
DEVIL'S GUARD
THE REAL STORY
Explodes the myths about Nazis in Vietnam and tells it as it was
ERIC MEYER
DEVIL'S GUARD THE REAL STORY
ERIC MEYER
DEVIL'S GUARD BLOOD AND IRON
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DEVIL'S GUARD BLOOD & SNOW
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DEVIL'S GUARD COUNTERATTACK
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DEVIL'S GUARD VIETNAM
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DEVIL'S GUARD AFGHANISTAN
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# DEVIL'S GUARD
# THE COMPLETE SERIES BOX SET

By Eric Meyer

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# DEVIL'S GUARD BLOOD & SNOW

by

Eric Meyer

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# FOREWORD

This is a story that for a number of reasons, was almost never told. The epic victory of the Soviet Armies at Stalingrad was an event as momentous to the Germans as it was to the Russians, though for different reasons. Five months later, the greatest tank battle in the history of armoured warfare took place at Kursk, resulting in the destruction of much of Germany's irreplaceable armour. Yet in between these two great events there were many bloody battles, much of them taking place in and around Kharkov where constant attack and counterattack took its toll of the warring armies. It was into this maelstrom that Jurgen Hoffman began his military career and this story has been compiled from notes taken during that time. Incomplete notes, to be sure, and much of the surrounding material had to be completed from a great deal of separate and sometimes unrelated research. Yet what has emerged is an account that is essentially correct in its treatment of the war on the Eastern Front, capturing the brutality, the futility and man's inhumanity to man. There is also the involvement of the Sicherheitsdienst and the Geheime Staatspolizei, the Gestapo, the omniscient organisation whose shadowy tentacles reached to the very borders of Germany's conquests, even to the battlefront.

This is the first posting for Untersturmfuhrer Jurgen Hoffman, a posting that almost never takes place when his train is attacked by Russian fighter-bombers. Yet he survives and goes on to find that he has all of the necessary skills to make a ruthless soldier. Suicidal bravery, a cool head under fire and the determination to press home a stalled attack if he feels it has a chance of success. There were soldiers like Hoffman in every army that participated in the Second World War and there have been in war from the dawn of history until the present time. Men who possess that uncanny, natural ability to be hard, skilled fighters yet manage to do so without losing their own humanity. In telling this story, perhaps it would not be overreaching to suggest that I am telling the story of many of them and many yet to come. Soldiers do not start wars, politicians do. Soldiers only fight them and let us hope that those who do may fight with honour and respect for the lives of those who are but innocent bystanders.

# INTRODUCTION

After the fall of Stalingrad, the Soviet Armies fought with renewed vigour on the Eastern Front. Not only was their morale lifted by the defeat of von Paulus' Sixth Army, but they were constantly reinforced by new supplies of weapons, armour and even whole new armies. The T34 tank had made its debut on the battlefield for the first time and was seen to be the weapon that could compete on the battlefield with the largest of the German Panzers, especially after the new 75mm gun was fitted. Yet the Germans were far from beaten. They perceived, correctly, that a substantial part of the force that was bled dry at Stalingrad was composed of inferior foreign troops, Italians, Hungarians, Romanians and other non-German nationalities. To the battlefields of the Ukraine they brought fresh troops and armour, in particular the debut of the much-awaited Tiger tank that was prophesied to be the deciding factor in future armoured confrontations. These factors were the background to the conflict that took place around Kharkov and Kursk, both important transport hubs and railheads that the Russians and Germans alike viewed as essential strategic targets.

There were two other factors of course that made such a difference, the Soviet and German leaders, Stalin and Hitler. Stalin had wisely realised, somewhat belatedly, that the battlefield should be under the control of his generals rather than himself, major historical figures like Zhukov and Timoshenko. On the opposing side, Hitler was still very much in control of his armies seeing himself as the military genius that his sycophantic inner circle constantly assured him he was. German Army Group South was under the command of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein and included such charismatic leaders as Paul Hausser, commander of the First SS Panzer Corps. They were constantly hampered by Hitler's irrational orders to hold ground at all costs and several times were forced to risk debacles such as the one that occurred at Stalingrad, when Hitler refused to allow whole armies to withdraw to avoid encirclement. The resultant chaos could only benefit the Soviets, on the German side the commanders often risked demotion and even imprisonment for simply taking the correct military decisions to avoid their troops being wiped out.

The result was that the battle continually swirled between attack and counter attack. Cities were taken, lost, and retaken and all the time the German forces were constantly being bled of vital men and equipment. The Soviets lost substantially more men and equipment, but were in a position to replace it, which the Germans were not. Into this potent and lethal mix the

young Jurgen Hoffman arrives, a newly commissioned Waffen SS officer who has only one goal, to be a successful fighting soldier. In order to pursue his ambition he has more than just the Soviets to fight. He becomes embroiled in the machinations of the SD and the Gestapo as they follow their own dark agenda. The result is an epic struggle as he fights to defend himself, his friends and even the girl he falls in love with, from the dark forces of both sides that threaten to engulf the Eastern Front in a cauldron of agony and blood.

# CHAPTER ONE

*‘Without consideration of "traditions" and prejudices, Germany must find the courage to gather our people and their strength for an advance along the road that will lead this people from its present restricted living space to new land and soil, and hence also free it from the danger of vanishing from the earth or of serving others as a slave nation.’*

*Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf*

I straightened my tunic as the train steamed into the station. I felt slightly nervous, it was my first assignment, to the Waffen SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment Deutschland, part of the famous Das Reich Division. The platform was crowded with men, all soldiers, like me, they were heading for the Eastern Front. Perhaps I should have been rather more nervous, if the stories coming from the numerous returning soldiers, many wounded, were to be believed. But at nineteen I was only keen to join my unit and get into the thick of the fighting. Untersturmfuhrer Jurgen Hoffman, the three pips of my new rank on my collar tab, the lighting runes of the Waffen SS on the other. I brushed a tiny piece of lint from my field grey tunic, checked that everything was in order. Jackboots gleaming, trousers correctly aligned, belt buckle adorned with our motto ‘Meine Ehre heisst Treue’, my honour is my loyalty, polished metal shining, black leather belt and holster containing my issued Walther PPK automatic pistol. I felt the rim of my officer’s cap, it seemed correct, then the train shuddered to a stop. I picked up my bag and was about to board when a voice stopped me.

“Herr Untersturmfuhrer?”

I looked around, irritated at the intrusion and my spirits dropped a few notches. Damn. An officer was standing there, an SS-Sturmbannfuhrer, but no, not SS. I checked his badges, he was SD, the secret intelligence division of the SS, the Sicherheitsdienst. I clicked my heels and stood to attention.

"Herr Sturmbannfuhrer?"

He was older than me, much older, and held a cane. Wounded, perhaps?

"Could you assist me with my case?"

I looked down, there was a large, heavy-looking leather case next to him.

"Of course, Sir."

I struggled to drag his case onto the train and found a vacant compartment in the officers' section, he followed me in, limping. I pushed the case up to the luggage rack, put my bag up with it, and then sat down. It was rotten luck to have bumped into an SD Major, a policeman or maybe a spy with whom I would presumably have to spend the journey all the way to Russia. Unless he got off the train before, of course, with his limp he would not be going near the Front. Maybe the Fuhrer Headquarters in Eastern Prussia? That seemed a real possibility.

"Your first command?"

He was staring at me, I sat to attention, whatever that was. Anyway, I sat erect.

"Yes, Sir."

"And who will benefit from your undoubted fighting qualities, Untersturmfuhrer?"

Was he mocking me? He reminded me of the old police sergeant in my hometown, he used to speak to me like that when I was about eight years old.

"Second Battalion, SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment Deutschland, Das Reich Division, Sir."

"Ah yes, near Kharkov."

I was surprised, how would he know that? But of course, he was SD. "Yes, Sir."

As I studied him more closely, I saw that he was even older than I had thought, maybe in his fifties.

"Relax, I won't be joining the fighting."

How the hell did he know what I was thinking? Had the SD invented some kind of mind reading technique, perhaps one of the secret weapons the Fuhrer was always referring to?

“Sir, I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Untersturmfuhrer, I used to be a police inspector in Berlin before I was transferred to the SD. It’s my job to understand what people are thinking, it’s what I get paid for.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I felt like a dummy, constantly repeating the same ‘Yes, Sir’, but as a junior officer I didn’t know what else to say, so I played safe. Fortunately, he put his head back and started to doze.

I looked around at my surroundings, at the compartment. It bore little resemblance to the railway carriages I’d travelled in since childhood, they had been smart, clean and in good repair. This one was shabby, ill maintained, a crack in one of the windows, torn upholstery and the floor hadn’t been cleaned in a long time. There was a bloodstain on the panelling to the side of the window, I knew that these trains were used to bring casualties back from the Eastern Front. Was it as bad as some people said it was, a mincing machine that sucked in good German soldiers and spat out bleeding, broken men, and corpses? Surely not, any battlefront that was occupied by SS Regiments would certainly be an example of good efficient soldiering, enough to frighten off any enemy that came near. I had learned that much in basic training and before that during my service in the Hitler Youth. Our Waffen SS units were the finest soldiers in the world, our troopers were legendary in every theatre of war that they had fought in, heroes of the newsreels that we watched in the cinemas. As a new officer, I was determined not to let them down, to devote myself absolutely to the service of the Fuhrer, the Reich and the SS. But I glanced uneasily again at the bloodstain.

“Yes, it is as bad as that, young man. It’s a very bloody business.”

He had woken up and was speaking to me.

“Sir, I’ve heard the rumours and I don’t believe them, there’s no way the Russians could inflict those kinds of defeats on our armies.”

He smiled. “I can see you believe the propaganda. Listen, ordinarily you would be right. A Russian division tangles with one of our divisions and gets defeated, most of its men killed or wounded, they’re no match for us, are they? Agreed?”

I nodded.

“So then the Soviets bring up another division. They get beaten, then another and another. Until we run out of ammunition and suffer so many

casualties that we have to pull back."

"So you are saying that they are winning?"

He thought for a moment. "I am saying that they are a hundred kilometres nearer Berlin than they were a week ago. Draw your own conclusions."

It could not be true! Yet I couldn't argue with an SD Sturmbannfuhrer, so I didn't reply.

"You are Untersturmfuhrer, what?"

"Hoffman, Sir, Jurgen Hoffman."

"Good, my name is SD-Sturmbannfuhrer Walter von Betternich. Strange we may be serving in the same area, I have been assigned to investigate a little matter in the Kharkov theatre of operations. A murder, in fact."

"A murder? That seems, well, unusual in a war zone, there must be more than enough killings."

"Crime is crime, my young friend, it is no respecter of geography. Even in theatres of war."

He lost interest then and dozed off again. I went to the door and looked out into the narrow passageway, it was lined with soldiers of all ranks, talking, drinking, some playing cards. Some were silent, contemplating their fate, no doubt. The train lurched to a stop at a wayside station and more soldiers climbed aboard. None came near my compartment, the uniform of an SD Sturmbannfuhrer was a powerful deterrent. I could see troops loading boxes and crates onto the train, there must have been two hundred men passing them from hand to hand in a long chain. I had some time to spare so I got out onto the platform to stretch my legs. At the front of the train, the engine was letting out a small amount of steam as they kept up the boiler pressure. There was a four-barrelled Flak gun behind the coal tender, another at the back of the train manned by steel helmeted Flak gunners, anxiously scanning the sky for signs of a sudden attack. As I watched, they swung the barrels around constantly, searching for a target. There was a sudden flurry of alarm when three aircraft appeared, flying quite low, but they were ours, a Junkers JU52 accompanied by two Messerschmitt 109s. It could have been the Fuhrer, of course, he flew in a JU52 and always with an escort of 109s. I could imagine the gunners hurriedly taking their fingers off the triggers. An accident of that kind, to fire at the Fuhrer's personal aircraft, would be unthinkable. However, maybe it was just another Nazi bigwig, it was

impossible to tell.

I got back on the train and walked back to my compartment, the SD Sturmbannfuhrer was still alone. I was about to sit down when there was another flurry of excitement in the corridor, a hubbub of excited shouting and noise erupted. I went out to see what the fuss was about, a young SS private approached me excitedly.

“It’s Stalingrad, Sir.”

The epic siege on the Volga, the talk of all Germany, von Rundstedt’s heroic but encircled Sixth Army fighting off several Soviet armies, supplied only by the Luftwaffe flying around the clock missions to take them food and ammunition.

“Yes, what is it? Have they broken out, is it a victory?”

“They’ve surrendered, Stalingrad has fallen!”

It was as if I suddenly stood in an icy rainstorm. It was impossible, surely, the largest army that our German armed forces had ever put into the field.

“Are you sure?”

“Certain, yes. They are marching off into captivity, it’s on the news from Berlin. They’re playing those Wagner tunes with the announcements, you know, the funeral marches. It’s terrible.”

I shook him off and went into my compartment. Von Betternich looked up.

“Stalingrad?”

I nodded. “Yes, Sir, apparently they’ve surrendered.”

“Of course they have, what else could they do?”

I looked at him astonished. “They could have fought on like German soldiers.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Without food, without ammunition, in thirty degrees below zero with no warm clothing, how would they do that?”

“But Reichsminister Goering assured them that he would keep them supplied by air.”

He smiled. “Then it would seem that the Reichsminister was not telling them the whole truth, would it not?”

I thought it wisest not to reply.

As the train rolled eastwards it started to get very cold, the train was heated but it wasn’t enough to cope with the plummeting temperatures. Even with my greatcoat on and inside the heated compartment I was shivering, I

began to understand the kind of problem they had faced in Stalingrad. And in Kharkov, perhaps, the new post where I was taking up my first command. Three times the train had to stop and wait in a siding while westbound trains passed us, all of them carrying casualties, thousands, tens of thousands of casualties, a tidal wave of human misery that had been generated by the Russian steamroller. Von Betternich didn't look at me once while they rolled past, he didn't need to. Without seeing a single shot fired, I was getting a firsthand glimpse of the progress of the war on the Russian Front. Finally, the train stopped at a small wayside station that had been converted into a military transit camp, I got off the train and stepped into my first experience of the Russian snows. It was the SD officer's destination too, I took down his leather case for him. He followed me, treading carefully in the snow with his walking cane. A soldier was waiting for him with a staff car flying the pennants of an SS Gruppenfuhrer, a Major General, von Betternich climbed in and was driven away. I looked around, unsure of where to go. It was chaos everywhere, a squadron of Tiger tanks was parked nearby under clumps of trees. There was a group of tents, that housed the soldiers who guarded the station in the middle of this freezing waste, the poor devils. I was surrounded by a seething mass of soldiers, what the hell was I to do, where was I to go? But as I hunted around in confusion, I heard a voice calling.
"Untersturmfuhrer Hoffman, Second Battalion, Deutschland Regiment, where are you, Sir?"

I looked around to see an SS NCO, an Oberschutze, calling my name.

"Here, over here," I waved desperately, trying to make myself seen over the roiling mass of uniformed soldiers. His eyes settled on me and he came over.

"Oberschutze Karl-Heinz Voss, Sir, I've brought you a lift to Regimental Headquarters."

There was no salute, no ceremony, he just grabbed my kitbag and walked off at a fast pace, I had to rush to catch up with him. He led the way to a Kubelwagen and threw my kitbag in the back.

"Jump in, Sir, HQ is about two kilometres away, you'll need to hold on tight, the track is pretty bumpy."

I climbed in and stared at him. He was one of Reichsfuhrer Himmler's elite troopers, a Waffen SS corporal. He was supposed to be the best of the best, the toughest, the fittest of our German racial elite. He didn't look it. He was very thin and he looked half-starved. He was also unshaven and wore

wire-framed glasses, his hair was long and greasy, unkempt. His uniform tunic was ragged, ripped and repaired in several places and clipped to the windshield of the Kubi was a very non-standard Soviet PPSh submachine gun. I recognised it from basic training, when we were shown a variety of captured enemy weapons. His uniform trousers were also non-standard, made of baggy, black leather tucked into what looked like paratroopers lace-up jump boots. In his belt, he carried no less than two pistols in open holsters, like a cowboy from one of those American films. He was like a creature from that Fritz Lang movie Metropolis. I was about to ask him about his appearance when all hell broke loose. He'd leaned forward to start the engine when a siren started to wail, voices shouted. The Flak cannons on the train started to fire, soldiers were running in fear and confusion, diving for cover, exhaust smoke appeared around the Tiger tanks in the nearby wood as they started their engines.

"Get out, get out!" Voss shouted. I was reaching for my kitbag when he dragged me out of the jeep and I followed him as he ran for the cover of some nearby heavy balks of railroad timber. As I threw myself down beside him, the first bomb exploded and I heard an aircraft engine revving hard to climb after its bombing run, I looked up and the next aircraft was already banking towards us to make its own attack.

"Sturmoviks," Voss told me. I nodded, understanding that he meant the Ilyushin Il-2 ground-attack aircraft that we'd learned about. The Il-2 was produced by the Soviets in vast quantities, it was certainly the single most common aircraft on the Russian Front, but we'd been told that they were no match for any of our fighters.

"Where are our aircraft, the Luftwaffe?"

He laughed. "Tied up somewhere else I expect, Sir. There are just too many of these Sturmoviks and we don't have enough fighters to deal with them."

Another bomb dropped nearby, then a third that hit one of the carriages of the train. Dozens of men were sheltering underneath it and when the sound of the aero engines had died away, I heard their screams distinctly.

"Corporal, we should go and help those men."

"You do that and you'll die," he snapped at me as if I was a stupid child. He held onto my tunic but I threw him off to run to help the wounded, just as all three of the Sturmoviks came back in for a strafing pass, bullets hammered all the way along the train and around the station. One of the Flak

guns scored a hit and a Soviet aircraft blew up in mid-air, but the others finished their attack, raking the ground with machine gun and cannon fire, then they flew away. I could still hear one or two screams, but they were fainter. They died out completely.

"I think they've gone, we need to get to HQ, Sir."

"Yes."

I felt like a fool, if I'd run to the train I would have been killed. Voss understood what I was thinking.

"They do that, Sir, drop the bombs and then come back in to machine gun the rescuers."

I got in the Kubi and Voss started up and drove away from the wreckage of the station. We bumped along country lanes, past two Field Police points where we both had to show our papers to grim faced Feldgendarmerie, resplendent in their silver gorgets. Both times we were waved on and soon we arrived at the chaos of SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment Deutschland. It was also the church and monastery of St Basil's, we were outside the town of Korenevo a few kilometres west of Kursk.

The commanding officer, Standartenfuhrer Werner Brandt had little time for me. His office was just inside the front door of the monastery, I clicked my heels and gave an immaculate salute, 'Heil Hitler', as regulations demanded, then stood waiting. He gave me a friendly wave. I'd been told he was thirty-five years old, he looked more like fifty, he was wearing field grey uniform trousers and a camouflage pattern jacket. The reversible kind that could be turned inside out to display the white surface on the outside for winter fighting. On his head he wore a Schiff, the side cap that all ranks of Army and SS troops sometimes wore as a more casual alternative to the regulation headgear. He carried an Erma, the MP38 machine pistol, slung over his chest and half a dozen spare ammunition pouches festooned on his belt. He displayed no visible rank insignia, which I thought strange.

"We're not big on formalities here, Hoffman. I'd cut that 'Heil Hitler' stuff if I were you, it's out of favour here, you see."

Did he mean the salute, or the Fuhrer? I thought it best not to ask.

"I've sent for your platoon senior NCO, Scharfuhrer Willy Mundt. I'm afraid your unit is detailed to carry out a reconnaissance mission, we're mounting a counterattack first thing in the morning and I need your men to do some scouting for us. Don't worry, Mundt will show you the ropes, can you handle it?"

“Yes, Sir.”

He nodded. “Good, you jump off at two am. Dismissed.”

I went to salute, then gave a more conventional army salute. It seemed strange, I had understood that joining SS Deutschland Regiment was an honour, I was to become part of an elite, crack unit of Panzer Grenadiers. I’d had visions of ranks of immaculately turned out troops, weapons, uniforms and equipment all smart and gleaming. Instead, I felt as if I had arrived in a partisans’ camp. The mixture of weapons and clothing was incredible, much of it wouldn’t have been out of place in a Russian unit. Scharfuhrer Willy Mundt nodded a greeting as I went outside, he was standing in the snow chatting to a trooper who glanced at me and then went on talking. Like Voss, he was anything but smartly turned out, an ill-fitting tunic with an old blanket wrapped around his shoulders, trousers patched with pieces of leather and jackboots covered with strips of some kind of animal fur. His face was hard, dark, etched with the experiences of a hard life, or maybe that was just too much time spent fighting on the Eastern Front. His eyes were squinted half-closed as if against the glare of the snow, when he looked at me they appeared to be empty of emotion, empty of soul. All at once I felt irritated, maybe he’d had some hard fighting here but it was time to get a grip on my first command.

