in the photos. We’ll have to assume they’re still there.” Chan glanced at his second in command.

“I agree,” Garrett said, “but we’ve got to move fast.”

“Right.” Chan checked his watch. “We have about ten minutes before first light. Tanaka, you take the guard in the center, Ostlund, the one on the left, McQueen, the right.” Looking at Tanaka: “Give the others sixty seconds to get into position, then strike simultaneously. Garrett, Kracek, White, and I will be moving in before the last of them hits the ground. Be prepared to lay down covering fire as we come out.”

The three men quickly moved into their assigned positions. Tanaka was expert in the way of the Ninja. He took a blow gun from the leather sheath tied to his back pack, inserted a poison tipped dart, and checked his watch. When the second hand ticked off one minute, he took careful aim and fired. The feathered projectile hit his man in the neck, penetrating the carotid artery. He was dead before he hit the ground.

McQueen's weapon of choice was a small, but powerful crossbow that, at close range, was as accurate and as deadly as an M-16 rifle. His arrow went straight between the eyes of the second guard and into his brain, sending him crumbling to the ground like a withered vegetable.

Ostlund, preferred a more personal approach. The big Norseman waited for his man to pass his position, then attacked with the stealth and speed of a jungle cat. But, before he could reach his prey, the shrill crow of the village rooster pierced the silence of the jungle night in an unexpected affront to one's senses.

The startled guard spun around to the offending sound just in time to see a huge shadowy figure descending upon him. Before he could grasp the enormity of his living nightmare he was struck in the forehead by a blow so powerful it almost snapped his neck. The last image his mind would register before losing consciousness was the frightening sight of a huge open hand coming at him with lightening speed. He could not know that it would be the last thing he would ever see in his short life.

In a single blurred move Ostlund grasped the stock of the guard's rifle with his right hand and stepped behind him before he could fall. Reaching over the unconscious body, he seized the barrel of the AK-47 with his other hand and pulled it back into the man's throat, crushing his Adam's apple.

Chan and his half of the team reached the back of the hut before the first guard hit the ground. He motioned White and Kracek to go around the left side, while he and Garrett went right.

Rudely awakened by the bird's crow, a still drowsy sentry opened his eyes to see White turning the corner of the hut. The shock of seeing this giant of a man suddenly appear before him like a dark specter froze the scream in his throat before it could pass his lips. A perfectly placed karate strike by Chan sent him down in a lifeless heap.

Chan signaled the others to hold while he cautiously looked inside the hut. He saw Whitfield, whose eyes alerted him to the danger lurking to the right of the entrance. He unsheathed his knife and, in a move too swift to follow, entered in a low crouch, spun to his left, deflecting the guard's weapon with his right forearm, and buried the blade deep into his heart.

Whitfield was astonished. He had never seen a man move so fast, with such deadly force. He had witnessed other martial artists perform amazing feats in demonstrations, but never in an actual life and death situation.

Brown's jaw dropped open, and his eyes grew wide in disbelief when he saw Kracek and Garrett rush in even before Chan could extract his knife from the guard's chest.

"Viktor, where the devil did you come from?"

"I'll explain later, Colonel, first let's get you out of here."

Kracek cut Whitfield's bonds as Garrett freed Brown. They didn't know it, but they had been seen by pair of smaller eyes as soon as they entered the village. The same little boy who threw the stone that cut Whitfield's face wasn't able to sleep with his father's killers so close, and had stood lonely vigil through the night watching their hut. When he saw Chan and the others he ran to warn Lt. Than. "The Americans are escaping," he shouted, excitedly.

Than sprung to his feet at the first mention of Americans.

“What is it boy? What did you see?”

Trembling uncontrollably, he blurted out: “American soldiers come into village. They kill guard, then...then...” He couldn’t find the words.

Than knelt on one knee to look into his eyes. “Good work, son; you are a brave soldier. You must stay here.” He grabbed his weapon and ran outside followed by his men—some of whom slept in the same hut. They were pinned down before they could make it into the square.

White was waiting for them, and opened up with his M-16, while Chan and the others ran out of the hut. “Keep going! I’ll hold them here until you reach the perimeter.”

Chan flashed a thumbs up and took off running, with Whitfield, Brown, and Garrett on his heels. But, Kracek was not about to leave his friend. He stayed back to help him keep Than and his men at bay. As the bullets flew by their ears into the wall of the mud hut behind them, he wondered if one of them had his name on it, then realized that he didn’t care.

The words of an old first sergeant—told to a young lieutenant at the foot of Korea’s Heartbreak Ridge—replayed themselves in his mind: “A man is never more alive than when he is closest to death.” He could hear them clearly, as if he were standing with them at the bottom of that hill.

A grenade landed at their feet.

“Grenade!” Kracek shouted, as he scooped it up in his bare hand and tossed it into the window of the hut that had held Whitfield and Brown. It exploded harmlessly inside. The sequence of events took only seconds; yet, it felt as though he were moving in slow motion, as if time stood still. White looked at him and smiled. He never felt the bullet that ripped through the flesh of his left shoulder—nor did it slow him down.

The others now safely away, they made their move. White threw a smoke canister into the bullet infested fire zone, and loaded a fresh magazine into his M-16. Using the smoke to mask their retreat, they were clear of the fire zone before Than and his men could risk charging their position. To further discourage them, the big man lobbed a grenade over his shoulder as they sprinted into the jungle.

Garrett stayed behind with Ostlund, McQueen, and Tanaka, to cover their exit. When Kracek and White ran pass their position he set two trip wire explosive devices and pulled everyone back to join the rest of the team.

Chan took a quick head count as they came in. Garrett gave him a quick assessment of the situation..

“They started to move in on us as soon as we stopped firing; but the early Christmas presents I left under the tree should slow them down.”

No sooner did Garrett finish his report, when the first of his “gifts” was opened. The sound of the explosion was amplified by the heavy morning air. When the inhuman screams of men, whose bodies were no longer whole, reached their ears, it sent a chill through the spines of even these battle hardened warriors.

One of the guerillas was almost torn in half by the blast, and frantically tried to stop his intestines from spilling out of his body, as his life slipped mercifully away. The man next to him had both legs blown off at the knees and appeared to sink into the pool of blood (his own) saturating the jungle floor.

“Stop!” Than ordered. “The Americans have booby trapped their escape route. Watch for more trip wires as we retrace our steps to the village. We cannot afford to lose more men.” His quick reaction to the threat kept them tripping the second anti-

personnel mine only a few steps away.

Safely within the village perimeter he briefed his men. “We must stay wide and left, paralleling their course to avoid other possible mines. Their lead is big, but we are more familiar with the terrain, and we will catch them.” Than sounded confident, but his forced retreat gave the Americans time to open the distance between them to more than two hundred meters.

Chan counted on Garrett’s antipersonnel mines to slow the Vietcong, and led the team out the same way they came in. The familiar terrain allowed them to move faster. When they reached the first clearing the VC platoon was nowhere in sight. They moved across rapidly, unconcerned about noise.

Than was four minutes behind when he and his men arrived at the same rice paddy, seventy meters to the left of the Americans. He too wasted no time crossing. On the other side he paused to check his map. His sergeants looking on he pointed out their position. “We are here...the Americans, here. If we draw a line from the village through their position it will take us to the Lavasier estate. That must be the helicopter pick-up point. “The runway there is sheltered on three sides by rubber trees, which will block our line of fire if they lift off before we get there. We must close on them before they can reach the plantation; if possible, before they can make it across the next clearing.”

Meanwhile Chan's team was being slowed down by heavier underbrush. He stopped to get a fix on their position. The men needed the break, but with the VC breathing down their necks they had to keep moving.

"This isn't good," Chan said. "They're not more than five minutes behind us, and could close that gap before we make it to the DZ. The last thing we need is to get into a fire fight with a superior enemy force in broad daylight."

Garrett nodded his agreement. "What do you have in mind?"

"I don't think we can make it to the planned DZ before they close on us. Our best chance is to bring the choppers in for an early extraction at this next clearing. Hopefully we'll be in the air before the VC can get there.

"We're going to need your expertise here, Viktor." Chan handed him his map. "Contact Python. Tell him to meet us at these new coordinates. In the meantime, let's keep moving."

Kracek joined Saldana, who had already tuned his radio and was trying to contact Python, but with no success. "Nothing but static, sir."

"Let me try," Kracek said. "Python, this is Night Crawler, come in, over." No answer.

Chan's face reflected his concern. "What's wrong? They should be in the air by now to provide us cover as needed."

“They probably are, but in this light Morris is probably skimming the tree tops. Unless they climb to a higher altitude we won’t have a clear line of sight until they’re right on top of us.”

“Keep trying.”

Kracek keyed his mike. “Python, this is Night Crawler, Python, from Night Crawler, how do read, over?.” More static. He tried another approach, on the chance that Python might be receiving him, but he wasn’t able to hear his reply. “Python, Night Crawler here, if you read me key your mike twice.”