“Scharfuhrer, don’t you salute an officer when he approaches?” I said sharply.

He grinned. “Well, Sir, if that’s what you want, of course.”

He gave a lazy salute, the trooper stood smiling.

I returned the salute. “Look, we’ll never beat the Russians without good discipline, it’s important to remember that, the Fuhrer has said so himself.”

They both roared with laughter.

“What are you laughing at?”

“The Fuhrer’s plan to beat the Russians with salutes,” Mundt replied. “Have you ever fought the Russians?” After an insolent pause. “Sir?”

Perhaps I’d deserved the put down and I felt embarrassed. These were veterans of the Winter War, I was just a newcomer, had yet to fire a shot in anger on the Eastern Front. I should have known better and held back. It was time to retrieve the situation.

“You’re right, I have not seen any action yet, Scharfuhrer. Believe me, I do know the record of this regiment, I have a lot to learn, I trust that as my platoon NCO you will help me.”

He nodded, mollified. “If you’re to stay alive you’ll need to learn mighty fast. Beating the Russians is not the first concern, Sir. Staying alive, that’s all you need to concern yourself with on this Front, at least for now. I’ll take you to meet the men, then you’ll need to draw equipment and a weapon from the quartermaster.”

He picked up my kitbag and led me across the snow-covered ground to the church, my platoon was camped inside, to the side of the main altar. There were ten men apart from Mundt.

“Ten? Where are the rest, Mundt?”

“Dead, Sir, for the most part, some were wounded and shipped back to the Reich, I doubt they’ll be back. I’m afraid this is it.”

I’d expected thirty men at least. Ten! I wondered how many Russians we were facing, but it wasn’t something to dwell on. The men nodded a greeting, none stood up or saluted, they all looked exhausted, ragged, half starved. Were these the elite standard-bearers of the Fuhrer’s shock troops? I could hardly believe it.

“I’ll introduce you to them individually later, Sir. First, I’ll get you kitted out. The platoon commander’s bed is here.”

He showed me an alcove separated from the main room by an old blanket.

“The previous platoon commander?”

“Dead, Sir. The Soviets were using a Maxim gun when we went in to attack, it took his head off, killed three of the men too, before we got it with a couple of grenades.”

He put down my kitbag and I took out my steel helmet and put away my cap. Somehow the smart, officer’s cap seemed out of place in this camp of scarecrows. Then we went to the quartermaster, an older SS Scharfuhrer who presided over the unit’s stores.

“Right, Untersturmfuhrer, you’ll need a weapon, most of the officers and men favour the Erma machine pistol, the CO wouldn’t be seen dead without one. Of course, we’ve got plenty of the Soviet PPSh, if you fancy one of those, but there is a danger you’ll be mistaken for the enemy carrying one of them.”

“I’ll take the MP38, Scharf.”

“Good choice. I’ll give you plenty of spare magazines, we’ve had so many casualties that weapons and ammunition are no problem.”

If he was trying to reassure me, he was failing miserably. He dragged

out a reversible camouflage tunic, the SS pattern with an attached hood there was also a pair of trousers to match. I picked up the tunic and noticed a bloodstain on the front, it had been washed but was still visible. Had this been worn by my unfortunate predecessor? If so, it hadn't done him any good. We went back to the church and I put on the white sided camouflage tunic and trousers. It was cold, bitingly cold and I was glad of the extra clothing. Feeling more like I belonged in this strange place, I went for a walk outside, my boots crunching in the snow. It was early evening and activity had slowed around the camp, most of the soldiers had disappeared inside their shelters.

Only the sentries were in view, stamping around to keep warm. They eyed me warily as I approached, but none offered salutes. I had no officer's insignia showing, they were hidden inside the winter camouflage, but perhaps in this dismal place it would have made no difference. Curiously, there was a small encampment off to one side of the HQ area, a group of monks sat around a blazing campfire. I approached one of the sentries.

"What's the story there?" I asked him, pointing to the monks.

"They own this place," he replied, "or at least they used to. When we took over, they refused to leave, even when the second in command, Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, threatened to have them shot."

I nodded and walked on, it was just one more oddity in this strange new world that I had arrived in. Monks in an SS camp! However, no doubt everything would become clearer as I got to know my way around, it was just a matter of time. I walked back to the church, overhead I could hear the droning of aircraft, the sentries looked up nervously but the planes didn't come near. I went to my billet and Mundt introduced me to the men who were sitting around sharing a bottle of brandy. Sturmmann Josef Beidenberg, Oberschutze Karl-Heinz Voss, the driver who had collected me from the station. Schutze Stefan Bauer and Schutze Dieter Merkel, then I lost track of the names. They seemed friendly enough and there was no standing on ceremony, little if any deferring to me as an officer. We were all Waffen SS, if there was to be any respect it would obviously have to be earned in combat. I remembered we were due to go out at two in the morning to scout the ground prior to the attack, it would be my first test in front of the men, I determined not to mess it up. I went behind the blanket screen and settled down to try and get a little rest, it had been a long and strange journey.

Someone was shaking me, for a moment I thought I was back at home

in Germany, then I sat up and felt the biting cold.

"It's time, Sir. We need to go very soon."

Scharfuhrer Mundt was staring down at me, he let go of my sleeve and stood up. "There's a mug of coffee for you and some bread, we're leaving in ten minutes."

I swallowed my embarrassment. I was in command of this platoon yet he was up and awake and I had been sound asleep. I was still fully dressed so I just got up and pushed the blanket aside. The men were clattering around, talking nervously, strapping on their webbing and checking their weapons.

"I thought you'd like a lie in, Sir, you had a long journey," Mundt smiled. I checked my watch, it was one thirty in the morning. He didn't seem to be making a joke. I guess I had enjoyed more sleep than the others before I was woken up, it had indeed been a tiring journey from Germany. I picked up my MP38 and strapped on my belt with the Walther in the holster. Mundt handed me a white webbing set.

"For the spare clips, you'll find them easier to carry."

I thanked him and strapped it on. Then he gave me a white pack. "This was Untersturmfuhrer Fieseler's, he won't need it now."

"Do officers normally carry a pack in this unit?"

"Yes."

He offered no other explanation and I pulled it over my shoulders. Mundt showed me the map.

"This is our objective, all we need to do is scout out the opposition and get back here and report. If we can bring back a prisoner, so much the better. No heroics, no shooting, ok, Sir?"

"Yes."

"I'd better lead, just follow me, you'll be fine."

I didn't feel fine, I felt like a lamb being led to the slaughter. Why the hell was I here? They didn't need me, I was just a passenger. But I was determined to learn so I kept quiet and followed the lead of the laconic Scharfuhrer. We went out past the sentries, Mundt leading, me behind him, then the rest of 'my' platoon. We walked quietly through the snow, no one talked, no one smoked, all I could hear was the crunch of our footsteps in the crisp white crust that covered the ground. We entered a wood and Mundt kept up the pace, only stopping every five minutes or so to listen for sounds of the enemy. Then we came out of the wood and I saw we were at the base of a low rise. Mundt pointed to two of the men and they went swiftly out to the

flanks, then we went forward again. We reached the top of the rise, there was no sign of the enemy. Or so I thought. He pointed to a clump of bushes about a hundred metres in front of us. I looked closely, nothing. I looked again and saw a tiny movement, it was the wisp of steam from warm breath meeting cold air. Mundt dropped to the ground and started crawling forward, it was a long, slow crawl. The two flankers were still invisible to me, I just followed his lead and crawled on towards, what? A machine gun nest, an observation post, maybe one or two shivering Soviet riflemen? Or the first in a formation of Soviet T34 tanks? Oh God, no, not on my first mission. We crawled nearer and I heard a muttered conversation, it sounded like Russian. We were within ten metres of the bushes when I saw two shadowy white shapes leap up, one from either side and descend on the enemy. There was the distinct sound of a struggle, a grunt as someone was struck, then silence.

"Come on, we're clear," Mundt whispered. He got up and ran forward and I joined him with the rest of the men. Two Soviets were in the foxhole, one of them dead with his throat slit, the other apparently unhurt but shaking with terror. He looked to be about my age, what struck me as odd was that he was wearing warm, padded winter clothing, much more suited to the conditions than we had been issued with. That was unexpected, I thought the Soviets were supposed to be more primitive than us, less well equipped.

"Look!" Mundt murmured, he was looking further ahead. I made out irregular shapes, slightly darker objects that stood out from the distant horizon. Tanks. They were about two kilometres away.

"Do you have any idea of how many?" I whispered to him.

"About forty, almost certainly T34s, that's our best guess."

"Shouldn't we get closer and make sure?"

"No. Unless you'd like to go and get yourself killed, Herr Untersturmfuhrer."

I realised I was making a fool of myself in my enthusiasm. But what if there were more tanks, wouldn't we also want to know how many infantry they had in support?

"We need to know, Scharfuhrer. I'll go forward and check it out, I'll need a volunteer to go with me, the rest of you can wait here."

There was silence for a moment, I could imagine their thoughts. A gung-ho new officer, fresh from training school, determined to get them all killed. I didn't care, I felt that it was important to bring back the intelligence.

"I'll go with you."

Sturmmann Josef Beidenberg, I remembered. “Thank you, Beidenberg. Let’s go.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, just climbed out of the foxhole and started creeping forward. Beidenberg was right behind me, I could hear his footsteps crunching in the snow. We were both going slowly, both nervous of hearing a sudden challenge from an unseen sentry, then the burst of gunfire that would scythe through us, but it didn’t come. We veered to the south of the line of tanks and worked our way around them, finding a path that led through some trees to give us cover. When we were behind the tanks we saw the Russian encampment, looming suddenly out of the night as the cloud drifted past and moonlight shone down on the steppe. There was at least a division of infantry camped in front of us with their vehicles, motor-rifle troops by the look of them, with towed mobile artillery and rocket launchers.

“I think that’s enough, Josef, we’ll get back and report what we’ve seen.”

“Sir.”

We retraced our steps, after fifty metres we almost ran into two Soviet soldiers. They were walking into the woods hand in hand, their intention obvious. Homosexuality was punished as severely in the Soviet armies as in ours. Both of the men were keeping watch on their own lines and didn’t notice us as we waited. We stood behind a tree and when they came abreast of us, I stepped out and simultaneously cocked my machine pistol, Beidenberg had a combat knife ready to use. Both put up their hands, even in the dark I could see that their faces had gone as white at the snow they were walking on.

“Do either of you speak German?”

One of them nodded. “I do,” he said shakily.

“Good. You are now our prisoners, if you make a sound you’ll both be killed. Clear?”

He nodded and explained it to his comrade who nodded eagerly.

“Let’s go, we need to get back as quickly as possible,” I said to Beidenberg. “Our people will need to question these two prisoners urgently.”

We walked quietly back the way we came to the south of the lines of T34s, each of us with a gun barrel pressed to the backs of the Russians. When we approached the foxhole, I called out softly to the platoon.

“This is Hoffman and Beidenberg coming in with two prisoners.”

“Very well.”

We joined the platoon and I at least had the satisfaction of seeing the men's awed faces as we displayed our two new prisoners, we now had three in all to take back for interrogation. Despite the cold, the misery and the uncertain start to my new command, I felt I had acquitted myself quite well. I wondered if I'd stay alive for long enough to build on it.

The CO, Standartenfuhrer Brandt was impressed, one of the prisoners turned out to be a Russian major, the other two were private soldiers and they were all led away for interrogation. He turned to me.

"Well done, Hoffman, a good start. Pity there are so many Russians in front of us, we'll have our work cut out. Muller, what's the word on the Panzers?"

Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, the second in command, answered immediately.

"HQ reports we have eleven Tigers operational. We also have a StuGIII that will be deployed as soon as we start the attack."

The StuGIII assault gun mounted a 75mm StuK37 gun and was a formidable tank killer, built on a Panzer chassis it was effective in a number of infantry and armour support roles. It was also known to be much more reliable than the sophisticated and heavily armoured Tiger tank, which could dominate the battlefield but had proved to be prone to breakdowns.

"Anything else?"

"A few mobile artillery pieces, that's about it. We're still waiting for the half-tracks to be delivered, so the Panzer Grenadiers will have to go in on foot."

Brandt grunted. "Again! It's not enough, Otto, not enough. What if those T34s break through our armour?"

"We've issued Panzerfausts to all units," Muller said hesitantly.

"Panzerfausts! What the hell next, do we start throwing rocks at them, we might as well?"But he nodded. "Forget I said that, Otto. If it comes to it, we'll use the Panzerfausts and hope for the best. Very well, get the men to their jump off points and we'll follow the Panzers in."

I joined my platoon waiting outside the church. We'd had a sleepless night after being assigned to the scouting mission and it looked as if the coming day was going to be an even harder one. No one had said joining the SS was going to be a picnic, though, so I'd have to get used to it. The men had brewed some coffee and I was given a steaming mug of the hot, rich mixture that bore little resemblance to any coffee I'd ever tasted before.

There were also a couple of slices of thick, black bread coated with dripping or some kind of animal fat, for breakfast.

"Breakfast or dinner it all looks the same, you'll have to get used to it, Sir," Mundt smiled.

"But look on the bright side, we may not be alive by tonight so we won't have to eat this muck again."

"Isn't that kind of comment bad for morale?" I asked him firmly. It didn't seem a good idea to suggest to the men that we were short of food. But he laughed out loud and the men around him smiled with him, obviously I had a lot to learn. We finished the food, it was indeed foul, then the regiment moved up to the jump off point and I made sure I had everything, MP38, two stick grenades that Mundt had given me and my pack. "You never know when you may need an advantage, Sir," he said as he handed me the grenades.

Water and food in my pack, just bread of course, spare ammunition and a rudimentary first aid kit. Two of the men carried Panzerfausts.

"Schutze Bauer, have you used one of those before?" I asked the private. I'd used one at the training school and I was genuinely interested, it seemed such a tiny weapon with which to stop and destroy a tank.

"You're not serious? I'm still alive, aren't I?" he replied brusquely.

I was puzzled, I was about to ask him what he meant when Mundt put his hand on my shoulder. "Untersturmfuhrer, if the battle comes down to using one of those, you're normally as good as dead already. If you ever score a hit with a Panzerfaust you get awarded a Tank Destroyer Badge. Posthumously!"

"I see."

We marched through the wood, retracing the route our patrol had taken during the night. When we came out the other side, we waited. At first the night was quiet, there was no noise at all. Then in the distance I heard a clanking, mechanical noise. It resolved itself into the roar of powerful engines and the clatter of iron tracks. Suddenly, the Tigers broke out of the wood, eleven of them deployed in a wide line with plenty of space between them. The leading tanks fired, star shells lit up the battlefield, the T34s were now stark, bright targets on the horizon. Even at this distance, I could see the crews scrambling to dive through the turret hatches and prepare to defend themselves. Our Tigers were all firing now, armour-piercing rounds that exploded all around the Russian tank positions. Already three of them were

on fire, their ammunition starting to explode, fuel catching fire and crews running for cover. Then five more exploded as our accurate gunfire kept hitting them, but they still outnumbered us by a large margin. Now it was the Russian's turn and they opened fire, high explosive shells landed and lit up the onrushing Tigers. One was hit and started to blaze, the others rushed on. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the STuGIII assault gun clank out of the wood already firing anti-tank rounds at the T34s and more of them exploded as the combined fire of our Tigers and the STuGIII wreaked deadly havoc.

"Let's go, let's go!" I heard the shout along our lines. Whistles blew and we were up and running, I led my men straight towards the enemy positions, we were going to have our work cut out this morning, especially if the Tigers failed to deal fully with all of the T34s. We ran like demons towards the Russian lines, the Soviet infantrymen had advanced and set up firing positions, rifles cracked along their lines, a machine gun started to fire, then another. We had to go more carefully now, dodging from cover to cover, foxhole to foxhole. Fortunately this ground had been fought over before and it was littered with shell holes and trenches in the ground where we could shelter from the continuous gunfire and explosions that swept the battlefield. Two T34s started towards us firing their coaxial machine guns but the STuGIII continuously fired at them and they both exploded, hit by the armour-piercing rounds. Some of our men set up machine gun positions and soon we had four MG34s hammering away at the enemy.

Mundt shouted a warning, as I turned to clarify what he'd said a hand grabbed hold of my tunic and yanked me down into a shell hole. I was about to protest when a T34 swept past us, heading for the STuGIII. Then the T34 was itself hit by one of our Panzers, but when I looked up another Russian tank was bearing down on us heading for the STuGIII tank destroyer.

"Panzerfaust," I shouted.

Bauer was crouched down in the shell hole, looking at me with terrified eyes. I didn't blame him, the Soviet armour was awesome to a soldier on foot but there was no time to be overly worried, I needed to act.

"Give it to me, man."

I ripped the weapon out of his hands and primed it ready to fire. I squinted over the rim, the T34 was almost on us. As it went past I leapt up, I'd done this in training though never very successfully, but that day the gods of war smiled at me, and my rocket flew true, straight into the vulnerable rear of the tank and I had the satisfaction of seeing it explode.

# CHAPTER TWO

*"For centuries Russia drew nourishment from this Germanic nucleus of its upper leading strata. Today it can be regarded as almost totally exterminated and extinguished. It has been replaced by the Jew. Impossible as it is for the Russian by himself to shake off the yoke of the Jew by his own resources, it is equally impossible for the Jew to maintain the mighty empire forever. He himself is no element of organization, but a ferment of decomposition. The Persian empire in the east is ripe for collapse. And the end of Jewish rule in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state."*
*Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf*

The two officers disappeared into the regimental office and I went into our quarters in the church with the rest of the men. We had no casualties in my platoon, for that at least I was thankful.

"Sir, I've sent Voss to drum up some food, we all need a meal after this morning's work."

I nodded, "Thank you, Scharfuhrer."

Damn, I should have thought of that first, feeding the men, but I was tired, so tired, all I wanted to do was crawl into a hole and sleep for a week. But first things first, I checked my weapons and cleaned and reloaded my MP38. I made sure my water bottle was full, then lay down for a short rest. It was to be very short, Voss brought back some loaves of bread and a container of beef dripping and we sat to enjoy our feast. Mundt brought out a bottle of schnapps, I should have disapproved but I needed it as much as they did. I realised that, to my shame, I was shaking after the action. The food and drink revived me and we sat talking about the action. I tried to underline how well we had done, after all it was my task to maintain morale.

"I know we had to pull back but we seemed to give them a real beating," I said to Mundt.

He smiled. "Look, Sir, think of it this way. They've got two hundred T34s, we've got ten Tigers. That means that every one of our tanks has to knock out twenty of theirs. And even then they'll just bring up another two hundred when they're all gone, we can't replace our losses at anything like that rate."

"What about the Stukas?" I reminded him.

“Yes, the Ju87s are good and they got away with it today. Normally the Russians send up fighters by the dozen and just shoot the Stukas out of the sky, they can’t defend themselves against fighters.”

I pondered the enormous implications of what he was saying. “So you don’t think we can beat them?”

“Of course we can, Sir. We’re all waiting for the secret weapons that the Fuhrer promised us, then we’ll knock them down like skittles. Until then our half-tracks would be helpful, at least we could travel over the battlefield without being totally exposed.”

He had a straight face when he mentioned the secret weapons, was he being serious or sarcastic? But I knew that our High Command had vastly more resources than Scharfuhrer Mundt realised and I explained that we’d soon have much more equipment than the men knew about, and that not every aspect of high-level strategy was obvious to the troops on the ground. I was certain that a couple of good victories would convince them. I didn’t elaborate on the Fuhrer’s secret weapons, it was a subject best avoided. I made a mental note to enquire about the half-tracks.

“Believe me, men, we’ll be back knocking on the front door of the Kremlin before too long.”

I’m not sure I believed it myself. I was certain that the men didn’t, but I had to try. A messenger came up to me. No salute, as usual.

“Untersturmfuhrer Hoffman, you are to report to the regimental adjutant immediately.”

As I walked across the camp, an officer stopped me, a Hauptsturmfuhrer, a captain.

“Are you that bloody fool that nearly got us all killed, the one that stood up and fired the Panzerfaust?”

I was utterly bewildered, there was a huge contradiction in what he was saying. How could my destruction of a Soviet tank be foolish, wasn’t that what we were here for?

“Well, yes, Sir, that was me. I did destroy a T34.”