“Python Lead, this is Two. I’m picking up something, but I can’t make it out...too much static.”

“Roger, I hear it. Another transmission started to come in just as Morris released his mike button. It was badly broken, but he could make out some of the words:

“Python...Crawler...if...read...key...twice.”

“It is them.” Morris keyed his mike two times, then called his wingman. “I’m taking it higher...stay with me.”

“Like your shadow, Lead.”

“We got them,” Kracek said. “They’ll be calling back soon.”

“Good work, Viktor.” Chan said. “Make sure they get the new coordinates. Let’s keep moving. The bad guys can’t be far behind.”

Despite the uncertainty of their situation, Whitfield couldn't help but admire the professionalism and courage of every man on the team. They worked together as though each knew what the other was thinking, and Kracek seemed to fit in as if he had trained with them for months. Seeing him in action filled him with a pride he imagined only a father could feel for a son. "Just when I think I've seen all he has, he shows me more."

His thoughts, involuntarily spoken aloud, were overheard by Brown. "I know what you mean, Colonel. When we get out of this I'm going to buy that man a drink. Hell, I'll buy him the whole damned bar."

Whitfield smiled. "You won't be the only one in that line, John."

As Kracek predicted, Python called again. "Night Crawler, this is Python, how do you read, over?"

"Loud and clear, Python...say your position."

"Five minutes from the DZ."

"Roger that, but there's been a change of plan. I have the new DZ coordinates. Are you ready to copy?"

"Go ahead."

"The new coordinates are whiskey-sierra-three-six-zero-two...repeat, whiskey-sierra-three-six-zero-two...copy?"

"Roger. Python copies whiskey sierra three-six-zero-two."

“It’s the first clear area two miles west northwest of the original DZ. A heading from there of two nine five degrees will take you straight to us.”

“Got it. When did you get time to do the math? Aren’t they keeping you guys busy enough down there?”

“Except for some pissed off people on our tails, and some unfriendly jungle in front of us—not to mention the goddamned mosquitoes—it’s been a walk in the park, but we’re not stopping for tea,” Kracek said.

“Some guys have all the fun.” The usually taciturn Cannova couldn’t resist a personal comment.

“Crawler, from Python Lead, say your estimate to the clearing.”

Taking off his headset, Kracek looked at Chan. “He needs an estimate to the clearing, Ed.”

“Ten minutes, if this undergrowth doesn’t get any thicker.”

Kracek put his headset back on. “Ten minutes, Python. Hold about a mile out. I’ll call you thirty seconds before we reach the clearing, assuming our VC friends haven’t joined the party by then. Look for our smoke, then come in fast to pick up the first half of the team and our two ‘passengers.’ The rest of us will provide cover.”

“Sounds like a plan. We’ve got enough fire power on these birds to discourage anyone we don’t like from venturing out of the trees.” Morris turned to his co-pilot. “That’s gotta be Kracek.”

“Python Two, Lead, keep it high and hold to the north until I pick up the first group. Arm your guns and rockets, but don’t fire until cleared by Night Crawler. Bring it down as soon as my skids leave the ground. I’ll cover you when you go in for the rest of the team.”

“Roger that,” Cannova acknowledged. “This is getting interesting,” He said under his breath. He looked over at the empty left seat. On most days he didn’t mind flying alone. In fact, he preferred it that way, except on missions like this. *An extra set of eyes and hands would come in handy about now.* He didn’t know how prophetic his unspoken words would be.

Meanwhile, Than’s platoon was rapidly closing the gap. “If we keep this pace we will intercept them before they can cross the next clearing. Hung, take five men and continue straight ahead to the edge of the trees. We will go right to trap them in a crossfire.”

“Yes sir.” Sgt. Hung moved out with his five men.

“The clearing is dead ahead,” Saldana whispered.

“Now, Viktor,” Chan ordered. “Call them in.”

“Python, this is Night Crawler, come on down.”

“On the way.” Morris and Cannova added power, lowered the noses of their aircraft, and skimmed across the jungle canopy like giant dragon flies. They were over the clearing in thirty seconds. Morris landed just east of the smoke marker, while Cannova hovered at two hundred feet in the air and five hundred feet to his right. He armed his rockets, checked his gun switch on and waited, but not for long.

The rescue team came under attack from two sides before Python Lead could touch down. It was too risky to make a break for the chopper as long as the enemy force to the north of them was still in play. Chan looked at Kracek, but words weren't necessary. He was already making the call.