“And what about the other two hundred T34s bearing down on us, Untersturmfuhrer? When they saw you shoot at their tank several of them swung around and headed towards your position. We were slightly to the side and in front of you, when they fired at you their shells went wide and came close to our position. It was only sheer luck that prevented us being hit. You nearly got us killed, you idiot! Next time, keep your fucking head down and

mind your own business, clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

I saluted and he stormed off. What the hell was that? Were we fighting the enemy or not? I hurried on to the regimental office, a flag hung outside next to a sign, 'HQ, SS Standarte Deutschland'. A corporal was standing outside smoking a cigarette. He glanced up, "Untersturmfuhrer Hoffman? You're to go right in." Then he turned away and lost interest in me. I knocked and went through the door into the CO's office. Sturmbannfuhrer Otto Muller sat behind the desk, temporarily in command of course, after the death of Standartenfuhrer Brandt. Another officer sat in an old armchair beside the stove at the side of the office. I felt a moment of trepidation. SD Sturmbannfuhrer von Betternich. Whatever the reason for the Intelligence Officer being here, it was not likely to be anything good. Was it about that Russian tank? I saluted and waited for them to speak.

"Yes, Hoffman, I need to speak to you. You know the Sturmbannfuhrer?" he indicated the SD man.

"We met on the train, Sir."

"Of course. Before I go on, I have had a complaint that you deliberately put the life of one of my officers and his men in danger by drawing the fire of enemy armour. Is that true?"

I was still utterly bewildered. "Er, well, Sir, I did destroy a Soviet tank, a T34 with a Panzerfaust. It seemed an opportunity to me, it came close and there was a weapon to hand. I'm sorry about that, Sir, it just seemed the right thing to do."

"Next time, wait for orders and don't do anything stupid, do you understand me?"

I felt annoyed, I thought I'd joined an elite regiment, one that would stop at nothing to destroy the enemy, not a band of cowards.

"Yes, Sir, you want me to avoid firing on the enemy in the middle of a battle unless so ordered, I see, Sir."

He gave me a hard glance. "Don't fuck with me, Hoffman. Just do as I say."

"Yes, Sir."

"I'm leaving you with this officer. You will consider yourself under his orders." He got up and left the office.

"Hoffman, pull up a chair and sit down by the stove," von Betternich said cheerfully. "I imagine you're a little confused."

I pulled up an old bentwood chair that looked to be in imminent danger of collapse and sat down. “Yes, I confess I am rather puzzled as to what you might want me for, Sir.”

“Very well, I will do my best to enlighten you. Firstly, my congratulations on killing that tank, that was a brave action. The officer who made the complaint is the nephew of a Party Gauleiter, an old friend of the Fuhrer’s. Muller is under orders not to put him in too much danger, do I make myself clear?”

I nodded.

“However, I am certain that the Fuhrer would not approve of such an arrangement, neither would Reichsfuhrer Himmler. Be a little patient, I assure you this little matter will be cleared up shortly.”

“Yes, Sir.” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, I seemed to have walked into a political shit storm, but he’d said to be patient so I resolved to forget about it.

“You recall I told you I was here to investigate a murder? Well, now there is at least one more murder to investigate.”

“A murder?” It was so strange, murder in the middle of so much killing. “Who was murdered?”

“Your Commanding Officer, Standartenfuhrer Werner Brandt.”

I guess I looked dumb for a few moments. “The Standartenfuhrer, impossible, he was killed in battle.”

“Indeed he was, Hoffman, at least, he was killed during the battle. The regimental surgeon is conducting an autopsy at this moment and I confidently expect him to find a German bullet inside him. Perhaps we can go and see how much progress the good doctor has made.”

He noticed my hesitation. “Hoffman, your CO explained that you’ve been fully assigned to me, that means you and your men are to escort and assist me in this investigation. I suggest we go.”

He stood up. He looked terribly out of condition, flabby and overweight, apart from being too old to be in a theatre of war. Then there was his wounded leg, I got up quickly and followed him out of the door as he limped across the snow to a tent bearing the red cross of the medics. Inside, a body was on the table, the trunk cut open and much of its contents removed to lie on the enamel tray next to the body. I felt like puking but I kept it down. The surgeon, a tired looking man, thin and arrogant, his apron bloody and filthy, looked up angrily.

“Really, I haven’t got time for this, Sturmbannfuhrer. I’ve got wounded men waiting for treatment, this could have waited.”

The SD man totally ignored his protest. “Do you have the bullet, Doctor?”

The medic sighed and picked up a white enamel bowl and handed it to von Betternich.

“Here, take it. Lodged in one of the ventricles of the heart, death was almost instantaneous.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

I followed him out of the tent and we stood in the snow to inspect the bullet. I didn’t need to look too hard, it was a German 7.92 mm round. The ammunition we used in both rifles and machine guns.

“Well?” von Betternich asked me.

“It’s one of ours, of course, but it proves nothing,” I said.

He nodded. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Look, Sir, accidents involving friendly fire are nothing new, it’s by no means unusual in the heat of battle for bullets to fly everywhere, it’s the risk we all have to take.”

“Yes, that’s true. It seems that our senior officers are taking more of this risk than usual, though.”

“Sir?”

“Brandt is the fourth senior SS officer to be killed by a German bullet in less than three weeks and all in the same Division, SS-Das Reich.”

“Four killed? That’s impossible!”

He drew me away from the main body of the camp. “Keep your voice down, Hoffman. Impossible or not, that is exactly what has happened. It is why I was called from my nice warm office in Berlin. Someone is killing our commanders and the Reichsfuhrer wishes to know who and why.”

So it was a direct order from Himmler. Possibly I could have had a worse start to my military career, but it was not likely. Nobody in Germany wanted to be under the direct scrutiny of the Reichsfuhrer, his fearful reputation was an incentive to steer well clear of him.

“But why do you need me? I’ve only just arrived, I don’t know anything about this, I’ve got no experience of the Eastern Front.”

“Exactly! You have only just arrived and so you can’t possibly be involved, that’s why I want you, Hoffman. I’ll need three of your men for now, you can leave the rest under the command of one of your NCOs. I may

need more men later, of course, when I know what we're dealing with. We'd better get back to the monastery, Major Muller is organising an office for me. Then you can bring your men over and we'll get started."

An hour later I reported to the temporary office that von Betternich had been assigned, it had formerly been a monk's cell. I had three of my troopers with me, Scharfuhrer Mundt, Schutze Stefan Bauer and Schutze Dieter Merkel. The two privates, Bauer and Merkel stood guard outside the office, both wearing their steel helmets and carrying their MP38s ready for use. Mundt stood inside the door like a respectful butler, if a somewhat warlike one. I sat on the old wooden chair next to von Betternich's desk, actually a repaired table that had been brought in for him to use. I smiled when I saw that his chair was in fact the deceased Standartenfuhrer's comfortable old leather chair from the regimental office. Clearly the SD could throw their weight around.

"I have a list of officers who were near to the Standartenfuhrer when he was hit, I want you to bring them here one by one for interview. We'll start with Sturmbannfuhrer Muller who I believe was standing right next to him."

I went with Mundt to find Muller, who was not in the mood to waste time.

"Untersturmfuhrer, I need to make preparations, we're expecting the Russians to counterattack again very soon. Unless we shore up our defences they'll come right through us."

I politely persisted and took him grumbling into the office to speak to von Betternich.

"Yes, yes, I was standing right next to Brandt, the situation was very fluid, some of the Soviets were threatening to outflank us, there were bullets and shells flying everywhere. One moment the Standartenfuhrer was shouting orders, the next he was laying on the ground covered in blood. I took command and sent him to the surgeon, that's all there is to it."

"Did you see any of our men in the direction of where the bullet came from?"

Muller smiled grimly. "Yes, about five hundred of them."

"Thank you, Sturmbannfuhrer, that will be all for now." He handed Muller a piece of paper. "That is a list of the men who I understand were also nearby when the bullet struck the Standartenfuhrer, would you send them to me one by one?"

"Really, von Betternich, this is ridiculous, I have a battle to prepare for,

we all have work to do."

"Perhaps you would prefer a direct order from the Reichsfuhrer himself? I can arrange that?"

Muller gave him a vicious glance and stormed out of the office.

"I think that went well," the SD officer said quietly.

Mundt and I exchanged glances.

Throughout the day we interviewed officers, NCOs and troopers, each time von Betternich made meticulous notes on a pad. We went on late into the evening, the next morning after a hurried breakfast we rejoined von Betternich, rounding up interviewees for further interrogation. By mid-afternoon he said he was satisfied and we could rejoin the regiment while he collated the various statements that he had already taken. It seemed pointless to us, officers and men saying the same things again and again, it was just bureaucracy gone mad. We managed to get some food from the cookhouse and sat inside the old church to eat it. There were several platoons billeted in there and they had found an old iron stove that they had rigged up, we clustered around it to enjoy some of its warmth. I could have asked to eat in the officers' mess, such as it was, but in the SS it was encouraged for officers, especially junior officers, to fraternise with the men. After all, we were all equal in the service of the Fuhrer and Reich and eating with the men was supposed to support that viewpoint. I was listening to an old Scharfuhrer from another platoon extolling the merits of our Erma MP38 over the Soviet PPSh.

"Of course, it doesn't have the capacity for a drum magazine, but it's more reliable, packs a heavier punch, a much better all round weapon."

One veteran of the old stormtroopers, the SA, muttered that the Bergman MP-28 was a much superior weapon and later models had got progressively worse. The others laughed, it was obviously an old argument.

"Untersturmfuhrer Hoffman to report to Sturmbannfuhrer Muller."

I looked up, a Hauptsturmfuhrer, a captain, was looking directly at me.

"At once, Sir!"

I got up and reluctantly left the warmth of the stove to go out into the cold and over to the Regimental Office.

"Ah, Hoffman. You did well on that first reconnaissance mission, those prisoners have been more than useful," Sturmbannfuhrer Muller said. "I want you to go out again, tonight, in fact. You're new here, you need the experience. I need to find out more of the enemy's intentions, make sure you

bring back more prisoners. Ideally, we need another officer if you can find one. Our intelligence suggests that the Russians are planning another counterattack."

I was astonished at the sudden change of mission. "Sir, I thought I was assigned to..."

"I've spoken to your SD friend, Hoffman. I told him that SS operational requirements come before everything, he knows he must accept that. I suggest you rejoin your men and prepare to move out as soon as it gets dark."

So it was my SD friend now, von Betternich. It was a friendship I'd neither sought nor wanted. If it continued, it could drive a wedge between me and the other officers. Damn, of all the luck, to have run into the SD officer on the train. I determined to get out of the SD escort assignment after I got back from tonight's mission. I went back to the church and found Mundt and the rest of the platoon still huddled around the stove.

"Men, we're going out again, another mission. Get yourselves ready, they want us to bring in another prisoner, a Soviet officer."

I heard someone mutter something about sending over one of ours for one of theirs, a straight swap, I wasn't sure if they meant me. I ignored them, they were a good platoon. Within minutes they were lining up with their weapons and equipment, all wearing snow camouflage and carrying white packs. Even their machine pistols were covered in strips of white material. While Mundt checked them over, I buttoned up my own camouflage uniform, put on my steel helmet and pack, and picked up my MP38. As I was getting ready, a thought struck me. Why would anyone kill several of our senior SS officers? It was strange, a conspiracy, perhaps, it sounded as if it could be. I'd need to ask von Betternich, perhaps when I requested him to get someone else to escort him would be a good time.

"Ready, Sir."

I nodded at Mundt. "Let's go."

I knew that this time it would be more difficult, the Soviets were fully alerted to the likelihood that we were planning our own counterattack on this front. I pondered the problem as we walked towards the lines. We headed to the north of where we'd crossed the lines before, at least a different starting point may help us a little.

"Mundt, we need to rethink this, I don't want to walk straight into a Soviet trap."

"Nor me, Sir. What did you have in mind?"

I told him I didn't have a clue, and was rather hoping he would.

"Sorry, no, nothing. Whatever we do they'll be waiting for a German raiding party to walk straight into their laps."

He struck a chord in my mind and I had an idea. "Mundt, does anyone in of our platoon speak Russian?"

"Well, yes, Merkel's mother was Russian, I believe he's fluent."

Schutze Merkel was brought to the front to speak to Mundt and me.

"Merkel, I want you to become an officer, a captain."

"Sir?"

"In the Soviet army, Merkel. If we get near any Russian troops, start giving us orders in Russian, can you manage that?"

"Well, yes, I guess."

Our winter uniforms were almost identical to the Soviets, they would certainly pass muster during the night. I had the men take a quick lesson in Russian.

"Da, Nyet, Comrade, that should be enough, pull your white camouflage hoods over your helmets, their silhouette would give us away. Da, Comrades?''

There was a chorus of 'Da' and 'Comrade' from the men, one wag said 'Nyet'. The plan was all I could think of on the spur of the moment, short of an artillery barrage or Stuka attack to divert the Soviets, so we pressed forward. One of the men had a captured Soviet PPSh, I directed him to give it to Merkel, at least we would have one soldier that may convince the Russians that he was authentic. After the first kilometre, we began to see the lights of enemy campfires about another kilometre further on. I directed the men to drop to a crawl and we edged cautiously forward. We were within half a kilometre of the Soviet perimeter when the challenge came.

"Halt!"

Merkel was in the lead, he walked slowly forward speaking in Russian. We'd come upon a hidden sentry, the man got up and went forward to speak to him. They exchanged a few words and the Russian looked at me and barked out a question.

"Da," I replied.

It was the wrong answer, his expression changed to alarm and he started to swing up his rifle but Merkel swung his PPSh and hit him hard on the skull. Fortunately for us, he wasn't wearing a steel helmet. The man hit the ground and Mundt ran up to him, his combat knife flashed and the man's

blood started to pour out onto the snow. They'd obviously done this many times before, they threw the body into the foxhole where he'd been hiding and scooped snow over the evidence.

"What did he say to me?" I asked Merkel.

"He said 'Yob tvoyu mat', Sir. He was swearing at you for getting him out of his warm foxhole, it means 'Fuck your Mother'. You replied da, yes, which no Russian would ever do of course."

I smiled inwardly. We moved carefully on and dropped to the ground when we heard voices. I saw a chink of light show as a canvas shelter flap moved to one side and the figure of a man climbed out, still talking to the occupants. Merkel whispered to me.

"Soviet Commissar, he's doing the rounds of the troops, giving them pep talks."

"He'll do nicely, Merkel. Perhaps he can give a pep talk to our intelligence people. Challenge him, as if you were a sentry."

Merkel called out to him and the Russian looked around. We were lying flat in the snow, he didn't see us in our white uniforms, only Merkel standing there with his PPSh. His voice sounded irritated when he replied, but Merkel persisted, obviously demanding some kind of identification. He finally came over to us. Merkel simply put the barrel of the PPSh against his nose and told him to shut up. Simultaneously, the rest of us jumped up and Mundt put the blade of his combat knife against the man's throat. It was enough, he froze without protest.

"Merkel, tell him he's our prisoner, he won't be harmed if he comes quietly but if he makes a sound Mundt will cut his throat."

"I speak German, there is no need to translate."

"Very well, you are a Commissar?"

"Yes, Commissar Captain Valentin Tereschova."

I told him who I was. "Are we going to do this the hard way, Captain, or the easy way?"

"I have no wish to die, SS man, I will come quietly."

We walked slowly from the area, I judged that if we crawled away it would look suspicious. When we got near the point where we had killed the sentry I ordered them to drop to a crawl. I went in the lead, the Russian behind me, then Mundt and the others. Merkel brought up the rear, as a Russian speaker he'd be able to answer any challenge that came from behind us. In the event, it came from in front of us.

“Halt!”

We all froze. To his credit, Merkel crawled forward and spoke in Russian, but I could tell from the cold voice that the man didn’t believe we were genuine. As the cloud drifted across the sky I was able to make them out, two men standing up, one armed with a rifle, the other with a PPSh, both pointed at us. I silently took off the safety of my machine pistol and felt the trigger. Merkel was arguing with them when I took up the final pressure and let loose a long burst that took the pair of them. Both men spun to the ground, I could feel my platoon’s incredulous eyes on me. A voice called out from the Russian lines, then a burst of machine gun fire, tracer bullets, spat across the snow-covered ground about thirty metres from us. We had one option left.

“Run!” I shouted to them.

I dragged the Commissar to his feet and began to sprint for our lines, the others scrambled after me. The machine gunner shifted his aim and a hail of tracer flew over our heads, then we were over the lip of the low hill and racing through the snow towards the shelter of the trees. We had about a hundred metres to go when all hell broke loose, a flare burst in the sky, then another machine gun opened up and several sub-machine guns and rifles fired. All around us bullets buzzed and zinged past our heads, fortunately their aim was high and our camouflage made us difficult targets in the night.

“Down, get down, take cover!” I shouted. It was rotten luck, we’d encountered a large Soviet patrol, they were sheltering in a foxhole and we had run right past them without noticing. Now they were shooting at us and we were out in the open. I pressed the Commissar’s head into the snow, and then looked around my command.

“Is anyone hit?”

“We’re fine,” Mundt replied, “but we’re not going any further until those Russkis are dealt with.”

“Unless they deal with us first,” a sullen voice murmured.

“Shut up, Bauer,” Mundt told him.

“Mundt, keep an eye on the Russian prisoner, I’ll see if I can’t lob a grenade to take that machine gun out.”

“It’s too far, you won’t get them from this distance.”

“No, I’ll crawl nearer. Can you give me covering fire? I just need a minute to get myself ready.”

Voices were calling out from both the Russian and our own lines now. We’d stirred up our own mini battle, exchanges of gunfire all along the front.

I unclipped a stick grenade from my webbing and pulled out the pin. When I let go it would explode in four seconds.

"Now, Mundt."

They started to fire, I saw Mundt out of the corner of my eye as I ran. He had one hand holding down the prisoner, the other firing his MP38. Merkel still had the PPSh he'd borrowed, he was emptying the drum towards the enemy, the rest of them were firing furiously. I got halfway toward the observation post when one of the soldiers popped his head up, saw me and loosed off a burst. I dived to one side and rolled, but I was near enough, I threw the grenade as accurately as I could and pressed my head down into the snow. The soldier saw me throw the grenade and ducked down for cover, it exploded on the edge of their hole. Quickly, I unclipped a second grenade and crawled forward while they were still stunned from the first explosion. I could hear voices shouting in Russian, I pulled the pin and threw my second grenade neatly into their shelter. There was a scream of fear, then the explosion and they were silent. I ran back to my men.

"Let's go!"

We had a worrying moment when we reached our lines, the whole front was alerted and they nearly mistook us for Russians, but we managed to persuade them to let us through with our hands held high. Once we were safe, I hurried back to HQ and we handed over the prisoner. Muller came out to see what the fuss was all about.

He nodded with approval. "Well done, men. I'm sure we'll milk this one for everything he knows."

"He speaks German, Sir, and I believe he's anxious to cooperate to save his skin."

"Is that so?" He looked at Tereschova.

"And why are you so keen so rat on your comrades, Comrade Commissar? I thought you people were all dedicated communists."

The Russian looked Muller over. "Yes, so we are, Sturmbannfuhrer." He spat out the rank 'Sturmbannfuhrer' as if it was a swear word. Muller raised his eyes.

"So you know our SS ranks, do you?"

"Of course, it is my job to know the enemy we face. Do you know what we call you people?"

Muller shook his head.

"You take the orders of the devil in Berlin, Hitler. You are his guard, are

you not, the Schutzstaffel? We call you the Devil's Guard. What I say makes no difference, you and the devil Hitler you guard are beaten. All of you Germans will regret the day you ever set foot on our soil!"

Muller's expression darkened. "What the hell are you talking about, beaten? You are a prisoner of the SS, we have a whole Panzer army here, my friend, more than enough to smash anything you send against us, so how are we beaten?"

"For every Panzer division you put in the field, Sturmbannfuhrer, we can mount three tank armies to oppose you. For every soldier you send forward with a rifle we can send forward twenty, with twenty more waiting to take their place when they fall. For every aircraft you send over, we will put ten aircraft up to shoot it down. You are finished, SS man, you and every other German that has invaded my country!"

There was silence in our group for several seconds. I'd heard the same defeatist talk from my own men, perhaps the Soviet propaganda machine was very effective. But the Commissar was clearly wrong. I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the German armies were the most powerful fighting force in the world. And our SS Divisions were the elite of that fighting force.

"Take him away," snapped Muller. "Get our intelligence people to talk to him, they'll soon find out what's in front of us. Well done, Hoffman."

"Thank you, Sir."

"You and your men had better get something to eat and get some rest, we may be in action very soon."