“Python Two, we're caught in a crossfire. We can hold off the group behind us, but we need help with their friends seventy meters north of our position, just inside the tree line.”

“You got it.” Cannova steadied his sight on the target and fired a full salvo of nineteen high explosive rockets into the middle of Hung's flanking patrol, taking out half of them. Bodies were blown into the air like shredded rag dolls. Those that escaped death were dazed and wounded, and tried to run back into the jungle. A long burst from the Huey's 7.62mm Gatling guns finished them off.

“Crawler, that group north of you is history.”

Chan had already moved into the clearing with his half of the team, and was boarding the lead chopper before Python Two completed his strafing run. He took a head count: “Whitfield, Ostlund, Tanaka, McQueen, Brown...Brown! Where the hell is Brown?”

“He wouldn’t leave sir.” McQueen answered, grinning impishly...said something about not letting Kracek hog all the glory. I gave him my M-16 and a few grenades.”

“You what? Never mind.” Chan shouted over the noise of the rotating chopper blades: “This is it Steve, get us the hell out of here!”

Whitfield smiled at McQueen’s report. His men were acquitting themselves on the ground with the same fighting spirit they have always demonstrated in the air. Indeed, Brown’s selfless act of courage was a confirmation of the faith he had always had in the man—to one day overcome his personal demons and realize his true potential. Nothing is more gratifying to him than to see one of his men achieve that kind of breakthrough.

Morris lifted off before Chan could finish his sentence. He climbed out high and left and re-checked his armament switches on. “Python Two, Lead, bring it in. I’ve got you covered.”

Cannova was already on the way, and zeroed in on a spot south of the one his leader just vacated, out of the direct line of fire.

When Than saw the second helicopter land he knew time was running out. Despite the intense exchange of small arms fire, he was slowly gaining ground on the remainder of the rescue team.

Kracek saw what was happening. "Python, we need help. The VC are forty meters due west of our position and closing on us. Fifteen seconds after this transmission unload everything you've got."

"Will do. Good luck."

Kracek looked over at Garrett and Saldana. "Go, we'll be right behind you." With no time to argue they ran into the clearing, laying down more smoke as they sprinted to the second Huey, while Brown, Kracek, and White, standing shoulder to shoulder, sprayed the jungle in front of them with their M-16's to keep Than and his men at bay. Just before the fifteen seconds elapsed they simultaneously pulled the pins from their hand grenades, lobbed them into their attackers and ran like hell. The jungle literally exploded behind them as they charged into the clearing.

The combined explosive force of the grenades and Python One's rockets created a reinforced shock wave that knocked Kracek off balance. White caught him by the collar before he could go down, never breaking stride. They were already through the smoke screen Garrett and Saldona laid down when the second

rocket volley hit closer to the jungle's edge. They dove into the chopper just as Python One opened up with his guns. It should have stopped what was left of Than's platoon from continuing the chase until Two was in the air.

"We're all in Frank," Garrett shouted, "let's go." Cannova didn't answer and the chopper didn't move. "Frank!" He called again, even louder. Still no response. He looked into the cockpit and saw him slumped in his seat. "Christ Almighty, he's been hit! Now what?"

Instinctively, Kracek scrambled into the vacant left seat. "I've got it. Somebody get Frank in the back. John, take his seat."

Without hesitation, Brown climbed into the right seat, a look of utter disbelief on his face. "No offense, Kracek, but when did you check out in the Huey?"

"Never did...flew it a couple of times though."

"Couple of times. Are you shittin' me?"

"No, but don't worry, I can fly anything with wings." Kracek quickly familiarized himself with the Huey's cockpit layout and controls while Brown pondered his last remark.

"But this chopper doesn't have any wings," came Brown's delayed response.

“Sure it does, John. they just move around a lot.” Kracek smiled, not out of confidence, but over the sober realization that they had no other option. Either he flew this strange bird, or they would have to walk home; and he had his fill of walking.

Before an incredulous Brown could respond he was thrown back against his seat. They rose only a few feet in the air before coming down hard. The Huey’s controls were more sensitive than Kracek anticipated. He wouldn’t make the same mistake a second time. But before he could try again, a bloodied figure materialized from out of the smoke, with his AK-47 leveled straight at the cockpit.

Brown eyes go wide in disbelief. “It’s Than. How in the hell did he survive everything Python One threw at them?”

“You know him?” Kracek asked.

“Yeah. He’s the commander of the VC patrol that captured us.”