We managed to locate some foul tasting stew from the cookhouse with thick slices of black bread. I couldn't face the ersatz coffee again, so I washed the meal down with fresh water, probably melted snow, but it tasted fine. We spent the rest of the day repairing and maintaining our weapons and equipment and then we went into the church and I flung myself down behind the blanket and fell straight to sleep, praying that neither army, German or Soviet, would disturb me this time. They didn't and I slept the whole night, in the morning I was awoken by Mundt, who said it was time for stand to. I was still fully dressed to keep out the cold, I even still wore my winter camouflage. It was a simple matter of pulling on my jackboots and rushing outside with my men for the assembly. There was no alarm, no emergency, so we were able to get a leisured breakfast. I even thought about a shave, except that the prospect of trimming my beard in ice-cold water was distinctly unappealing. We sat around the camp, cleaning and checking our

weapons.

"What did you think about what the Russian said, Sir?" Merkel asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"About them outnumbering us so massively, do you think it's true?"

"They outnumbered us at the start of Barbarossa, it didn't make any difference then and it won't now."

"So why are we constantly retreating, Herr Untersturmfuhrer?"

I noticed the other men were looking at me intently. I knew I had to be careful with my answer. The trouble was, I honestly didn't know, I was newly commissioned and had only just arrived at the Front.

A new voice answered him. "It's part of the Fuhrer's strategy to pull the Russians onto our guns so that we can slaughter them in even larger numbers, then outflank them and mount a joint drive on both Moscow and the southern oilfields."

I looked around, it was SD Sturmbannfuhrer von Betternich, leaning on his cane. The older man managed to look fresh and clean shaven, his uniform immaculate in regulation field grey, he had a wide lapelled black leather greatcoat over his tunic and wore a smart peaked cap. We all stood up to attention.

"No, no," he waved us back down. "Hoffman, would you report to my office in, shall we say, half an hour?"

"Yes, Sir."

He walked away and we relaxed.

"So that's it, is it?" Bauer asked me. "We're pulling the Russians onto our guns to kill more of them?"

"I imagine so, Bauer. Why else would we be constantly pulling back?"

After half an hour I got up to leave.

"I thought we'd finished helping him out," Mundt said, "he makes me uneasy, that SD man. I never did like policemen much."

I smiled. "Had problems in the past, Scharfuhrer?"

"Well, yes, one or two. I remember when the Party first started, I joined the SA, damn, we had some fun. Fistfights, battles with the communists, always made a profit too, of course, if you kept your eyes open. The police were always two faced, mind, let you do anything you wanted one minute, throw you in jail the next."

"Well, you've got plenty of fighting to do here, so I trust you'll stay out

of prison."

He laughed. "As long as they don't catch me, or the Russians shoot me before it's all over."

The other members of the platoon cheered him as he said it. He was a likeable rogue and a good man to have as my senior NCO.

"Don't ever steal anything from the SS, Mundt, they'll have you shot."

They all laughed again. I went over to find von Betternich, he was sat behind his desk.

"How is everything going, Hoffman, I gather you had a successful night?"

"Yes, Sir, no problems. Look, I thought that my work with you was over, you've finished investigating the Regimental officers, I'd prefer to stay on duty."

"Had enough of police work, have you?"

"It's not that, Sir. I just want to fight the Russians, I feel that's what I'm here for, not investigating my fellow officers."

He looked thoughtful. "Come with me, Hoffman."

We walked outside and strolled around the camp in the fresh air.

"I see the monks are still here," he said abruptly.

I had forgotten about them, they were part of the scenery of the camp, but yes, they were still there, sitting outside their makeshift, ragged camp, just outside our perimeter. One of them had erected a crude, wooden cross on a pole.

"Yes, I expect they're waiting to regain possession of the monastery and church when we leave," I replied.

"Is that what they're doing?"

I looked at him sharply. "What else would they be doing, Sir?"

"No, no, I think you're probably right, they're just trying to get back what is rightfully theirs. That's the trouble with war, property gets, shall we say, re-assigned. Churches, monasteries, buildings, artworks."

I was mystified, where was this conversation heading.

"You know of Reichsmarschall Goering's art collection in his home at Karinhall, of course, Hoffman?"

I'd heard rumours but I decided to say I'd never heard of it. Von Betternich smiled.

"Is that right? Well, well. The Reichsmarschall is of course holding it all in trust for the nation, very noble of him, don't you think?"

“Yes, of course, Sir.”

“But war, you see, confuses things. Loyalties, for example, people forget who they owe allegiance to.”

I was horrified. “You mean there is some kind of a conspiracy against the Reich?”

“Who knows? I am merely a policeman investigating the murder of those senior officers, it leaves their regiments leaderless, rudderless. That’s what happens, you see, you chop off the head and people run around without orders, without knowing who to trust.”

We walked on, I was enjoying the chill and fresh spring air, but not the company, not the ominous way this conversation was heading. Or was the chill coming from the very dangerous SD officer next to me? I laughed inside at that melodramatic thought. Von Betternich, of course, was a policeman, he could almost read minds as he’d mentioned before.

“I am not your enemy, Hoffman. Quite the opposite.”

“No, Sir.”

“Are you a Christian?”

What kind of a question was that? “Er, not really, Sir, no. Not for a long time.”

“No, of course not. I imagine your loyalties are clear?”

“Absolutely, Sir, to the Fuhrer, to the SS, to my regiment.”

“Good. I need you to continue, Hoffman. I need someone I can trust to assist me. This investigation could have a serious effect on the course of the war on the Eastern Front. At the very least, it may uncover a serious conspiracy to undermine the discipline and loyalty of the Das Reich Division of the Waffen SS. That kind of thing can lose battles if it is left to grow and fester, do you understand how easily it can happen?”

I thought for a few moments, but lying to this man would not be a good idea.

“No, not really, Sir, I don’t understand at all.”

I didn’t want to understand either, it was politics. The further I drifted into this murky world, the further I would get from the glorious career I’d dreamed about in the Waffen SS.

I left him and walked back towards my billet in the church. Overhead, a bunch of aircraft flew past causing the alarms to sound, men running to don steel helmets, Flak guns sighting on the planes, there were perhaps thirty of them, a strong force. They were heading west, quite low, more Ilyushin Il-2s,

the infamous Sturmovik. No match for our Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs, of course. Except that the Luftwaffe wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Going to give our Panzers some problems, I imagine," a voice said behind me, Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, now acting commander of the Standarte 'Deutschland'.

I heard the distant sound of anti-aircraft fire, the whine of the aero engines as they dove in for the attack, the whistle of bombs as they hurtled earthwards, then the explosions as they struck.

"Where are our aircraft, Sir? It seems crazy to let the Soviets have free rein to attack our Panzers."

"Where are they indeed? That's a good question. A question we often ask ourselves, Hoffman, and we never seem to get a satisfactory reply."

We both stared into the distance at the smoke and explosions. Our own Flak guns were on standby, the whole camp buttoned up tight, but other than being able to take a shot at the enemy as they returned after their mission it was doubtful we'd be able to help the Panzers.

"I'm not happy about you cooperating with the Sicherheitsdienst, Hoffman. I don't trust that officer, von Betternich. The last thing I need is a policeman running around upsetting morale."

"I don't like it either, Sir. I'd sooner just be with my platoon."

"Of course you would. You can help me out you know, keep me informed of the investigation. I'll do what I can to get you relieved from this SD matter as soon as possible, I don't want one of my officers tied up with policemen."

So it was to be quid-pro-quo. Somehow, I felt even more uneasy about being asked to spy on the SD. In effect, to spy on the spies.

# CHAPTER THREE

*"We are determined, as leaders of the nation, to fulfill as a national government the task which has been given to us, swearing fidelity only to God, our conscience, and our Volk... This the national government will regard its first and foremost duty to restore the unity of spirit and purpose of our Volk. It will preserve and defend the foundations upon which the power of our nation rests. It will take Christianity, as the basis of our collective morality, and the family as the nucleus of our Volk and state,*

*under its firm protection... May God Almighty take our work into his grace, give true form to our will, bless our insight, and endow us with the trust of our Volk."*
*Adolf Hitler February 1933*

There was no time for me to think any more about my loyalties concerning either the SS or the SD. My regiment, Deutschland, was part of SS Division Das Reich, itself part of the newly reformed SS Panzer Corps under the command of one of our SS heroes, Obergruppenfuhrer Paul Hausser who the men had nicknamed 'Papa'. One of our regiments, Der Fuhrer, had been pushed back from their advance positions on the River Oskol, had to regroup and dig into new positions. During the day, we were amused to see streams of our allied Italian troops fleeing from the Soviets. Yet our morale was good, our Army Group South Commander, von Manstein, made it clear that the Russians had run out of steam and shortly we would be going back on the offensive, one that this time would sweep the enemy away and put us firmly back on the road to Moscow. I joined my platoon and we marched away to join the Panzers of our Division ready to mount our new attack. We would be riding in style as we'd been assigned a new delivery of armoured half-tracked vehicles with which to go into battle. Clearly, our commanders were anticipating a lightning thrust against the Russians that would carry everything before them. We assembled in a wood outside the village of Valki, line after line of our heavy tanks, artillery pieces, troop carriers and more, a formidable force. It was snowing heavily, a blizzard started to obliterate the countryside and it was difficult to see more than fifty metres in any direction.

Muller, our regimental commander, came back from Division and started giving orders. For my platoon, out task was simple, we were to follow the Panzers and suppress any pockets of resistance that threatened us in the rear of the advance and of course clear enemy mines.

"It's quite straightforward, stay with the tanks and watch out for any enemy that they miss, we're going in fast and hard. You will all be riding in the new armoured personnel carriers, so you shouldn't have problems keeping up. Any questions?"

I put up my hand.

"Hoffman?"

“Sir, what about radio communications?”

“No, most of our vehicles don’t have radios, they’re in short supply. I shall be in contact with Division, so keep your eyes on me for any changes in orders.”

It didn’t sound satisfactory, more like a Great War army, but I acknowledged the order. Kretschmer, an Obersturmfuhrer asked him about mine detectors.

“We’re still waiting for replacement batteries, Kretschmer.”

“Sir, we don’t have a single working mine detector and we know the Soviets will have planted plenty of them, how do we clear them?”

Muller thought for a moment, he looked a little embarrassed.

“Look, we’re waiting for fresh batteries to come in from Germany, at the moment we’re all in the same boat. If you think there’s a minefield, you’ll have to go forward and use your bayonets to find them.”

I had to be careful to keep a straight face, our mighty First SS Panzerkorps forced to go forward and dig out the mines by prodding for them with bayonets. And no radios in our vehicles either, should I ask Muller about carrier pigeons? Better not.

There was a clamour in the distance, Muller looked up with an irritated expression. “Damn fools, we haven’t had the order to go yet.”

We looked towards where the noise was coming from, suddenly the snowstorm cleared briefly and we could see men scrambling to climb into their tanks, artillery gunners working frantically to deploy guns. It was chaos, shouts, the roar of engines starting, whistles blowing. Then a siren started to wail and we heard distinctly a sentry shouting as he ran towards us.

“Alarm, alarm! They’re attacking, sound the alarm!”

Behind him there was the explosion of a tank shell as it exploded, then they were coming down on our position.

“It seems that someone neglected to tell the Soviets that they were overextended,” Kretschmer said drily. “They’ve decided to take the initiative and attack first.”

But Muller overrode him, shouting “Mount up, mount up, stay with the tanks!”

I ran for my vehicle, a Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 half-track, designed specifically for our Panzer Grenadiers to keep up with the tanks. Equipped with a 37mm Pak 36 anti-tank gun, as well as two mounted MG34s, we were confident that they would give us sufficient firepower and mobility to support

our new advance. Except that the enemy had decided not to wait, they were coming straight towards us.

I leapt aboard, the men were already there waiting for me.

“Follow the Panzers,” I shouted at the driver. I hadn’t a clue where they were going, it seemed that neither did anyone else. Several of the tanks turned around and headed away from the action, but to their credit, most had the sense to go forward to engage the enemy. We bumped through the wood, trying to make sense of the confusion in front of us. Another half-track running parallel to us took a hit from a T34’s main gun and disintegrated, several men were thrown screaming to the ground. The driver slowed, but I shouted at him to keep going. Mundt was manning the small Pak anti-tank gun fitted to our half-track.

“How are you with that gun, Scharfuhrer?” I asked him.

“Good enough,” was the laconic reply.

Ahead of us our Panzers were shooting now, a furious exchange of fire had developed between the tanks of both sides. Then we were out of the snowstorm and running through a wide area of sparse scrubland dotted with low hills. The six-cylinder Maybach engine roared as the driver gunned it along to keep pace with the racing Panzers. The snowstorm worsened and we were running almost blind, then it cleared again and our tanks again opened fire as their targets came back into view. T34s, there seemed to be hundreds of them, incredibly the Russians seemed to have them in inexhaustible supply. I was trying to make out targets with my binoculars, but they were so close, so numerous that I put my field glasses to one side and leaned across to Mundt.

“Are you ready with that gun?”

But even as I spoke, there was a mighty roar as he pulled the trigger and I jumped away to avoid the breech as it slammed backwards on its mountings. I was deafened, I could see Mundt’s loader slamming another round in the gun.

Ahead of us a Soviet tank went up in flames as it was hit, I’d no idea if Mundt’s shell had struck it or someone else’s. Then I saw troops, Soviet tank riders, leaping off the back of the tanks and jumping for cover, then beginning to fire at us. The butt of the MG34 was right next to me, I grabbed the weapon and aimed it towards the enemy, then shouted at the men behind me.

“Bauer, get here quickly, I need a loader to handle the belt.”

While he was scrambling through the cockpit of the vehicle, I opened fire. The gun vibrated in my hands, the belt rattled through the chamber at an alarming rate, empty cartridge cases spewing out around my feet, but the effect was deadly. The Soviets scattered but not before at least ten of them fell to the hail of lead I threw out at them. Just in time, Bauer attached a new belt to the end of the old one and I was able to keep firing. Mundt's gun boomed again and again as he fired at the Soviet armour.

"Sir, you'll have to stop, it'll overheat," Bauer shouted in my ear. Just as he did, so the gun stopped. He looked at me as if to say 'I told you so.' But he was right, I should have remembered my training. We had another gun, sitting uselessly at the rear of the vehicle in an anti-aircraft mount.

"You men," I shouted at Voss and Beidenberg, "unhitch that gun and bring it here!"

They jumped up to detach the second MG34. The roar of outgoing shells, the crash of incoming rounds and the chatter of machine gun bullets that whistled and whined all around us gave them plenty of incentive to hurry. Less than twenty seconds later they were slamming the replacement machine gun onto the mount and Bauer had removed the jammed weapon and placed it on the floor of the carrier. Five seconds later the gun was loaded with a full belt of ammunition.

"Take the jammed gun and fix it," I snapped at them. Then I started firing again. Targets were harder to find, the battlefield was covered in smoke, the noise was intense, constant crashes and explosions, engines, machine guns, rifles, it was the raucous music of the cauldron of hell. But our Regiment was inching forward. Bauer suddenly cried out as he was hit and spun away.

"Merkel, the gun, I need a loader."

He rushed forward as the men picked up Bauer, I heard someone say he wasn't hurt badly, a shoulder wound.

We were pressing ahead, defeating the enemy attack, the Soviets were clearly stunned at the intensity with which we hit them. The blizzard increased in intensity and with the smoke that hung everywhere we were almost blinded. A T34 appeared alongside us, fleeing towards his lines, I was astonished that he had got behind us, we were lucky he hadn't seen us and opened fire. The 76mm gun of the T34 would have made short work of our 251 half-track with its thin armour. He had only been three metres from us when he'd materialised out of the fog. As he surged past, I shouted to Mundt.

“Scharfuhrer, on your left!”

“Got it.”

Another crash as he fired and the almost instantaneous explosion as the point blank target was hit. It burst into flames and slewed to one side, smoke pouring out of the large hole that Mundt’s shell had blown into the side of the hull. There would be no survivors, that was obvious. The interior of the tank would have been a hell of flames and molten metal shredding human flesh to raw mincemeat. There was no time for thinking of the dead, other than the fact that it could be us next. We were caught up in the blood lust of the charge, like the famous English ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’. I prayed that on this occasion there wouldn’t be lines of heavy guns waiting for us ahead. I saw another group of Russians, they were running back to their lines but I aimed the machine gun and sent burst after burst of machine gun fire after them, a few fell, the others dived for cover. I kept firing, the more we killed today, the less would come back to kill us tomorrow. Then we were hit.

An explosion on the side of our vehicle, a jet of flame spurted up in the air and our 251 made a half turn and came to a stop. Fire was licking all around us.

“Everybody out before it explodes!” I shouted. We carried a large tank of petrol and it was at least half-full, when the fire reached it the half-track would explode like a bomb. Men were jumping over the sides, I got out the fire extinguishers and threw them after the men and jumped out myself. We attacked the flames, another carrier stopped near us and the men leapt out with their own extinguishers to help. It was Kretschmer’s platoon, I noticed. His eyes were bright, dilated with the excitement of the action.

“Bad luck, Hoffman,” he grinned, “you’ll have to walk next time.”

“At least we’re all alive. Thanks for the help.”

We both looked around as a STuGIII mobile gun came through the smoke, looking for targets. But the Russians had vanished, retreating to their original defensive positions. The STuGIII commander looked over the side at us.

“Any problems?”

We shook our heads. “It looks like the Soviets have run for it, there’s no business for you guys today.”

“I can live with that,” he said. He was an Obersturmfuhrer, like Kretschmer, although a little older. Artillerymen tended to be older, their trade was one that required a good deal more technical ability and something

less of the warrior determination that drove younger men on.

"Obersturmfuhrer, do you have a radio in there?" I asked him.

He nodded.

"I could do with a recovery crew to come out and pick up my half-track, I'd guess it could be repaired."

"I'll give Headquarters a call," he replied.

We waited by the half-tracks, the STuGIII seemed content to sit with its engine idling waiting for orders. Muller arrived in a Horch 801 Leichter Panzerspahwagen, a light armoured car that he used as his command vehicle. He climbed down from the cockpit and strutted up to us.

"What are you waiting here for, you men? We're pulling back to our own positions, the Russians have dug in a line of heavy artillery to the front of us, too much for us to break through."

I told him about the damage to our half-track and he walked over to inspect it.

"You say that you've put in a call for a recovery crew?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Very well. You'll need to stay by your vehicle until they can arrive to tow it away, the partisans operating in this area will destroy it completely if we give them half a chance. Or booby trap it. But if those guns start laying down a barrage get out of here fast."

"Right. How will we get back, Sir?"

I estimated we'd travelled about eight kilometres from our headquarters.

"You walk, Untersturmfuhrer Hoffman."

I could swear he had a slight smile on his face as he said that. He swung back into his armoured car and drove off.

"There's hot water in the radiator, Sir, we can brew up some coffee," Mundt said.

"Do it, Sergeant."

The recovery team were quick to arrive, we'd barely finished our coffee tasting of unnamed vegetable substances and rusty water, at least it was hot. They made a quick inspection and decided to recover our half-track. The Scharfuhrer in charge of the recovery crew, a cheerful looking old soldier, made light of the damage, they hooked it up to their towing equipment and were getting ready to leave.

"It's nothing very serious, we'll patch up the hole, put a new track on, a new pair of drive wheels, we'll have it back in action by tomorrow evening.

How are you getting back, Sir?"

"I think we'll have to walk, Sergeant."

"We'll be towing the half-track, why not ride back in that?"

"I think we will, thanks. Men, mount up, we're going back in style."

They jumped up into the cockpit and soon we were bumping along the Russian steppe, the men grumbling because I wouldn't let them smoke. The threat of leaking petrol made that very unwise, but when I reminded them that the alternative was to walk they quickly quietened down and started to extol the virtues of motorised troops. Our unit had newly been issued with a variety of transport, from Kubelwagens to heavy lorries and armoured half-tracks. But the Russian terrain was very unforgiving and after fearful losses of vehicles and equipment they'd fought for some time purely as infantry, with nothing to carry them to and from the battlefield. Of course, our new half-track was damaged, but I vowed to keep a watchful eye on it and make certain it came back to my platoon when it was repaired.

It was early evening when we got into camp. We managed to get the cookhouse to ladle out hot stew and we sat eating in companionable silence.

"I see those monks are still here," Merkel said. "I'll bet they're praying to their God that we get a good hammering, so that we go away and they can have their home back."

"Wouldn't you?" a voice said.

Damn, von Betternich had come up on us quietly and was standing nearby, leaning on his cane.

"What do you mean, Sir?"

"If foreign troops came and took your home, wouldn't you want it back?"

"Er, Yes, Sir," Merkel replied. "I guess I would."