Staggering forward on will power alone, the badly wounded Than stopped within ten meters of the unmoving helicopter and fixed his gaze on Kracek, to whom he was inexplicably drawn. *Brown, I know, but this man...can it be?* The words reverberated in his clouded mind as though he were listening to himself speak in a dark tunnel. *Can this be the same man I faced in that rice paddy?*

While the incredible dream-like scene played itself out before them, Kracek kept his finger poised on the gun trigger. “It is him,” he uttered in disbelief. The words barely left his lips, when the exhausted apparition facing him lowered his weapon in a eerie slow-motion replay of their first confrontation.

Images of it flashed before Than’s eyes like a malfunctioning movie projector, transporting him from past to present to past in a dizzying whirl until he, overcome by his wounds, mercifully lost consciousness and slumped to the ground. Kracek took a deep breath and let his finger slide from the trigger.

Why did I hesitate? He asked himself. *He could have killed us.* But there was no time to analyze what had just happened. Getting the Huey into the air, and keeping it there, was his first and only concern. Later, in the quiet solitude of his room, he would revisit that moment and, perhaps, find his answer.

Fascinated by the unreal “connection” that existed between the two men, Brown could not believe what he was seeing—perhaps, because it was beyond comprehension. “Jesus, Viktor, why didn’t you just shoot the son-of-a-bitch?”

Kracek looked at him curiously. “It’s complicated, John.”

From their aerial perch, Steve Morris and his co-pilot had a front row seat to the unfolding drama. They saw what was left of the Vietcong platoon charge into the clearing towards Cannova’s

aircraft, and strafed them with their Gatling gun. Several of them went down. The others faded into the jungle—all but one man.

Ignoring the barrage of lead raining down upon him, that man charged the grounded chopper, using the smoke laid down by Garrett and Saldana for cover. In a last ditch effort to stop him before he could reach the grounded Huey, Morris fired blindly into the smoke. He missed...so he thought. “Damn, I lost him.”

Miraculously, Than emerged from the smoke, but was now too close to Cannova’s chopper for Morris to risk another shot. He watched helplessly as the VC leader raised his weapon. “No, it can’t end here...not like this. Why doesn’t Frank lift off?”

Before he could key his mike to ask, he saw the man facing an armed Huey lower his AK-47 and fall to the ground. “I did hit him,” Morris said, taking no satisfaction from it. “Python Two, this is Lead, what’s the problem?”

“Frank was hit...lost a lot of blood.”

“Jesus, it’s Kracek! Frank was hit.” Morris repeated it out loud, as if hearing it again would make it sound more real.

“Python Two, Lead, can you fly that thing?”

“I’ve been asked that before...time we found out.”

40

Formation Recovery

Kracek pushed the throttle forward and cautiously lifted the Huey into the air, applying the same light control technique he would use in the F-100 for an instrument approach. This time it stayed put. He looked at Brown and smiled. “Anything with wings...”

Brown didn’t look convinced. “Right. Just keep your eyes on the road or we’ll both be sprouting them. Python One is at ten o’clock high.”

“Got him...Lead, Two is joining on your right.”

“Roger Two. Keep it wide and high. Our course to Bien Hoa is zero four seven degrees from the Can Tho Tacan. ETA, forty five minutes.”

“Roger that. How’s our VIP?”

“Came through it without a scratch.”

Whitfield was listening over his headset and watched Kracek move into position as though he were flying a fighter. “He flies that chopper like he’s got a thousand hours in it. If I didn’t know better, I’d wonder what he’s been doing in his spare time.”

“Whatever it is, Colonel, it’s paying off now,” Morris replied.

“That it is,” Whitfield acknowledged.

“Python, go channel seven.”

“Two, roger.”

“Python check in.”

“Two’s on.”

“Paddy Control, this is Python, we’re four miles north of Can Tho at three thousand feet. Request vector to Bien Hoa.”

“We have a good paint, Python. Maintain present heading. The field is VFR, with two thousand five hundred feet scattered, winds calm. Cleared to Paris Control at your discretion.”

Seventeen minutes later Morris switched the flight over to channel six. “Paris, this is Python...squawking ident, over.”

“Copy your squawk. Maintain heading.”

“Be advised, we are declaring an emergency. Python Two has wounded aboard. Request ambulance and crash crew.”

“Roger that...call field in sight.”

Five miles out, Morris made the call. “Python has the field in sight.”

“Roger, you’re cleared to tower frequency...Paris out.”

Morris switched the flight to channel two. “Bien Hoa tower, Python is four miles southwest of the base.”