"Hoffman, would you join me in my office when you've finished your dinner?"

"Yes, Sir."

I took my time, I knew it was going to be a difficult conversation. I'd had enough of divided loyalties, I was going to ask him firmly to find another officer to assist him. I'd been in combat and felt that I'd acquitted myself well, the regiment needed me on the battlefield, not in a police station. I finished up and walked towards the monastery. Two officers stopped me.

"Untersturmfuhrer Hoffman, a word."

They were both SS Hauptsturmfuhrers, Captains.

“Of course, Sir.”

“This business with the SD man, von Betternich. None of us are happy that an officer of our regiment is involved helping the police, Hoffman.”

I smiled grimly. “I’m not happy either, believe me. I joined the SS to fight, not to be a police snoop.”

“So tell him to go and mind his own business, Hoffman. If you refuse to help him maybe he’ll go elsewhere to snoop around and we can get on with the business of fighting a war.”

I was about to tell them that I was going in to see von Betternich now to give him exactly that message, but something stopped me. Ever since I could remember, I’d been suspicious of other people trying to influence the way I thought. I guess it went back to my father, he’d been an infantry officer with the Bavarian Infantry during the First War, had even spent some time in the same regiment as the Fuhrer, although he refused to ever discuss it. The lesson he always tried to teach me was to be my own man. When the whole country was going mad for the new Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, my father was cautious, saying that he’d need to see some evidence of his abilities as a politician before he ever voted for him. He certainly told me he disagreed with the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews, insisting that they were just Germans, no different to the rest of us. Wisely, he instructed me to keep quiet on that issue, as well as other issues of politics in general, and the Fuhrer in particular. Hitler had brought many new things to the destroyed nation he’d inherited in 1933, some of them good, some of them not so good. Amongst the latter was the loss of free speech, we could disagree, but keep it inside our own heads.

My father had tried to dissuade me from joining the SS at first, saying they weren’t proper soldiers, just a bunch of political thugs, but at least in that he was wrong. It was obvious to me that the unit I had joined was part of a military elite, one that I was proud to be a member of. It was all very confusing for a new officer, but I decided to err on the side of caution. Yes, he would certainly keep his own counsel on the business of the SD versus the good of the regiment, until he knew more about the political undercurrents that swirled around everything in our new Germany. Both my parents were dead now, killed in a massive American bombing raid, victims to the B-17s that flew daily missions over The Reich and bombed civilian homes with impunity. I remembered coming home and finding a heap of rubble surrounded by rope barriers to keep people away from unsafe buildings.

Their bodies had been bulldozed into a mass grave alongside dozens of others of their neighbours. I'd been angry at first, a white hot anger that made me want to pick up a machine gun and go looking for the enemy to kill. But I remembered my father's words when we heard Dr Goebels shouting on the radio about the Luftwaffe bombing raids on London.

'Jurgen, you know that they will simply retaliate for this, soon their aircraft will be dropping bombs on towns and cities all over The Reich.'

He'd been only too accurate in his prediction. I lost my passion for vengeance and instead put all of my energies into becoming a good soldier.

"I'll think seriously about what you've said."

"Very wise, Hoffman."

They walked away and I continued to von Betternich's office.

"Untersturmfuhrer, thank you for calling in to see me."

I raised my eyebrows, it was as sarcastic as I dared be, we both knew it was no invitation.

"I came as soon as I could, Sir."

"Quite so. Have you encountered the Langemarck Regiment on your travels? I am due to visit them in the morning. They're the motorcycle reconnaissance unit."

"I haven't, Sir, no. I'm not happy about continuing with this assignment."

He looked up, his expression blank.

"No?"

"Well, Sir, I feel that I should be serving the SS as a fighting soldier, after all, it's why we're here, isn't it?"

"Fighting who, Hoffman?"

"Well, the enemy, Sir, of course."

"And who are the enemy, Untersturmfuhrer?"

I nearly lost my temper with his bland, calm yet stupid questions.

"In case you hadn't noticed those people over there taking pot shots at us, Sir."

I put a strong emphasis on the 'Sir'.

"And what about the people taking pot shots at us on this side of the line, Hoffman?"

His manner was still calm and quiet but his words fell like hammer blows, I felt he would be a formidable chess player. He always seemed to think several moves ahead of me. I kept silent.

“You think about it, my friend. I will need a driver and escort to take me to talk to those Langemarck people. I’d like you with me, but not against your will and not if you plan on giving in to pressure from your brother officers. Decide in the morning. Let’s hope no more regimental commanders get shot in the meantime. The Reichsfuhrer would be very distressed.”

“Sir.”

I saluted and left. His last words calculated to make me lose sleep overnight, as if it was my entire fault if some lunatic was killing our senior officers. Surely that’s all it was, if it even was one of our own people. It could easily be partisans, though that would be something of a coincidence. In the morning there was no prospect of any action, providing that the Ivans left us alone, and I decided it would be churlish not to escort the old SD man on his visit to the reconnaissance regiment. Besides, he’d thrown the gauntlet down, suggesting I’d give in to pressure from the other officers. I detailed Mundt, Voss, Beidenberg and Merkel to come with us, Voss to drive. Bauer was apparently recovering at the unit hospital and due back with us in a couple of days. Voss brought the Kubi around to HQ and I escorted von Betternich out, and he sat down in the back seat. He made no comment about me accompanying him, merely wished us all a good morning. Voss drove us the five kilometres to where SS Langemarck were based. It was an old farm, the yard littered with the BMW motorcycle combinations that they used for high-speed mobility on the battlefield. Voss stopped the Kubi outside the farmhouse being used as the Regimental HQ. While we waited, von Betternich went inside and asked to see the acting commanding officer, a Sturmbannfuhrer Eicke. An NCO came out of the building with him and pointed out what looked like the old stables.

“The CO is in there, Sir, he’s checking out our stores situation. It’s a bitch to get spare parts for our machines, is that why you’re here, to chase them up for us?”

“I’m afraid not, Scharfuhrer, but I’ll pass your comments on.”

The Sergeant smiled and nodded.

“To Reichsfuhrer Himmler when I return to Berlin.”

The NCO’s face fell, “I didn’t mean...”

But von Betternich had already walked away, he was after all the master of the last word.

I followed him at a distance with Mundt, the other men stayed with the jeep. He reached the barn and turned to us. “I need to speak with

Sturmbannfuhrer Eicke alone, would you wait for me here?”

Again, that polite request, that was no request. He opened the door and limped into the barn, the floor was covered in wooden crates, uniforms and coats hung from nails banged into the wooden walls. Eicke was shouting at a harassed NCO who was clutching a clipboard. Von Betternich went straight up to him. “Sturmbannfuhrer, a word with you, alone!”

Eicke stared at the officer approaching through the gloom. “Who the hell are you?”

“Von Betternich, Sturmbannfuhrer, Sicherheitsdienst. I’m here on the orders of Reichsfuhrer Himmler.”

Eicke snapped at the NCO. “Get out, man. Out and close the door after you!”

He scuttled through the door and closed it. We waited outside. At first, we heard nothing, then the sound of a raised voice. It had to be Eicke, I knew that the SD man never raised his voice. Eicke shouted louder and louder, ‘who the hell are you to ask me that kind of question’ and so on. Then the door opened abruptly and Eicke came storming out, still shouting at von Betternich, who followed him out of the barn.

“You’ve no business coming here, the SD, we’re trying to fight a war, people like you...”

He didn’t get any further, the roar of aircraft engines drowned out his voice, together with the wail of the air raid alert, men shouting.

“Alarm!”

I looked up and saw the fighter coming in, a Yakovlev Yak-1, the description from my officer training etched in my mind. Our soldiers often mistook it for the British Spitfire, which was understandable, the British supplied their famous fighter to the Russian Front and they had become feared by the Luftwaffe after they began to appear in increasing numbers. But the Yak-1 was no slouch either, it had proved to be a match for many of our ME-109 Messerschmitts. As we scattered for cover, I looked around for other aircraft but it seemed to be a lone raider. Machine gun and cannon fire rained down on us as the pilot opened fire, we were sheltering underneath a Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 armoured half-track, similar to the vehicle being repaired for us. The protection of the half-track was more for morale than reality, the fourteen-millimetre armour would not protect us from the 12.7mm machine gun bullets from the Yak, even less from its 20mm cannon. The Yak roared overhead and climbed away from the camp. Our anti-aircraft guns

were slow to react, but now they started to fire in deadly earnest, sending streams of bullets after the Yak. I watched it turn in the sky less than a kilometre away from us, and then it came in again. A salvo of combined cannon and machine gun fire hammered into one of our machine gun positions, reducing it to a bloody pile of scrap and torn human tissue. The remaining gunner fired after him, but his shots went wide as the Yak swept past still shooting. A storm of fire enveloped an armoured half-track and left if a broken, shattered ruin, smoke and flames pouring out of it. The screams of the men sheltering underneath heard for several seconds until they went silent.

We ran over to try and pull out the casualties, but the flames kept us back. The men underneath would already have been dead anyway, burning fuel had saturated them and they had become human torches, hopefully dead through lack of oxygen before the worst of the flames started turning their bodies into charred meat. Firefighters ran up and started spraying the wreckage to put out the flames, but it was more for form's sake than anything else, there was nothing left to save, neither man nor machine. I looked around for my charge, the SD officer. Eicke was getting up from behind a pile of old engines parts, his uniform smeared with grease. Von Betternich had not moved, had just stood outside the barn in full view throughout the raid leaning on his cane. He looked at Eicke with a straight face.

"Sturmbannfuhrer, I imagine you'll be busy for some time dealing with the damage. I would like a full, written report on those matters I have mentioned, together with names and locations of the officers concerned. Would you send it over to SS Deutschland HQ, my office is located there. If you have any questions, I suggest you contact Berlin, Office of the Reichsfuhrer SS. Good day."

He came towards us. "Ah, Hoffman. Did our transport survive undamaged?"

"I believe it did, Sir."

"Good, then let's get back to Headquarters. If we leave now we'll be in time for lunch."

We drove back along the bumpy track to Korenevo. Von Betternich kept checking through his notes and the journey was conducted in silence. The smell of roasted flesh was still in our nostrils, we'd come close in our own half-track to suffering the same fate as those poor devils at the Langemarck Regimental HQ. Voss stopped outside the monastery and I was about to walk

away when the SD man stopped me.

"Hoffman, I'm going to speak to that Russian you captured, would you care to come with me?"

"Of course, Sir."

We found Commissar Captain Tereschova in his cell, von Betternich asked the guard to open it and we went in. Then he dismissed the guard. Tereschova looked nervous, I think I would have in his position. There was a standing order that all Political Commissars should be shot out of hand, he would be well aware of it and well aware of the author of that order, Adolf Hitler. Equally, I had been told that many unit commanders ignored the order, especially when the prisoner was a uniformed soldier, as was the case here.

"Captain, I wonder if you would answer some questions for me."

The Russian looked at the older man, his face was white. Did he think I was here to start pulling out his fingernails? Probably. The Russians deliberately spread myths about SS brutality to encourage their troops to fight on when they would otherwise surrender. Not all of them were myths, however.

"What do you want to know?" he asked suspiciously.

"Your Russian rifles, Captain, tell me about them. Are they better than ours, would you say?"

"Rifles? What the hell would I know about rifles?"

"Hoffman, ask the guard to bring us a pot of coffee, let's make it more comfortable in here. You do drink coffee, Captain?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. Now, tell me what have you heard, do you form the impression that the German Kar 98 is better regarded than your Mosin–Nagant? What's the impression amongst the troops? Come, Captain, this isn't a military secret, I ask only out of curiosity."

The Russian shrugged. "Some of your rifles have fallen into our hands, it's true. There'll doubtless be large stocks of them after your defeat at Stalingrad."

He smirked as he said the name Stalingrad and I felt angry. A quarter of a million of our men were in the Sixth Army, the largest army in the German Order of Battle. All were dead or had surrendered to the Soviets in the ice-cold wastes on the banks of the River Volga.

"You weren't up against the Waffen SS in Stalingrad," I said hotly. I was proud of my place in an elite regiment, sure that we would not have

allowed the surrender to the Russians.

"Wehrmacht, SS, it makes no difference, the result would have been the same," he said wearily. "An army cannot fight without food, fuel or weapons, Lieutenant."

I was about to snap back an angry retort when von Betternich told me to keep quiet.

"But, Sir, we lost a hundred thousand men killed at Stalingrad."

"And we lost three hundred thousand," Tereschova snapped back. "You shouldn't have come, SS man."

"Gentlemen, enough," the SD officer stopped us. "We are not here to discuss Stalingrad. Now, the rifles, Captain, is it true that some of your men prefer using captured Kar 98s?"

The guard returned carrying three steaming tin mugs of coffee. He brought them into the cell and left again. Von Betternich tasted it and pulled a face.

"Captain?"

"Well, yes, a few do prefer them, a very few, mainly partisans who have more access to captured German weapons and ammunition. But our regular troops, no, it is quite rare, I would imagine."

"What about your snipers, would they tend to prefer the Kar 98, especially the longer variants, over your own rifles?"

"Never!" the Captain snorted. "Our Mosin–Nagant is the finest sniper rifle in the world. Did you not hear of the record of Vasily Zaitsev in Stalingrad?"

We had all heard of Zaitsev through the unofficial grapevine at training school, where an appreciation of the tactics of Soviet snipers was part of the curriculum. The Soviets claimed that his career started in Stalingrad when Zaitsev's commanding officer pointed at one of our officers in a window eight hundred metres away. Vasily took aim from his standard issue Mosin-Nagant rifle and with one shot, our officer was down. A few moments later, two other German soldiers appeared in the window, checking their fallen comrade. He fired two more shots, and they were both killed. For this Zaitsev became a sniper and was awarded a medal. He became elevated to the status of virtual hero through the use of Soviet propaganda and established a snipers' training school in the Metiz factory in the ruined city of Stalingrad. Zaitsev's trained snipers were nicknamed leverets, or baby hares. They were extremely lethal hares too. Their toll on the morale of the Sixth Army was out

of all proportion to their number of kills.

We chatted on for ten minutes more, but von Betternich had got what he wanted, the significance wasn't wasted on me. The person who was killing our senior officers wasn't likely to be a Soviet soldier. We left the cell and walked out through the camp.

"What are you thinking, Hoffman?" he asked me abruptly.

"It had to be the partisans, Sir."

He didn't reply as we walked on. Then Voss ran up to us.

"Sir, I need you to take a look at the Kubi, someone has interfered with it."

"Interfered, Oberschutze? In what way?"

"They planted a bomb, down in the engine compartment."

We hurried over to look at what they had found. A box, that seemed to be made of brass. Attached to the side was a pair of copper contacts, the whole thing wrapped in thick, rubberised insulating tape and coated with thick grease.

"Stand back, Sirs, Merkel is taking the top off to disarm it."

"Is that safe, Voss?"

"Safer than leaving it armed, Untersturmfuhrer, it could go off at any moment."

I didn't say anything, but we stood back ten metres from where Merkel was working with a box of tools. He finished unscrewing the lid and gently, very carefully prised off the lid. Then he snipped through the internal wires.

"It's safe now, I've disconnected the firing mechanism," he said, standing up and coming towards us to show us the bomb.

We inspected the device. It was filled with enough explosive to destroy the Kubi and all of its occupants.

"Why didn't it go off?" I asked him.

"Useless battery, look, they used a dud. Probably didn't realise it, else we would have gone up like Mount Vesuvius."

"The materials to make the bomb, do you recognise them?"

"Oh, yes, Sir. Before I transferred to the SS I was in an engineer regiment. It's all standard stuff. German, of course."

I went with von Betternich back to his office.

"Well, Hoffman, what do you think now of my investigation? More of your partisans?"

"Possibly not, Sir, but I'm not sure who could have done it."

Clearly the bomb could have been planted at any time recently, when we visited the Langemarck Regiment, even before then at the camp of Der Fuhrer Regiment. Or here, within Deutschland Regiment itself.

"So the questions we have to ask ourselves are who is doing it and why is it so vital to them that they stop my investigation?"

"Maybe it is a conspiracy, Sir, one to destroy the SS from within."

Even as I said it I realised how absurd that premise was. I wasn't aware of the current strength of the Waffen SS on all fronts, but it had to be more than half a million men under arms.

"But surely it must be partisans behind it, what other explanation would there be?"

The SD officer looked at me steadily. "In my experience as a policeman there are only a limited number of motives for murder. There are crimes of passion, of course. Revenge, that's not uncommon. Then there are the psychotic killers, they do it purely for the thrill of it. Lastly, there is financial gain, by far the biggest motivator of men."

"Are you saying that these officers were robbed when they were killed?"

"It doesn't appear that way, no."

"So do we have a mad killer on the loose?"

"Probably not, no."

I was becoming exasperated with von Betternich. He was clearly not prepared to share his thoughts about the murders, which was his right, but if he wanted my cooperation it was making things much more difficult. It came as no surprise to me that he was almost reading my thoughts.

"You need patience, Hoffman. I have some ideas but nothing definite. Have you decided to assist me now that they've tried to kill you too?"

"Yes, of course, Sir." And when I found them I'd like to hang them from the nearest tree.

"There you are, Untersturmfuhrer, you have a strong incentive to keep in mind while we look for the killer. Self preservation."

I was certain that he would always be one jump ahead of me. As for the murderer, or murderers, if there were such people and it wasn't just a succession of unfortunate coincidences perpetrated by partisans, it may even come down to whether they could kill von Betternich before he discovered who they were. I think I would have put my money on the wily old policeman, except that staying alive on the Eastern Front was as much a

matter of luck as of skill. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. My own side may have tried to kill me, fellow SS men. I was outraged, frightened and furious in equal measures. They would have to be stopped.

# CHAPTER FOUR

*"In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet, and have usually been ridiculed for it. During the time of my struggle for power, it was in the first instance only the Jewish race that received my prophecies with laughter when I said that I would one day take over the leadership of the state and with it that of the whole nation and that I would then among other things settle the Jewish problem...but I think that for some time now they have been laughing on the other side of their face. Today I will once more be a prophet: if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevising of the earth and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."*
*Adolf Hitler January 1939*

Later that evening Sturmbannfuhrer Muller again approached me.

"Hoffman, have you considered this business with the SD?"

"Sir, I have, I shall continue to assist Sturmbannfuhrer von Betternich."

His face went red with anger. "I thought I made it clear that I take a dim view of my officers helping this," he paused to think of a suitable word, "this policeman, he's poking his nose into the regiment's affairs when we're trying to fight a war. If the CO hadn't been killed he'd never have allowed it."

"But, Sir, the CO was almost certainly murdered by the same person, or persons."

"Rubbish. Colonel Brandt was killed by partisans."

I didn't answer, but I was beginning to agree with von Betternich. Partisans were not known to be that selective, they'd shoot officers only when targets of opportunity appeared, otherwise they'd just snipe at anyone. Muller wasn't done with me.

"Hoffman, I'm beginning to wonder if you're the right kind of officer for the SS, perhaps you should consider a transfer to the Wehrmacht."

I was stunned. It was almost like suggesting I desert to the Russians.

"I would prefer to say here, Sir, in the SS."

"Well, you'll need to learn to behave like an SS officer, won't you?"

He stormed off and I wondered had I made the right decision. Yet they had tried to kill me. I was determined to find out who was behind it and ignore Muller's threats for the present, I know my father would have done exactly the same thing.

I went back inside the church where my platoon had clustered around the old iron stove, the temperature outside was well below freezing, as usual. I wondered about the monks, they sat around a small fire out in the open, close to the camp. Surely they would freeze to death in these conditions, they needed to be indoors. Some of them were old men, outdoors on the Russian steppe in winter was no place for them. I felt guilty as I warmed my hands on the stove, after all, this was their place before we came here. I was sitting in their church, warming myself on timber that had undoubtedly come from their church property.

"What do we do now, Sir?" Mundt asked.

"We carry on as before, I'm determined to find out who's behind this, Sergeant. You feel the same, one or more of our people are trying to kill our own men, to kill us, even. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not as much as having a bomb hidden under my backside, Sir, no."

"So you think we should give up, Mundt?"

He squirmed, I'd spoken sharply to him. "Well, maybe, yes, perhaps it's not a good idea to keep going, surely you can see that? That bomb was just a warning."

"No, I can't see it that way at all." The others were watching with interest, but I didn't care, I was sick of being pushed around. "It's quite simple, you see. I was brought up never to walk away from a fight, and I'm not walking away from this one. Goodnight, gentlemen."

I got up, pushed my blanket screen aside, and slumped down on my mattress. I'd joined the SS to fight the enemy, not our own soldiers. I knew exactly where my loyalties lay, it was just that not everyone else did.

The following morning I reported to von Betternich's office with Mundt and three of the men. He seemed more cheerful.

"Ah, Hoffman, we're going to see the surgeon, come along with me, perhaps you'll all learn something."

Inside the temporary morgue, Colonel Brandt's body was laid out as I'd

seen it before. There was no need for refrigeration, the temperature never went above freezing even during the day. The surgeon looked irritated again maybe he had a hangover. Heavy drinking was by no means unusual on the Eastern Front, we'd all been warned about it.

"What now?" he snapped. "I told you everything I know."

"Yes, of course you did," von Betternich replied. "Since then, I had the other post mortem reports forwarded to you, the ones concerning the previous officers that were killed."

"And?" the surgeon said, his manner growing surlier by the minute. "You do realise that I still have many wounded men to attend to?"

"If you think I am impeding your duties, feel free to make a report and I will attach it in my next report to the Reichsfuhrer, Doctor. He has a personal interest in this affair. Perhaps you would prefer this to be a Gestapo investigation, you could of course suggest that to him."

The surgeon had tried to bluff it out, that was clear. Equally clear was that his mind had worked through the various possible outcomes of non-cooperation, he quickly backed down. The Gestapo was the trump card. Generalleutnant der Polizei Ernst Kaltenbrunner was both head of the Sicherheitsdienst and the Geheime Staatspolizei, as every member of the SS well knew. It was well within von Betternich's power to call in the Gestapo.

"What do you want to know, Major?"

"You have had time to look at those reports, my question is simple. Were they all killed in a similar manner, a bullet from a Kar 98?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact they were. It was partisans, of course. They are known to use our own weapons against us, it's nothing new."

"Yes. Doctor, describe for me how you believe the Colonel was shot."

"It's only guesswork of course."

Von Betternich nodded.

"I would say that he was shot from behind, probably at quite long range, none of his soldiers saw who shot him so the shooter must have been quite some distance away. The Colonel would have been going forward. The marksman was armed with a Kar 98, positioned in a slightly elevated position from Brandt, perhaps in a tree or on top of a vehicle. He fired, the bullet angled downwards and hit him from behind and went straight into his heart, where it lodged in the ventricle, as you already know. Had the shot been from closer range, the bullet would almost certainly have gone straight through him and we would never have recovered it."

“And the other senior officers who were killed?”

“Yes just the same, remarkable really, an amazing coincidence.”

“That the shooter identified and killed all of the officers from a similar distance in a similar way with a similar gun?”

“Indeed, yes, well...” he tailed off.

“Thank you, Doctor. Write everything up you just told me and send it across to my office. Hoffman, we’re leaving.”

He limped away and we hurried after him. “Where to next, Sir?”

“Get the Kubelwagen and make sure it’s clear of any explosives. We’re off to SS Der Fuhrer Headquarters to speak to Standartenfuhrer Stettner.”

Voss and Mundt checked the Kubi over thoroughly, someone was obviously serious about us not finishing this investigation and their inspection was meticulous. Finally they said it was clear of any explosives or booby traps and we drove away to find the temporary HQ of Der Fuhrer Regiment. Like us, they were Panzer Grenadiers attached to the Das Reich Division of the First Panzer Army. The Regiment was settled in a small village about five kilometres from Deutschland HQ, if the Russian artillery barrage hadn’t started we might have reached there in less than ten minutes. Instead, we had only driven a kilometre before we were pinned down as both sides exchanged artillery fire. About half a kilometre away I could make out the dark grey shapes of some of our tanks, the Second Panzer Regiment were laagered just inside the tree line of a nearby wood, clearly the Russians were aiming at what they assumed was their location. Instead, they found us.

Voss drove the Kubi off the road and into some trees. We scrambled out and dove into the nearest shell hole as more rounds whistled in and landed nearby. They fell all through the wood, trees splintered to matchwood as shell after shell destroyed the ancient trunks that gave us our shelter. Von Betternich was next to me, looking with interest towards the bright flashes that lit up the Russian positions as their guns fired.

“They don’t know their business, do they?” he said to me.

“Sir?”

“They’re hitting the wrong trees, Hoffman, obviously they wanted to hit the tanks in that wood over there.”

I could see our Panzers, they had started up, smoke pouring from their exhausts and they moved off in formation towards the enemy.

“Perhaps someone saw our Kubi and mistook it for a staff car,” Mundt said. “They watch out for things like that, the Russians are not all that

stupid."

"Nor that clever, Mundt, they've missed the tanks altogether," I replied.

Our Panzers went into action, we could see the explosions as they fired their main guns at the Russians and the artillery barrage slackened as the gunners took shelter from the deadly barrage. Our own artillery stopped firing altogether to avoid hitting our tanks. We couldn't see anything now, just flashes of fire and smoke everywhere, a thick fog, deafening explosions and the chatter of machine guns. Then the first of our tanks came back, racing out of the far wood, heading straight towards us, swerving to avoid the Russian anti-tank fire.

"Let's go," Mundt shouted. Before I could protest, he and the men almost threw von Betternich and me bodily into the Kubi and Voss was driving away at speed.

"Scharfuhrer, what the hell is going on?" I asked, when I finally had time to get over the shock of being manhandled by my own men.

"Russian counterattack, Sir, they're coming this way," Mundt gasped.

The Kubi rocked on its springs as Voss flung it along the track and then braked to a halt.

"Russian artillery, they're covering the road, we can't get past them."

We could see the guns, they'd rushed them up on the flank of their T34s, it was obviously an ambush. A shell whistled overhead.

"They've seen us!" Beidenberg shouted. "I can see one of their soldiers pointing at us."

Another shell whistled past and exploded in the trees.

"Voss, turn around man, hurry," I snapped.

He flung the Kubi around and hared back the way we had come. Ahead and to the side of us, our Panzers were still racing away from the enemy.

"Very clever, don't you think, Hoffman?"

"If you say so, Sir."

Von Betternich was watching the enemy action with keen interest. I wished that he would put his brain to work to find us a way out of this, we were in serious trouble and it wasn't even our fight.

"But I do say so, it's a clever trap, the Russians caught our Panzers with their pants down."

I didn't reply, up ahead a group of T34s had almost reached the track, we were boxed in.

The Panzers just crashed into the trees in their headlong flight away

from the Russians, their immense weight and power with the grip of their caterpillar tracks smashed a way through for them. Our Kubelwagen was a simple, two-wheel drive vehicle based on a Volkswagen saloon car. The off road performance was lamentable, but it was all we had.

"Into the trees, Voss, try and follow a trail that the Panzers have made."

He threw the wheel over and we began bumping through the deep wood. He twisted and turned to follow the path blazed by the tanks, I thought we'd got away with it until I was suddenly flying through the air. I landed heavily, the Kubi was upturned in a deep gully concealed by foliage. The dip was no barrier to a Tiger tank but impassable for our vehicle. Von Betternich was lying on the ground groaning, at least he was alive. The others seemed unhurt, Voss, Mundt, Beidenberg and Merkel picked up the SD officer and carried him away from the wrecked Kubi.

"Down into the gully, quickly, the Russians are nearly on us."

We scrambled down into the cover of the shallow ravine and hid in the foliage. The thundering of the T34s was awesome, diesel engines roaring, guns firing, machine guns chattering as they swept after our Panzers. One roared right over our position, its tracks carrying it like a portable bridge over the narrow ravine as it plunged on. Then another and another. Some had tank riders clinging grimly to their hulls, it seemed like a suicidal way to go into battle, probably it was. Then they were past in their frantic pursuit and the wood started to go quiet. I looked down at von Betternich.

"How are you, Sir? Have you been injured?"

He gave a tired smile. "I'm too old for this, Hoffman. No, I'm not injured, just a few bruises. Where are we?"

"Behind the Russian lines, Sir."

We kept down in the shelter of the gully for over an hour, waiting for the last of the Russians to go past. Several stragglers came by, bringing up supplies, one unit dragging along a Maxim machine gun on its two-wheeled carriage. Then we were on our own. They were all looking at me, von Betternich was the senior officer but he deftly passed the ball to me.

"I'm just a policeman, Hoffman, I wouldn't dream of interfering in military matters. I'm sure you'll find a way out for us back to our own lines."

I went a few metres away from them to clear my head and tried to think. In front of us, to the west, we had what had looked like a division of Soviet tanks. To the north, there were the Soviet anti-tank guns, dug into their position to support the tanks, behind us to the east was most of the Soviet

army, several million men. The solution was obvious. I went back to them.

"We head south. The T34s were blocking us there but hopefully they've pushed on as part of the Russian advance. Voss, Mundt, can we get the Kubi operational again?"

They looked at me in shocked surprise. "But, Sir, it's smashed, besides, how would we get it out of the gully?"

"You must have ropes, Voss. Isn't there a winch attached to the front?"

"Well, yes, there is, but I doubt the engine will run."

"Why not?"

He scratched his head. "It may run, I suppose."

"We'll try it, get the ropes and let's try and get it out first."

Fortunately, it had slewed around so that the front was facing us, they were able to fasten the ropes to the winch and the other end to a strong tree. They began winching and within ten minutes the wheels started to show above the edge of the gully.

"Wouldn't it be better to walk back?" von Betternich asked me.

"We don't know how far the advance reached, Sir. Suppose it was fifty miles to our new headquarters?"

"I see what you mean."

The Kubi finally got onto level ground. It was bent and buckled in places but intact. We all heaved on one side of the bodywork and managed to right it. Voss pressed the starter and the engine fired immediately, they looked around with wide grins. Someone muttered something about Volkswagen engines, 'take you anywhere'.

"Well done, men," I told them. "Let's get in and head back to the track, then we'll turn south."

Voss drove carefully through the wood, back the way we had come until the track came into view. I asked him to stop before we got into open ground and I went forward on foot with Mundt. It was a no-go. The Soviets had established an encampment within full view of the track, not much more than a kilometre from where we stood. They had already begun to pitch mess tents and even from this distance, I could smell food cooking. I felt hungry, wondering when we'd get our next meal. Mundt was licking his lips.

"Do we have any food in the Kubi, Sergeant?" I asked him. It should have been a routine mission, we'd not been part of any planned attack and there'd been no obvious need to bring supplies. That was then, now we were stuck out on the frozen steppes, behind enemy lines and getting hungry.

Mundt shook his head. Well, we'd have to be hungry, it was quite simple. We walked back to the Kubi and I explained the problem to them.

"So that way is blocked, we have to go forward through the wood, we'll follow another tank trail and keep away from any holes in the ground this time. Any questions?"

"Perhaps if we get the opportunity we should take a prisoner, Untersturmfuhrer? Find out where the front lines have moved on to?" von Betternich suggested.

"Yes, Sir, that's a good idea. In the meantime, we'll keep moving south west until we meet up with our own lines." Or until we run into a Russian division of tanks, I didn't add. We got into the Kubi and Voss drove away carefully, watching the forest ground for ditches and holes. We stopped once and Mundt cleared the bodywork from where it was fouling the rear wheel, it had been making a loud clanking noise. After that, it was quieter.

It took us an hour to reach the edge of the wood. In front of us, to the southwest was a small town, possibly a village, a regiment of Soviet tanks had stopped immediately outside. To the west was an area of unbroken steppes with no sign of movement, to the north were more low snow-covered hills and woods. There was no obvious sign of the enemy over there and we picked our way carefully in that direction. It was also the direction of Korenevo, our last regimental headquarters. We skirted the edge of the wood, several times Voss drove into the trees when aircraft flew over. Finally, I estimated that we were within three kilometres of Korenevo and still no sign of the enemy. It seemed incredible that the Soviets could have swept across the wide battlefield and swung away from our headquarters but I had to allow for the possibility that our HQ was still operational. While we were tucked inside the shelter of the trees, we all heard the sound of an engine coming towards us, I deployed the men out of sight. Von Betternich sheltered behind the Kubi while Voss stayed to guard the vehicle, Mundt sent Merkel and Beidenberg to our flank with the MG34 and then came with me to the edge of the wood. We saw the jeep moving slowly towards us, then it stopped, less than fifty metres away. It was an American Willys adorned with a red star, the Russians had been given hundreds of these by their American allies and when they fell into our hands they were highly prized. Unlike our Kubelwagen they were four-wheel drives and kept going in the snow and mud that was a constant hazard on the Eastern Front. The jeep had a driver and a single occupant, he looked to be a middle ranking officer but I couldn't

see his rank badges from where we were.

"Why have they stopped?" Mundt asked.

"Maybe to take a leak, Sergeant?"

I got out my binoculars and focussed on the jeep. The officer had his own binoculars and was looking west. While he did so, the driver was setting up a radio aerial, a complicated affair with several poles and guy ropes. On the back seat of the Willys was the radio, bulky and complicated looking with many dials and knobs. It was all too good an opportunity to miss.

"We need to take them," I said to Mundt. "I'll watch them, tell Voss and the other two to leave the MG34, we'll start working our way through the trees until we're close, then we can just surprise them."

"No MG34? It could be useful if they see us coming."

"We may be able to use the radio, I don't want it shot full of holes."

"Right."

He crept away and was back minutes later with the men. I told them what I wanted and we started to creep through the trees towards the Russians. When we were abreast of them and no more than twenty metres away, we cocked our weapons.

"No shooting if you can avoid it, I want that radio."

They nodded and we crawled slowly across the forest floor. Voss was covering us with the rifle he'd brought from the Kubi, if they spotted us he would try and hit them with well-aimed shots that would avoid the radio. However, when we reached the edge of the wood it was very undramatic, we jumped up, Merkel spoke to them in Russian.

"You are now our prisoners, put your hands up!"

The officer, who was a captain, looked at us in shock. We were well behind their lines, the last place he had expected to find a contingent of SS. His driver simply put up his hands and waited in that resigned way we'd found was typical of both the Russian soldier and peasant, as if they'd seen so much misery, what was a little more? Merkel and Beidenberg swiftly checked them and removed their weapons. Fortunately, the officer spoke some German, apparently there'd been something of a scramble to learn the language ever since we'd first invaded back in 1941. I heard the snap of a twig as someone approached and we all whirled around, but it was only von Betternich, limping forward to take a look. I addressed the captain.

"I wish to know how far your advance has taken you, where are your armies?"

Not the hero this one, he pointed straight across the steppes. “We’re camped about five kilometres in that direction, due west. Are you going to kill us?”

I couldn’t see how we could possibly deal with taking them back, but neither could I kill unarmed prisoners out of hand. I shook my head. “No.”

“What next, Hoffman?” von Betternich asked. “Is the radio useful to us?”

“I don’t think so, Sir. If the lines are only five kilometres away we could give our position away by using it.”

“And the prisoners? You know there is not enough room in our vehicle to bring both of them. We can hardly leave one of them here to raise the alarm. The officer could be useful, though.”

It was a difficult position, I looked across the endless steppes, hoping to see a sign of our troops but there was nothing only the village to the southwest, where the Russian tanks had halted.

In the end, I pumped the Russians for as much information as I could get from them. We tried the radio but were unable to raise our own people, perhaps they were on a frequency that the Russian set did not cover. I got the men to smash the radio and disable the Willys, Voss found a hammer and knocked a hole in the engine block and ripped out the wiring.

“It seems a shame, Sir, we could have used this vehicle back in our unit.”

“I’d sooner not re-enter our lines in a Soviet jeep covered in red stars, Voss. There have already been reports of our people firing on captured Willys jeeps that we’ve taken into service, we’re running enough risks as it is.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I smiled as he continued grumbling, but finally I was satisfied that the vehicle and radio were useless. We took the Soviets’ boots and weapons and the men tied the prisoners to the bodywork of the jeep with a length of fencing wire, I also got them to drain the petrol tank to give us extra fuel to get back. The prisoners would work loose eventually but I intended to be well clear of the area by that time. Von Betternich was sceptical.

“Your concern is touching, Untersturmfuhrer, I just hope it doesn’t get us killed.”

“Would you like to shoot them yourself, Sir?”

He smiled. “I’m just a policeman, Hoffman, why would I do that?

That's a job for a soldier."

But he didn't argue very forcefully. I suspected that he was more policeman, than SD thug. The security services had a reputation for having both in its ranks, from the former SD leader Heydrich, an intellectual and sportsman, to Muller, the notorious head of the Gestapo department of the RSHA. Muller was the very personification of the Gestapo, murderous to anyone who fell foul of the Gestapo, he was known to be almost as vicious and ruthless with his own people. He had little allegiance to any political persuasion, other than the one that would give him career advancement. More than one party member had gone on record as stating that they could not understand how so odious an opponent of the movement could become head of the Gestapo. He had once referred to Hitler as 'an immigrant unemployed house painter' and 'an Austrian draft-dodger'. Hardly the way to ingratiate himself with the leaders of the Third Reich, yet his tireless brutality had taken him to the very top of his profession. Muller would of course have shot the prisoners, probably tortured them first for fun.

We returned to the Kubi and drove on, keeping close to the trees so that we could duck inside at any time. For several kilometres, we saw no sign of any soldiers, neither the enemy nor ours. Suddenly, an artillery barrage bellowed out from within the trees about a kilometre in front of us. The distant ground suddenly boiled with tanks and men, our own Panzers were attacking, I felt like cheering. We hid in the trees and watched the glorious sight of an SS Panzer Regiment charging across the plain. They were accompanied by STuGIII assault guns and behind them dozens of other self-propelled guns and Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251armoured half-tracks. Das Reich Division was at last attacking in strength, putting a stop to the Russians being able to pick them off piecemeal with their constant harrying attacks. Thirty or more T34s raced out of the wood to intercept them and we could see the Soviet tanks in the southwest manoeuvring to join the battle. We were in a unique position to observe the action, on a low hill where we could see for several kilometres north, south and west. The Soviet artillery kept up a ferocious barrage, but so far failed to hit any of our tanks or half-tracks. The T34s joined in, but were equally unsuccessful. Our own tanks scored heavily, decimating the Soviet armour, the STuGIIIs kept up a furious rate of fire and our artillery, concealed in a distant wood, kept up a ferocious rate of counter battery fire that annihilated the Russian guns. For ten minutes the battle raged but it was one sided, we'd caught the Russians unprepared this time and even

when their tanks joined in from the southwest there were not enough to turn the tide. A green flare burned brightly in the sky and the Russian survivors turned abruptly and headed east. Behind them they left more than half of their vehicles burned and broken on the battlefield, yet our own losses were light, no more than three tanks and a STuGIII destroyed. My platoon shouted with joy, I almost felt like joining in it was a redoubtable victory. I told the men to get into the Kubi and we drove across the steppe, straight for our own troops. I was counting on the distinctive shape of the Kubelwagen to protect us from itchy trigger fingers.

A Tiger commander, an Obersturmfuhrer, watched warily as we approached, I could see the co-axial machine gun keeping us covered.

"Who are you?"

I explained that we had been caught behind the lines. The presence of an SD Sturmbannfuhrer helped persuade him that we were genuine and I sensed the finger on the trigger of the machine gun relaxing.

"My congratulations on beating the Russians, it was very impressive," I said to him sincerely.

"Thanks, but we'll need to do more than this, they've retaken Kursk."

We were all shocked. Kursk had been bitterly fought over, but our assumption was that it would only be a matter of time before we used it as a springboard for the renewal of the offensive east.

"So what was this lot all about?" I asked him.

"The Soviets had pushed a salient through our lines, they threatened to divide us. Before we can even think about Kursk we needed to re-unite our armies, now that we've beaten them back we can regroup to try and take Kursk again."

So we had to do it all again. I was still new to this, but I knew that my platoon had been involved in the bitter fighting around both Kursk and Kharkov. The bitter disillusionment on their faces was a testament to the failure of our armies to make progress against the Soviet juggernaut. He gave us directions to Deutschland HQ and I thanked him, Voss drove us away in silence. Von Betternich leaned towards me.

"Hubris, Hoffman. Just when you think things are going well, the gods snatch victory away from you."

"I thought it was the Soviets that did that," I snapped back

He smiled. "Yes, of course, you are right."

We drove on in silence. Soon we started to reach the first signs of our

division, supplies, ammunition and replacements being rushed backwards and forwards. We stopped next to a Feldgendarmerie post and were given directions. Ten minutes later we drove into the temporary camp of SS Deutschland Regiment, the men scattered to the cookhouse to find food. Von Betternich disappeared into the radio tent, presumably to contact Berlin. Muller appeared, he was in a foul mood.

"Hoffman, where the hell have you been?"

I explained that we were heading for SS Der Fuhrer Regiment when we got caught in the Russian advance.

"That's all very well, but we had our hands full fighting the Russians, as did Der Fuhrer, while you were messing around with that damn SD man. I've a good mind to charge you for dereliction of duty."