Lafitte was on duty, as was Major Thompson and Sergeants Donnelly and Steinman. She had the mike. “Python, this is Bien Hoa tower, cleared to land on the helo pad in front of base ops. Ambulance and crash vehicles are standing by.”

“Negative, tower. Request a formation approach from a two mile final at five hundred feet. We’ll land in the grass at midfield with my wingman on the right.”

The unusual request took Lafitte by surprise. She looked at Thompson, who nodded his approval. “Roger,” she replied, “you’re cleared as requested. Active runway two-seven, altimeter setting 3-0.1-0. Call final at two miles.”

“Roger that.” Re-keying his mike, Morris instructed: “Python Two, move it in a little closer. We’ll land in formation, fighter style.”

Kracek eased it in closer, but maintained a comfortable separation between the rotating blades. He also positioned himself at a thirty degree angle back and slightly above Python One's rotor plane. "How does this look?"

"Perfect. Hold that pose until we touchdown."

"You got it. Not exactly a tactical approach, but it'll do."

"What did he mean by that, Colonel?" Morris asked over the intercom.

"It's an insider joke...tell you about it later."

Lafitte recognized Kracek's voice. "It's Viktor, I mean, Captain Kracek." She almost spilled her coffee. "I didn't know he was back."

"You and me both." Thompson said. "When they briefed us, they never mentioned his involvement—flying an Army chopper no less. I've learned to expect the unexpected from him, but this...this one is off the charts."

Viktor turned to his co-pilot with a feigned expression of hurt. "You hear that, John, I don't think he trusts me to land this bird on the ramp."

"Yeah, I wonder why? You'd think that after a whole forty minutes at the controls of an aircraft you're not checked out in he'd have a little more confidence in you."

“You would, wouldn’t you?” Kracek held up his right hand, a big smile on his face.

Brown slapped it hard. “Now, for Christ’s sake, keep both hands on the ‘wheel’ until we’re on the ground.” Even Brown had to crack a smile. But, it wasn’t over yet, not until the skids touched the grass. The next few minutes would decide their fate.

Approaching the field from the south, Morris turned right to parallel the active runway. “Tower, Python turning downwind. Request clearance to descend to one thousand feet.”

“Roger, Python, you’re cleared to one thousand. Call turning base.” Lafitte could feel the apprehension and excitement building within her. She wasn’t alone. The eyes of everyone in the tower were riveted on the two aircraft about to turn base.

Morris began a descending left turn and made the call: “Python turning base.” He continued the descent in the turn and rolled out on final at five hundred feet. “Python on final with two for a full stop formation landing.”

“We have you in sight Python...cleared all the way.”

“This is a switch,” Thompson said, lowering his binoculars. “It’s usually Kracek doing the leading. Then, who would have imagined him landing at my airfield in an Army helicopter?”

He looked over at Donnelly and Steinman as though they had the answer. They just shrugged their shoulders. Donnelly was squeezing a four leafed shamrock sealed in plastic that he always kept with him for luck, while Steinman nervously fingered the six-pointed star he wore around his neck.

“Python Two, this is Lead, you’re looking good. Hold that position until we touch down.”

“Roger. I think I’m beginning to get a feel for this whirlybird.”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute.” Morris started down final at rate of descent that would put them over the runway threshold at not more than fifty feet. Then, he skillfully decreased his descent and approach speed to land at mid-field with zero forward motion and zero sink rate—a textbook approach.

Kracek touched down a split second later. “Nicely done, Python.”

“Thanks, you took the words right out of my mouth.” Morris looked at his co-pilot. “Can you believe this guy? He pulls off a picture perfect formation approach and landing in an aircraft he’s never flown before and he compliments me.”

Before they could ‘throttle off’ the medics were already rushing under the rotating blades to retrieve the wounded. Cannova was carried out on a stretcher. Thanks to the first aid efforts of Garrett and Saldana he was still alive. The surgeons would do the rest.

A stubborn White wouldn’t get in the ambulance until he was ordered to by Garrett. “But it’s only a scratch, Lieutenant. I don’t need no ambulance.”

“For Christ’s sake, Andy, just go with them. At least let the Doc take the freakin’ bullet out.”

“Is that an order, sir?”

“No, damn it!”

“Then I’ll go.” White hopped into the ambulance, grinning from ear to ear. Garrett shook his head and smiled. He had nothing but admiration and respect for the big man, and wished the “Berets” had more like him.

Not until Kracek cut the engine did Brown allow himself to relax. “Don’t let this go to your head Viktor, but that was the coolest piece of flying I’ve ever seen.”