"Look, Sir, I don't want this assignment any more than you do. I'd much prefer fighting with the regiment, but the Sturmbannfuhrer insists that this mission is essential for the morale of the whole division. We've lost some good commanders, Sir, including our own CO."

"To partisans, yes, they're always active behind our lines. You know how I feel about this, I'll speak to von Betternich later. Dismissed, Hoffman, get yourself something to eat."

I went to the cookhouse and scrounged up a bowl of stew and some black bread, our division seemed to fight on the same fare every day. Mundt was still there with the platoon.

"What do we do next, Sir," he asked me anxiously. "The men are not happy about this SD business, some of the other units are starting to haze them about it."

I was tired of the whole business too, but I couldn't admit it to an NCO. "Anything you can't handle, Scharfuhrer?"

"Not yet, Sir, but it could get worse. They're asking if our men are here to fight the enemy or to grass them up to the police."

"It's to be expected, I suppose. I think things are coming to a head, the CO is pretty fed up about losing half a platoon to the SD too. Give it a little longer, maybe we'll be able to get out of it."

Mundt nodded, but he was anything but happy.

In the late afternoon, Muller called me to his temporary office, which was a tent fastened to the side of his Horch armoured car. When I went in, von Betternich was already there. It was obvious that they had been arguing. The policeman nodded to me in a friendly way, Muller just glared.

“I want to clear this nonsense up once and for all,” he spat out. “This investigation is interfering with the smooth running of this unit, it’s got to stop and I want all of my officers available to fight. That includes you, Hoffman.”

“Sir!” I acknowledged.

“So Sturmbannfuhrer von Betternich, would you kindly find someone else to assist you and leave my men to carry out their duties, clear?”

“Of course it’s clear,” the SD man smiled. “But equally, of course, I have my own orders from Berlin.”

“Berlin is a long way from here. They have no idea of what kind of a war we are fighting.”

“I’ll make your feelings known to them, Sturmbannfuhrer,” von Betternich smiled gently.

Muller knew he was being played but wasn’t sure how far he could go. I pitied him, he was honestly trying to maintain a fighting regiment under difficult conditions. As it happened, an unexpected arrival took the decision of how to cope with the SD out of his hands.

“Achtung!”

There was the sound of vehicle engines and he opened the tent flap to look out. A convoy of vehicles was coming through the snow, in the lead an armoured half-track flying a general’s pennant. A senior officer sat rigidly in the rear looking around at the camp. We all recognised the figure of Obergruppenfuhrer und General der Waffen-SS Paul Hausser, the commander of Second SS Panzer Corps. Muller’s face dropped as the vehicles braked to a halt and soldiers jumped out and took up position around the General’s car. Then he got out and waited for Muller to approach. He was a tall, immaculate man, wearing a general officer’s greatcoat with contrasting lapels. Even in the snow his jackboots gleamed, at his throat was the Knight’s Cross he had won during the Barbarossa campaign. Under the command of von Manstein, he was regarded as a superb officer and clever tactician, the right man to turn the campaign on the Eastern Front around. He was well-liked and widely known in Das Reich by the nickname ‘Papa’. Muller rushed up to greet him, clicked his heels to attention, right arm straight up in the salute.

“Heil Hitler, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer, this is an honour.”

Hausser casually returned the salute. I’m on an inspection of our front line troops, Muller, tell me, how is everything going?”

He took Muller by the arm and led him away in the direction of our vehicle park to look at our half-tracks. All around the camp, men were running to get into their units ready for inspection, pulling on jackboots and helmets and shouldering their weapons. Hausser's entourage followed while he went around and looked at the vehicles, spoke to officers and men and generally made himself known to all of us. As much as anything, it was clearly a morale-boosting mission and it worked.

I was waiting with von Betternich next to Muller's armoured car when the General and Muller came back. They went inside the tent and von Betternich was called in. I heard them talking in quiet voices for a short time, something about Kharkov, then the voices became heated. Finally, Hausser snapped out an order of some sort and they all went quiet again. After a few more minutes, the tent flap opened and Hausser emerged, said a friendly goodbye to the troops and drove off in his half-track. Muller called me into his tent with von Betternich.

"It seems that your platoon is to continue to assist the SD," he said. "I'll leave you to it."

He nodded to von Betternich and gave him a half salute. "Sir." Then he left.

I raised my eyebrows.

"It seems that the Reichsfuhrer has decided to promote me, Hoffman, I am now an Obersturmbannfuhrer."

"Congratulations, Sir."

"Thank you, yes. But I think my promotion is to facilitate this investigation more than for any reason of merit. Now, in the morning we will try again to meet Standartenfuhrer Werner Stettner, the CO of Der Fuhrer Regiment. Let's hope the Russians do not get in our way this time."

I went to rejoin my platoon, the men had rigged a series of lean-tos, that made our previous accommodation in the church at Korenevo seem positively luxurious. Mundt had made sure that I had a screened off shelter for myself, although I noted with amusement that it was furthest from the campfire that they had built. I decided to try and enjoy some of its warmth before I got some sleep. Merkel poured me a mug of coffee unasked. I was astonished. It tasted like coffee.

"Where the hell did you get this?"

They all looked away and I set my mind to thinking, who would have

had access to real coffee on the Eastern Front in the middle of winter? Then it hit me, of course!

"I trust General Hausser can spare this?" I asked them. In the darkness, a soldier said 'General Who?' But I let it go. It was worth it for the coffee.

"What's new, Sir?" Mundt asked. "Can we go back to being full-time soldiers again?"

"I'm afraid not, Sergeant. Not just yet. The Obersturmbannfuhrer wishes to visit Der Fuhrer Regiment in the morning."

They raised their eyebrows when they heard his new rank.

"Maybe this mysterious shooter will put a round through his brain," someone murmured.

That of course was always a possibility and was in part why we were escorting him. But in that case, it would be proved that one of our own people was doing the killing which meant that the mission really was fully justified. Why the hell couldn't they leave aside their stupid squabbles until the war was over? The Russians wouldn't leave me alone, that was for sure, but at least my own people could. That wasn't too much to ask for, or perhaps it was. I almost wished for von Betternich to meet with an accident, at least a slight wound so that he could be recalled and leave me to continue with my military career. But somehow he seemed to possess a charmed life, a way of deftly avoiding the potholes that life put in his way. Perhaps it was what he had learned as a policeman. Or maybe within the Sicherheitsdienst.

# CHAPTER FIVE

*"I can give vent to my inmost feelings only in the form of humble thanks to Providence which called upon me and vouchsafed it to me, once an unknown soldier of the Great War, to rise to be the Leader of my people, so dear to me. Providence showed me the way to free our people from the depths of its misery without bloodshed and to lead it upward once again. Providence granted that I might fulfill my life's task-to raise my German people out of the depths of defeat and to liberate it from the bonds of the most outrageous dictate of all times... I have regarded myself as called upon by Providence to serve my own people alone and to deliver them from their frightful misery."*
*Adolf Hitler April 1939*

I was awoken in the morning with another mug of General Hausser's excellent coffee. I buckled on my kit and rounded up the men ready to accompany von Betternich. Our Kubi was still serviceable, though very battered, and we piled into it ready to leave. The SD officer limped out, I noticed his lapels bore the badges of his new rank. He was reading through a sheaf of reports and barely waved a good morning to me. We drove off, Der Fuhrer was encamped only two kilometres away and we soon arrived in their headquarters, part of an old wayside railway station. A train was stationary in the siding, the engine steaming away in the cold air while soldiers worked to unload supplies of food and ammunition. We were shown into the CO's office, obviously it had been the stationmaster's in happier times. Standartenfuhrer Werner Stettner sat on a peculiar chair in front of the fireplace, a fire was blazing in the hearth and his orderly was throwing extra logs on the blaze. An adjutant was standing nearby, an Obersturmfuhrer, with a sneering expression on his face.

"Gentlemen, do come in," he shouted to us.

Mundt waited outside the door with Merkel and Beidenberg while Voss stayed with the vehicle. Stettner was an interesting sight. A handsome, lean man of about thirty-five, his uniform was battered and well-worn. At his throat, a Knight's Cross hung at a careless angle and he was unshaven. His feet were on a wooden stool warming at the fire, his jackboots on the floor. Next to him was a battle-worn MP38 together with a creased leather belt holding a pistol holster. The picture was clear, probably deliberately, he was a fighting soldier with little time for the formalities.

Von Betternich and I came to attention. "Heil Hitler," we chorused.

Stettner just waved, as if Hitler was of no consequence.

"What can I do for the SD?" His expression was friendly enough, I noted.

My eyes were drawn to his chair, virtually a throne. It had an enclosed base decorated with carvings, the arms and back were also carved. All the woodwork was painted in gilt with rich, red velvet upholstery over the arms and back, though it was very worn and threadbare.

"We are investigating the untimely deaths of several senior officers," von Betternich explained.

"There's a war on, my friend. Doesn't the SD know that?"

"Of course, Sir. May I have permission to look at your unit's movement records, perhaps I could speak with some of your men?"

Abruptly Stettner stood up, his expression was no longer friendly.

"Now listen to me. To the east, we are barely holding, Kursk has already fallen. SS Leibstandarte and some of our Wehrmacht units are defending Kharkov, but reports suggest that the Russians are trying to encircle us and take the city, which could mean the loss of two divisions of troops unless by some miracle they can get out before the Russians complete their manoeuvre. Der Fuhrer has orders to prepare to go to their assistance with other elements of the SS Panzer Corps. Now, you come here and tell me that you want to waste our time by inspecting my records and talking to the men. What would you say if you were me, Obersturmbannfuhrer?"

He'd picked the wrong man to reason with. "I'd obey my orders, Sir," von Betternich said.

Stettner was silent for a moment, and then he nodded. "Very well, but not now, you'll have to wait. You may return after the matter of Kharkov is decided and conduct your investigation then, not before. Clear?"

"Of course," the SD officer said. "Thank you, Sir."

We saluted and walked out of the office, I was astonished that the policeman had given up so easily. I should have known that he knew exactly what I was thinking.

"I got what I came for, Hoffman, don't worry. After they've finished their little squabble over Kharkov we'll be back and do as the CO suggested."

I half smiled at his description of a little squabble, several armoured divisions, perhaps even two Soviet armies as well, manoeuvring to take or defend the city. I didn't however give him the satisfaction of asking exactly what he'd got from this visit, he'd tell me when he wanted to, not before. Merkel was chatting to a Sturmscharführer, they seemed to know each other. We walked back to the Kubi.

"Merkel, you are a friend of that NCO?"

He smiled. "Yes, he helped me out a lot when I was younger. When I joined the Hitler Youth he taught me to shoot."

"Are you any good?"

He smiled. "Artur Vinckmann helped me get my sniper qualification."

"Excellent, that may well come in useful, Merkel."

Von Betternich turned to Mundt, "Did you find out, Scharfuhrer?"

"Yes, Sir. Their Sturmscharführer Artur Vinckmann, as you suggested, Sir."

"Thank you."

He saw my expression. “I merely asked Mundt to find out who is the best shot in the regiment.”

“So you think it’s Vinckmann?”

He shook his head. “It’s too early to draw any conclusions. Don’t forget that we’re looking into the records after Kharkov is decided, until then we mustn’t jump to conclusions. Let’s get back to your unit, Hoffman, I need to contact Berlin.”

I wondered should I mention that Merkel had known Vinckmann before the war, but I decided to keep quiet. In any case von Betternich probably knew already. I was surprised he’d been put off so easily. Surprised and uneasy, there was something he wasn’t telling me. As usual.

We drove back along the icy track. Snow was still falling and the temperature was dropping fast, when we got back to HQ von Betternich commandeered Muller’s armoured car and used the long-range radio while Muller stood out in the snow tapping his foot. We waited nearby for our orders. When he climbed out, he was all smiles.

“I am to report to Division, so you and your men will get your wish to go back to being ordinary soldiers, at least for now, Hoffman. General Hausser is sending a car to collect me, the Reichsfuhrer has one of his personal representatives there waiting to discuss my findings.”

“Anything more we can do for you, Sir, you’ve only to let me know,” Muller said. I had to hide a smile, he’d done his best to obstruct the SD man ever since he arrived.

“Thank you, Muller. And all of you, thank you for your help, I am sure I’ll be seeing you all again once we’ve decided on our next move.”

Divisional HQ was only five kilometres away and ten minutes later a long, black Mercedes limousine drew up and von Betternich got in and drove away. Muller stared after him with relief.

“That’s it, Hoffman. You can rejoin your platoon, I’m calling a meeting of all my officers later today, you’re aware of the difficulties we’re facing around Kharkov?”

“The Russians threatening to encircle, Sir?”

“Exactly. The 1st SS Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler is holding the line at Kharkov, but intelligence reports that the Ivans are gathering their forces to attempt a classic encirclement. General Hausser wants his 2nd Division Das Reich to be ready to move against them. Staff meeting is at eleven hundred hours, you’ll find out all you need to know then. A good job

with the SD man, by the way, you seemed to keep him happy and off of my back."

"Thank you, Sir."

I saluted and left to find my platoon, utterly confused. One moment I was the black sheep of the regiment for escorting the SD officer, now that he had gone I was back in favour. With the departure of von Betternich it was as if a black cloud had been lifted off the regiment. I found the men shivering underneath a canvas shelter and warming their hands on a fire made of wood and old engine oil, it stank terribly. I told the men about the forthcoming operation at Kharkov. There was the usual SS competitiveness.

"So the Leibstandarte need us to bail their arses out, do they?" Beidenberg said with a degree of satisfaction.

"Josef, I think they are facing two Soviet armies, it's hardly surprising that they're having trouble holding the line."

It was obvious from their jeers that they didn't agree with me, but I ignored it and started on an inspection to check our ammunition inventory and equipment. While I was talking, there was the sudden clamour of an armoured half-track clanking into the camp and I looked around to see our Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 being driven into the camp. Grinning at us from the open cockpit was Stefan Bauer, recovered from his wound. He jumped down and winced as he hit the snowy ground, came up to me and saluted.

"Schutze Stefan Bauer reporting for duty, Sir."

"Are you fully recovered, Stefan?"

"Near enough, Sir, thank you. I am ok to fight, if that's what you mean. I gather we're going to need everyone to deal with this business around Kharkov."

So he already knew, clearly the difficulties of LAH were being discussed all around the Corps.

"Very well, check your weapons and ammunition, we may be in action very soon."

I completed my inspection and had a chance to see the repairs they had done to our vehicle. The mechanics had welded a steel plate over the hole in the bodywork and fitted new wheels and a track. We were fully mobile once more. Almost for the first time since I'd taken over the new platoon I felt confident, the SD were out of my hair and we had a formidable armoured division, Das Reich, that would soon be rolling towards Kharkov to obliterate the Soviet threat to our SS brethren in Leibstandarte. Who knew where we'd

go from there, maybe even Moscow, what more could a young officer want? Even the platoon seemed more cheerful and optimistic, no more gloom about thousands of Soviet T34s appearing out of the mist, this time we meant business. The cookhouse even outdid themselves with huge helpings of meat pie and gravy to fill our empty bellies. The meat was a little tough and I recalled seeing a pair of horses being led to an empty building nearby and the sound of two shots. Sometimes it was better to not see or hear certain things. The talk was about what we would be doing after we'd defeated the Russians, Voss was contemplating driving into Moscow in a limousine stolen from one of Stalin's commissars. He was still fantasising about the Russian beauties that he'd get to ride with him in his vehicle when I left them and reported to Muller for the officers' briefing.

There were more than fifty officers present, including two new arrivals, I was pleased to see that I was no longer the most junior officer in the Regiment. Muller outlined the battle plans, which involved a mixed fighting group comprising Der Fuhrer and Langemarck Regiments as well as some of the LAH units to assemble at the town of Merefa, ready to launch the main counterattack that would either destroy or drive the Soviet armies away from Kharkov. Our regiment, Deutschland, was to occupy the flanks and prevent our SS battle group being encircled. Although we faced several Soviet armies, intelligence reported that they were so under strength and ill equipped that they would be no match for a determined attack.

"Is that clear?" Muller asked. There were nods and shouts of assent. "Good. If this goes well, and it had better, we can push on towards Kursk and retake the city. From there, who knows, let's make sure we give the Ivans a bloody nose. Rejoin your men, we're moving off to our assembly points at four o'clock, ready to jump off for the attack at dawn tomorrow."

We hurried back to get started. I outlined the operation to the platoon and they started to load the half-track with supplies and ammunition. At four precisely, we drove away in a cloud of exhaust smoke, at last I was going to war, a proper battle. We drove for two hours and as it was getting dark, the Feldgendarmerie guided us to a temporary camp. A regiment of SS Panzers was already in position with a mix of Tiger tanks and STuGIII assault guns. In the artillery park, rank upon rank of guns was lined up ready to lay down a barrage and we had a dozen vehicle-mounted Nebelwerfers with which to pound the enemy. The Nebelwerfer 41s were fitted to firing frames, grouped together in a bank of six rockets that could hit the enemy at a range of two

kilometres. Some said their accuracy was lamentable, others that they had a devastating effect on enemy morale. We also had an anti-tank section with towed twenty-eight millimetre PAK guns that should be able to blunt the effect of the T34s. It was an imposing mix of might and armour and we were only the flank guards, the main battle group would be substantially larger. The following morning we woke up in the dark, a snowstorm was blowing hard.

The camp was alive with the clamour of shouts from NCOs, engines being warmed up and equipment being given final checks. It was still dark, but the real problem was the snow. It literally fell from the sky in thick, rich flakes, visibility was less than fifty metres. Mundt came and told me that the cookhouse was serving breakfast.

"Stew and black bread, Scharfuhrer?"

"How did you guess, Sir?" he answered with a smile. "Snow's going to be a problem."

"More of a problem for the enemy," I replied. "They won't see us coming, we'll roll straight over them."

"Yes, Sir. The armourers have been around in the night fitting new machine guns to the half-tracks, we've got the MG42s now."

"Are they any different to the previous guns?"

"Armourers say they have a much higher rate of fire and they are more reliable, so yes, they'll be an improvement."

"Good. Let's get some breakfast while there's still some left."

I wolfed down the food and went to prepare the platoon, in truth there was nothing much to prepare, the half-track had been warmed up, refuelled and rearmed and was ready to go, the men assembled nearby. Promptly at five o'clock a whistle blew and we climbed aboard, along the line dozens of engines started and we roared off, following the Panzers.

The terrain was crazy, all we could do was follow the vehicle in front who was in turn following the vehicle in front of him. We drove a kilometre and came to a halt, the Russian front lines were immediately ahead. Suddenly our artillery crashed out and began laying a shattering barrage down on the enemy, it went on for an hour. Then the whistles blew again and we started the attack. Ahead of us, I heard the roar as our tanks opened fire, then the flatter sound of the T34s as they replied. How the hell could anyone see to shoot in this, I wondered? Soon we came upon the wreckage of Russian tanks destroyed by our Panzers, then abruptly we were in the middle of the battle.

The Soviets had deployed their infantry into anti-tank formations and they were firing at our tanks with their PTRD anti-tank rifles. They may as well have thrown rocks for all the good these feeble weapons achieved. We came upon a huddle of Soviets who had just fired at a Panzer, there was a clang as the projectile bounced off the heavy armour. The Tiger swung its coaxial machine gun around and hosed down the gunners, they were flung to the ground like dust in a storm. The tank charged on without even slowing and we followed it looking for our own targets. We soon found them, a small group of Russians who were desperately trying to deploy a ZiS3 anti-tank artillery piece. I shouted at the driver to turn towards where they were positioned, our half-track swung over and we bore down on the Russian gunners. Bullets hammered all around us, they had a machine gun set up in a defensive position behind a low stone wall. I looked around for support, but we were on our own.

I shouted orders at the men. “Mundt, get on that machine gun, give us covering fire. Voss, drive straight at the anti-tank gun.”

Mundt opened up, Merkel had detached the rear-mounted MG42 and brought it to the front of the vehicle, both guns fired incessantly, the loaders continually fitted ammunition belts as the empty ones rolled through the breech. Mundt’s gun overheated and he called for a new barrel, we didn’t need that in the middle of this fight. The Soviet artillery piece was clearly loaded ready to fire and the gunners were rushing to crank it around to hit our half-track. Then we slewed around, one of our tracks had become detached. We weren’t hit, it was probably a faulty pin on the new track they’d fitted, but it stopped us dead. Without thinking, I leapt out of the vehicle and landed heavily in the snow, I scrambled up and ran towards the anti-tank gun, pulling a stick grenade from my webbing and arming it in one fluid motion. The Russian machine gunner saw the danger and swung his gun over. He fired a burst, it went wide and I flung myself to the ground as his second burst ripped over my head, then the grenade exploded. The machine gun stopped firing as the two-man crew was cut to pieces by the flying metal fragments. The anti-tank gun crew looked shocked, one of them was lying on the ground, also hit by my grenade and the others stunned by the force of the explosion. My platoon wasted no time, before I could get up they ran past me and sent burst after burst at the gunners.