“Thanks, John. It’s amazing what you can do when you have no other choice.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before,” Brown said, recalling Whitfield’s words when they sprinted into the jungle to evade the VC patrol.

Lafitte, meanwhile, was anxiously watching the unfolding melodrama from the Tower. She saw the medics carry one man off in a stretcher, and another figure—a big man in a camouflage uniform—reluctantly follow him into the ambulance. More men got off both aircraft, all similarly dressed and heavily armed but one. He was wearing a flight suit. Through her binoculars she could see who it was. “It’s Colonel Whitfield. They got him out.”

“Damned if they didn’t.” Thompson said. “Score one for our guys.”

She saw a second man in a flying suit step off the other Huey. “Brown, they got Brown too.”

Everyone in the tower let out a loud cheer. Donnelly and Steinman gave each other high five’s, and Major Thompson—in a gesture totally out of character—grabbed a startled Lafitte and gave her a big hug. She hugged him right back.

As they were celebrating, another man stepped out of the same aircraft Brown was on. He was also in camouflage—his face unrecognizable under the black grease paint. Yet, he seemed familiar. There was something about the way he carried himself; how, despite the frenzied activity going on around him, it appeared as though he were standing in the eye of a storm.

“Viktor...is it you?” She heard herself ask. In a voice filled with excitement, she answered her own question. “It is! But how? What are you doing in that uniform...flying that helicopter?”

Thompson was moved by her unabashed outpouring of feelings. He felt embarrassed, as though he were invading her privacy, yet, could not take his eyes off her. He was fascinated by the wide-ranging display of emotions that swept across her lovely face; emotions of joy, relief, pride, and love. *Beautiful and poised, yet so vulnerable*, he thought.

As the tears welled up in her eyes his heart went out to her—just as it did when he sent his only daughter off to college the summer before he left for Vietnam. The same fatherly compassion he felt then, for a daughter he loved beyond measure, he was feeling now for a young woman he barely knew. “Why don’t you ask him yourself, Lieutenant?”

“What?” She was still in shock.

“I said, ask him yourself...go on down. We can handle things here for awhile without you. Go, before you miss him.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you.” She gave him another hug before running out. The look in her eyes was all the thanks he needed.

He suddenly remembered he was not alone in the control room, and turned to catch Donnelly and Steinman looking at him with huge smiles on their faces. “Okay you two, you can wipe those shit-eating grins off your ugly mugs. She wasn’t going to be any good to us for at least an hour anyway. I don’t want to hear a word about this outside the tower.”

“Yes sir,” they answered in unison.

“The old man does have a soft spot in his heart.” Donnelly whispered to Steinman.

“I heard that, Sergeant...don’t count on it.” Thompson turned away before they could see the smile on his face.

Renee hurried down the empty staircase as though in a trance, her heart pounding against her chest. At the bottom, she threw open the door to the flight line and searched for him amidst the hectic scene unfolding on the runway infield. “Viktor, where are you?”

The ambulance and crash vehicles had driven off, replaced by a van, staff car and pickup truck. Chan's men quickly boarded the van. He was about to join them when he felt a hand on his shoulder, Whitfield's. "Captain Chan, before you leave, I'd like a few words with you and your men."

"Yes sir, we're all yours."

Whitfield looked around the van into each of their darkened faces. "I can't let you men go without thanking you properly; although a simple thank you is hardly enough for what you did today. Were it not for you, Captain Brown and I would be rotting away in a North Vietnamese prison for the duration of the war.

"In a military career spanning three wars I've never seen a more skilled, or more courageous group of soldiers; nor have I ever been more proud of wearing the uniform. You not only gave us back our freedom, you reaffirmed my belief that the fighting men of today are every bit the equal of their predecessors. Once again, as inadequate as the words are, thank you."

"Amen to that Colonel," Brown said. He had suspected why Whitfield was going over to the van, and followed him.

“Colonel Whitfield, believe me when I say the pleasure was all ours. You and your pilots have always been there for us when we needed air support and, on more than one occasion, literally pulled our butts out of the fire. We owed you big time, and we’re grateful for the opportunity to repay the debt.”

Chan then stood at attention, joined by his men. Without command they saluted in unison. Whitfield and Brown returned their salutes and watched them drive off.

Kracek, meanwhile, had been discussing the finer points of the approach and landing with Steve Morris when he heard a familiar voice call his name. It was Major Pitts. “Christ, just when I thought the worst of my day was over.”

“Friend of yours?” Steve asked.

Kracek looked at him, unsmiling. “More like a distant cousin.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a few of those.” Steve admitted.

“Captain Kracek, where in hell did you come from?” Pitts demanded to know, as he approached them. “What did you think you were doing, flying an Army helicopter?”

Kracek was in no mood to put up with the slightest criticism from this little man with nothing better to do than annoy him.

“Major, your question is about as relevant as you.”

Pitt's face went livid; his whole body quivered with rage.

"Goddamn you, Kracek. You can't talk to me like that. I'll have you court-martialed. I'll...I'll have you grounded."

"A court-martial I can take, Major, but grounding? That's going a little too far." Kracek said it as a joke, but there was more truth in it than he would ever admit.

Before the thoroughly flustered Pitts could recover from his anxiety attack, Whitfield and Brown returned to join the fray. None of them saw the General when he walked up. He announced himself. "What the devil's going on here? Court-martial, grounding? If any of that is done, Major, it won't be by you!"

Pitts snapped to attention and saluted, visibly shaken. "General Simmons, I...I didn't know you were here, sir."

"That's obvious. Now, I suggest you leave us."

"But sir, I..."

"You heard the General, Major," Whitfield snapped. "Get back to operations. We'll talk about this when I get there." His stern rebuke unintentionally saved Pitts from further embarrassment.

"Yes sir." Pitts started back to the pickup, but before he could get in he was called again by Whitfield. He turned around with an apprehensive look on his pathetic face.

"Leave the truck."

An dejected Pitts started to say something, but thought better of it. He simply turned and walked away, shoulders hunched forward.

“Colonel, I couldn’t have handled that better myself.” Simmons smiled as he said it, then extended his hand. “It’s good to have you back, Bill.”

“It’s good to be back, sir.” Whitfield’s handshake was smothered by the General’s bear hug.

He greeted Kracek and Brown, in the same manner. “Captain, when did you check out in the Huey?”

“Never did, sir, not until today. I couldn’t have done it without Captain Brown’s help.” Kracek winked at his co-pilot.

“Don’t let him kid you, General, I was half in shock the whole time. But it was one hell of a ride, and I wouldn’t trade it for all the “Top Gun” trophies in the world. For me, that’s saying a lot.” Brown looked at Kracek and returned the wink.

“Yes, I know. I thought I had seen it all too, but this little stunt...well, I’m proud of you both.” He shook their hands warmly.

“Thank you, sir, but the guys who really deserve the accolades just drove off in that van,” Kracek said.

“Yes, and they will be duly recognized for what they did today. I also know about your part in this Viktor, and what you and Brown both did to help pull it off.”

“You knew, sir?”

“There’s not much I don’t know about what goes on in my command son, especially a high profile mission like this. I was aware of it before you and the team reached the drop zone.

“You were?”

“Of course. But, by then, it was too late to turn you back—even if I had wanted to,” Simmons said, with a wry smile.

The look on Kracek’s face made words unnecessary, and Simmons didn’t wait for them. “Of course, you know that your participation in this can’t be made public. There will be no medals, no trips to Washington, and definitely no encore appearance on the Johnny Carson show.”

“Yes sir, I know, but the only reward I need is standing right next to you.” Kracek looked at Whitfield, but his eyes were drawn to a familiar figure running towards them from across the ramp.

They all turned to see what attracted his attention.

“Isn’t that...?” Whitfield couldn’t remember her name.

“Renee...yes sir.”

“Well, why are you standing here Captain? The least you can do is meet the lady half way. You can join us later.”

“Thank you, sir,”

“No, Viktor, thank you.” Suddenly realizing that he may have just overstepped his authority, Whitfield turned in time to see the General’s smile and nod of approval.

He ran to meet her amidst a ramp full of aircraft from another era. As they clung tightly to each other, an A1E (a prop-driven fighter of World War II vintage) started its big radial engine a few rows away, creating a blast of swirling air and loud noise. They took little notice of either. “Viktor, I thought you were in Washington. How? Why...?”

“I’ll tell you about it later.” He pulled her to him. As they embraced, a flight of three F-100’s pitched out above. Their wings sliced through the dense morning air, painting sweeping white arcs against a canvas of clear blue sky in a beautifully synchronized aerial ballet.

For the men watching, it was a show as timeless in its beauty as “Swan Lake.”

“They’re ours,” Whitfield observed, noting the Black Falcon logo on the tails.

“Yes sir,” Brown said, “and they’ve never looked better.”

The End