“Cease fire, cease fire!” Mundt shouted. “Are you ok, Sir?”

“Yes, thank you, Sergeant. We need to try and get that gun ready to

defend ourselves against the T34s, who can fix the half-track?"

"Voss and Beidenberg, Sir, I'll get them straight on it, if it's just a shackle pin we carry spares, we'll soon have it fixed."

We checked over the anti-tank gun, it looked similar to our own. We turned it around and Merkel checked that the breech was already loaded with a shell. The snow was still coming down heavily and there was nothing in sight, none of our armour, no enemy, nothing, we were alone on the steppe.

"What now, Sir, there doesn't seem to be a target?" Mundt asked.

"Destroy the gun and then we'll follow the line of advance, it shouldn't be a problem. Can you double shot the gun and stand back while it fires?"

"Yes, Sir."

They loaded a shell nose into the breech and extended the lanyard that fired the weapon. I went to check on Voss and Beidenberg, even in the freezing cold they were sweating with the heavy work of lifting the broken track back into place.

"It's almost done, Sir," Voss said. "We slackened off the idling wheel and we've nearly closed the two ends of the track. Another five minutes and we'll be ready to lock up the pin. Say twenty minutes all up."

"Very well, do your best, I don't like hanging around here on our own, we've no idea where Ivan went off to."

"Running like hell from our Panzers, I think, Sir."

"All of them, are you sure about that, Voss?"

"Right, we'll get a shift on."

While we waited, the men rifled through the possessions of the dead Russians. I left them to it, they knew the importance of documents and if they found any food that was edible they were entitled to it. I didn't ask about personal possessions, if they wanted a souvenir Russian pistol or cigarette lighter, I preferred not to ask, there were more important considerations on the battlefront. Like the two surviving crew members of the anti-tank gun being guarded by two of my troopers.

"What do we do about the prisoners?" Merkel asked.

I'd been thinking about that. "We'll search and disarm them, then tie them up and leave them for our support group. If we take their boots it'll stop them from going very far."

I turned around and lifted my MP38, an engine was getting louder as a vehicle approached, but it was the familiar roar and clatter of one of our armoured half-tracks. It stopped next to us and an officer jumped down

carrying an MP38 like mine. He was an Obersturmfuhrer from the Der Fuhrer Regiment and I saluted him. He nodded an acknowledgment.

"What's going on here?"

"We're fixing one of our tracks, nearly finished now so we'll be able to follow the Panzers."

He looked at the anti-aircraft gun and the broken machine gun nest.

"Your work?"

I nodded.

"Excellent. The gun is to be destroyed?"

"Double shotted, we'll blow it when we leave."

"Good. What about the prisoners?"

As he was speaking, he walked across to look at the two Russians. One was a private, the other a sergeant from the Thirty Eighth Army of the Voronezh Front, I explained it to the Obersturmfuhrer.

"Have you questioned them?"

"Yes, but they don't know anything worthwhile."

"I see. Well, we can't leave them in our rear and we can't spare any men to guard them, I can deal with this for you."

Before I could protest, he raised his machine pistol, pulled the trigger and aimed a short burst at the two men. I noticed that he had a gleam in his eyes as he fired, his expression strange and far away, as if he was performing some sort of a private ritual. I realised he was enjoying it.

"Sir, I must protest, they were my prisoners!" I shouted at him.

"They were Russians, man, hardly worth the bullets."

"I believe we have a regiment of Russians within the SS."

He shrugged. "Perhaps these two should have joined it then."

He jumped back up on his half-track. "Good luck, try not to be too late for the party."

As they drove off my men looked at me. It was an unwritten rule in the SS not to shoot prisoners. That kind of behaviour would lead to our own men being shot when they became prisoners of the Russians, even the Fuhrer's order to kill captured Commissars was often quietly ignored. Yet here we had just witnessed what amounted to murder. I cleared my head, it was too late to worry about it now.

"Men, we need to hurry, Voss, how long until you're finished?"

"Two minutes, Sir. We're almost there."

In the event, it took another ten minutes before the job was completed,

they started up the engine and we piled into the half-track. Merkel was on the ground and he paid out the string that led to the trigger of the anti-tank gun. We drove fifty metres away, he lay down in a shell hole and pulled the string. The gun fired and instantly blew up in spectacular fashion. Merkel ran up, jumped aboard and we followed the chewed up terrain after our main force. Panzers made a chewed up mess of the snowy ground, which was fortunate, they were not difficult to follow. Voss was driving and he went flat out to catch up. I made sure the men kept a wary eye out on all sides, the threat from both Russian stragglers and partisans was very real. Finally, we came to a halt on top of a long slope that swept away in the distance. The view of the battlefield was incredible. The snowstorm had temporarily stopped and we could see for several kilometres.

The whole of our Panzer Corps was on the attack, charging at the enemy who were firing back from positions at the top of a low rise two kilometres away. The enemy had anti-tank guns deployed and while we watched they found the range of a Tiger tank and destroyed it, but our own gunners were already in action. Our guns fired repeatedly, mobile artillery pieces, STuGIIIs and PAK anti-tank guns kept up a withering rate of fire to add to the onslaught of the Tigers deadly eighty-eight centimetre main guns. I'd seen photos of artillery barrages on the Western Front during the last war, this looked similar, hundreds of guns firing, except that so much of the artillery was mobile. The battle was still very fluid, pockets of T34s and mobile guns stood their ground and took on our armour, others were turning and fleeing. I felt a hand touch my arm.

"Sir, look, the Major."

About half a kilometre from us, I could see a Horch armoured car, the aerial array and unit marking made it obvious that it was Muller's. The vehicle was at a standstill, the reason obvious. One of the wheels had been blown completely off by a hit from a shell, or possibly a land mine. The vehicle was under attack from a trio of the new Soviet armoured cars that I recognised from intelligence briefings as the BA-64, lightly armoured and carrying only a machine gun but they were capable of overcoming the lightly armoured Horch. Normally the Horch would carry a two centimetre cannon, but for vehicles equipped with long range radios, like Muller's, the cannon was removed and all they had to defend themselves with was a single MG34. There were no other units nearby, I didn't have any choice but to go and help him.

“Voss, head for the Sturmbannfuhrer’s armoured car. Men, those BA-64s have thin skins, if we can send enough bullets their way we should do some damage. Hopefully enough to drive them off, at least. Use both machine guns and every man that can shoot, do it, plaster those Soviet tin cans. Let’s go!”

We hurtled down the slope and closed the gap between us, and the three Russian armoured cars. At first, they didn’t see us, until the weight of fire from our MG42s started to hit their armour. Then they turned their attention to us. Streams of machine gun bullets arced towards our half-track, then one of our gunners scored a lucky hit and an armoured car exploded. We were lucky, the car behind it ran straight into the burning wreck and had to waste precious time reversing out of the flames. We concentrated our fire on the third vehicle, seeing it lurch as we managed to hit something vital, possibly the driver or the commander. Then it turned through one hundred and eighty degrees and fled at speed up the slope and away from us. The remaining Russian vehicle disentangled itself and turned to engage but this time he was on his own, and the concentrated fire from us and the stalled Horch turned it into a flaming ruin as their fuel caught fire. One crewman escaped but he was badly on fire, screaming with the agony of the burning fuel that had soaked his uniform. Merkel was on one of the MG42s and he casually sent a short burst that ended the man’s suffering. We stopped next to the Horch, Muller climbed out and up onto our half-track, his crew followed him.

“Thanks, Hoffman, I need to catch up with the regiment, they’re over to the south of the slope near the bottom of the hill.”

“Right away, Sir. Voss, head for the south east, bottom of the hill.”

I told him about the broken track that had delayed us but he ignored me. His eyes were bright with the excitement of the battle.

“We’re beating them, Hoffman, they’re running from us, all the way back to Moscow with any luck. When the Panzers reach their objective they will turn south and we’ll have the whole damn lot of them caught in our trap, like dogs. A whole army, maybe two armies! Damn, how stupid they were to let themselves be caught in a trap like that.”

I thought about Stalingrad that had recently fallen to just such a trap, but wisely said nothing. It seemed that military stupidity was not unique to any army.

We caught up with our Deutschland regiment and Muller commandeered another Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 half-track, one equipped

with a radio so that he could regain command of his regiment, the luckless crew left to join up with several groups of infantry that were advancing on foot. We followed Muller's vehicle, the T34s and Soviet artillery had disappeared and we had an unobstructed journey through to our objective. We assembled under the cover of a thick wood, the hatch of a Tiger clanged open and General Hausser climbed out. We all leapt to attention and saluted.

"At ease, men. The first part of our operation had gone according to plan. The Soviet Seventh Guards Tank Army currently occupies the ground between us, and Kharkov. If they are not dealt with now the city will be threatened and our troops could even be surrounded. None of us wants another Stalingrad."

There was a grumbling and murmuring amongst the officers. The fate of the prisoners who had surrendered on the banks of the Volga was unknown but one thing was for sure, it would not be a happy one.

"Together with the Leibstandarte and the Wehrmacht 320th Division, we're going to turn the tables on the Soviets and encircle them, if we do our jobs right we can completely wipe out an entire Russian army. The enemy think that they can have things their way since Stalingrad, but there were no SS units involved in that battle, in fact, many of the divisions were not even German. Romanians, Italians, Hungarians and God knows who else, it's no wonder they crumbled. I want to give our Russian friends a real bloody nose, show them that they are dealing with a different class of soldier on this battlefield, so don't let me down. Let's go in and destroy the bastards!"

We all cheered mightily, it was what we wanted to hear, needed to hear. It was quite true, as bad as the fall of Stalingrad had been for German morale, it had been a great morale booster for the Soviets. Since then they seemed to have fought with a new spirit and enthusiasm, we needed to set the record straight and show them how them how the German soldier fought, particularly the SS. As Hausser had said, at Stalingrad they had fought Romanians, Croats, Italians and Hungarians, a real hotchpotch of assorted nationalities. Das Reich and Leibstandarte were purely German SS divisions, a different story entirely. We intended to give them a lesson they would not forget.

Buoyed up by the General's pep talk, we set to preparing our vehicles and weapons, we needed to take on fuel and ammunition, attend to running repairs and finally help ourselves to steaming hot bowls of the inevitable stew from the mobile cookhouse. It was probably the same food as before, but

served with a starter of Hausser's morale boosting speech, it tasted like cordon bleu, the black bread was wonderful once you'd scraped the mould off it and even the coffee was hot and cheering. Not in the league of the General's coffee, I thought ruefully, but good enough. We were on the way to Moscow and nothing could stop us now. We settled down to get some sleep, we were due to jump off again at four am and catch the enemy in their beds. I managed to claim a place in the cockpit of the half-track, a prized spot that kept me out of the snow and the bitterly cold wind that swept across the steppes. Three men joined me, the other men rigged a lean-to shelter at the side of the vehicle with a waterproof ground sheet to keep them clear of the snow, but it must have been bitingly cold.

I was already awake when they called stand to, and I only had to rinse my face in a bowl of melted snow that Mundt had left in the vehicle so that it thawed in the morning ready for our ablutions. We rushed to help ourselves to more stew and bread and washed it down with freezing cold water, there hadn't been time to brew coffee, then we were starting engines ready to go. Hausser stood in the turret of his Tiger and looked over his command. He gave an affirmative nod and spoke into his microphone. The driver engaged the gears and got the huge vehicle moving, the rest of the tanks and STuGIIIs followed. Then it was our turn and Voss swung our half-track behind the long column of armour. We were going to relieve Kharkov.

The drive into the city was hell. Soviet snipers had taken up positions in many of the ruins of the suburbs, making the approach a grim business. In the end we dismounted from the half-track, leaving only Voss to drive and Bauer, who I did not feel was fully recovered from his wound, as well as another trooper, Neumann, to man the MG42s. I took four men and walked the south side of the road, Mundt took another four and took the north side, in that fashion we crept carefully from house to house. Whenever a sniper was encountered the machine guns kept them occupied, while we rushed the building and took out the sniper either, with long bursts from our sub-machine guns or hand grenades. At one stage we were attacked by a column of T34s who rushed into the suburbs to try and make a few quick kills. There were perhaps ten or twelve in all and we thought we'd have to make a run for it, but the snowstorm at that time was holding off allowing the Luftwaffe to take off. They were flying over at the time looking for targets and they swooped eagerly on the Soviet armour. The Stukas screamed in for the attack and dropped bomb after bomb. By the time they had finished eight of the

tanks were ablaze and the survivors had swung around and were driving at full speed away from the city. We finally met up with units of the Leibstandarte as well as the soldiers of the Wehrmacht 320th Division. They swung into action to help us clear the snipers and by the late afternoon, we entered the centre of the city.

I found our temporary regimental HQ, Muller was barking orders to bring up replacements and reinforcements, more ammunition, fuel and the one hundred and one other things that kept an army in the field. He saw me and nodded.

"Hoffman, any problems?"

"No, Sir, we didn't lose any men, it all went well."

We both looked around as a group of men marched past, Soviet prisoners, dejected, unshaven, but their clothing was of some interest. Warm clothing, unlike ours, the Soviets had clearly been prepared. I suspected that some of their fur boots and hats together with the thick quilted arctic parka coats would 'disappear' en-route to their prison camp.

"Good. We are staying in Kharkov for a few days to conduct mopping up operations and strengthen the city defences, so you can find your platoon somewhere warm to bed down. Watch out for the snipers," he said in dismissal.

Was he being sarcastic, we'd just fought our way through nests of snipers that had caused a number of casualties, though not to my platoon? No, I decided he just didn't know. For myself I didn't care, but the men had fought well and hard.

"Sir, the men did well, all of them, they cleared out a lot of the snipers when we reached the city and saved our people from taking much heavier casualties."

"Thank you, Untersturmfuhrer, I will thank them when I see them."

It was the best I could do, I found Mundt who had sent two of my troopers to rustle up some food. I heard him shouting at them, "And try and find a pig, the cookhouse is doing potato soup today and I fancy a bit of meat to go with it."

He saw me and winced. "I heard that there are wild pigs running around the city, Sir."

"That's good news, Scharfuhrer," I replied drily. "I imagine there must be thousands of wild pigs running around these Soviet cities."

"Yes, Sir, there must be."

They knew my views on looting. Sometimes, especially in the depths of the Russian winter it was necessary to take food to stay alive. At the other extreme, there was the notorious Dirlewanger Battalion. Doctor Oskar Dirlewanger was an infantry officer during the Great War and won both the Iron Cross 2nd Class and the Iron Cross 1st Class. Subsequently he went back to university and was awarded a PhD in Political Science. While a teacher in 1934 he was convicted of the rape of a thirteen year-old girl, illegal use of a government vehicle and damaging the vehicle whilst under the influence of alcohol. For these crimes he was sentenced to two years imprisonment. Dirlewanger then lost his job, his title of doctor and all military honours. Soon after his release he was arrested again on similar charges. He was sent to the Welzheim concentration camp, which was standard practice for deviant sexual offenders, but was subsequently released and reinstated as a Colonel in the General SS Reserve. This following the personal intervention of his friend Gottlob Berger, the head of the SS-Hauptamt and long-time personal friend of Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler. Dirlewanger later headed the Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger, a penal battalion composed of German criminals. In February 1942, the battalion was reassigned for anti-partisan duties in Belarus. Dirlewanger was known to lead his soldiers into combat personally which was unusual for someone of his rank, he was wounded many times in combat. He was also intensely disliked by many of the SS troopers and officers for the extremes of his behaviour that dishonoured us all. Part of that extreme behaviour was looting, often combined with rape and murder. I was determined to keep a firm rein on my platoon and ensure they didn't even think about going the way of Dirlewanger's men.

By early evening the city had gone quiet and the mobile cookhouse once again served up their potato soup. The men had got a fire going and a pig was roasting on a spit that they'd improvised from the wreckage of a Soviet anti-aircraft mount. I sat around the fire, enjoying the warmth of the blaze, the good food in my belly, the flask of schnapps that was being passed around, thinking how good soldiering could be. For the first time I felt that I belonged in the SS Deutschland Regiment, that I was accepted as a part of it. With men like these, I could go the very length of Soviet Russia and get back in one piece. What a fine profession soldiering was. I bent down to pick up a piece of wood that had fallen from the fire. That was when the bullet cracked out, I dimly remembered hearing it even as everything went black.

# CHAPTER SIX

*"I am convinced that 1941 will be the crucial year of a great New Order in Europe. The world shall open up for everyone. Privileges for individuals, the tyranny of certain nations and their financial rulers shall fall. And last of all this year will help to provide the foundations of a real understanding among peoples, and with it the certainty of conciliation among nations. Those nations who are still opposed to us will some day recognize the greater enemy within. Then they will join us in a combined front, a front against Jewish exploitation and racial degeneration."*
*Adolf Hitler January 1941*

I heard voices, could see a bright light burning overhead. Surely I wasn't dead, not already. Was this how the afterlife began? But no, my sense of smell was coming to me, I sensed ether, antiseptics, the tang of urine. I had to be in a hospital. The voices got louder.

"I think he's regaining consciousness, Doctor, his eyes are moving."

I struggled to focus and my eyes suddenly revealed the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, a true angel. Perhaps I was in heaven after all. A vision in blue and white, blue dress with white stripes and a white armband adorned with a red cross, white apron, white cap, creamy skin, dark hair and flashing brown eyes, huge, warm liquid eyes that were staring at me gravely.

"How do you feel?"

I had to think about that.

"My head hurts. Where am I?"

"This is the hospital in Kharkov, it has been taken over by the military. Do you know what happened to you?"

I tried to think, I was near the campfire with my platoon, the crack of a bullet.

"I was shot?"

"Yes, you were, Untersturmfuhrer. The bullet came from behind, it lodged inside your skull, you were lucky. The surgeons were able to remove it and nothing vital was damaged. Very lucky."

I tried to move my legs and arms, I didn't feel very lucky. "Did I suffer any other injuries?"

She smiled at me and my world lit up with warm sunshine. "None

whatsoever, I think the head wound was enough for now. The doctor is next door, he will be coming back to check on you shortly. Now, I have to attend to my other patients."

"Nurse, would you tell me your name?"

The smile again. "It's Heide, Heide Thalberg. I am a Rotekreuz Helferin, a Red Cross Auxiliary Nurse."

"My name is Jurgen, Jurgen Hoffman."

She smiled yet again. "I know that, Untersturmfuhrer, we have your records."

"Please, call me Jurgen."

She smiled. "Just lie back and relax, the doctor will be here soon."

She turned and walked away. Did she quietly murmur 'Jurgen' or was I imagining it?

I lay there trying to work out what had happened to me, it must have been a Soviet sniper, one that we'd missed. Well, Kharkov was a big city with many tall buildings, we couldn't expect to clear out every single Russian with a rifle. I looked around, I was in a ward with perhaps twenty beds, all full of wounded or sick men. The beds either side of me were both occupied with men who appeared to be wrapped from head to toe in bandages, they were both groaning quietly. Probably tank crew, I reflected. The Panzers carried a heavy load of petrol, when they were hit they often went up like Roman candles. Poor devils. There was a stirring at the door and a harassed medical officer came into the room wearing a Wehrmacht uniform, a captain. He worked his way from bed to bed until finally he came to me.

"How do you feel, Untersturmfuhrer?"

"Just a headache, Sir. When will I be able to rejoin my unit?"

He put a stethoscope against my chest and listened, then moved my head forward and looked at the wound at the back, I saw stars as my head was tilted. He noticed me screwing my face up in pain.

"Hurts a bit does it? Well, that is to be expected. Three days, no less than that. Then you should ok to leave here, but you will need to rest up for another few days before you're fit enough to go back into action."

He made notes on a chart at the foot of my bed and moved on to the next bed. Three days, how could I lie here doing nothing while my platoon was out fighting the enemy? Yet even as I thought about it the door burst open and four of my men came into the ward. I recognised Mundt, Voss, Merkel and Beidenberg. They clustered around my bed.

“How are you feeling, Sir?”

I told them I was ready to come back, it was just the hospital that was keeping me from rejoining them. Mundt looked closely at the back of my head and winced.

“Jesus Christ, they’ve sure made a mess of you. Lucky it wasn’t the front of your head, at least you can grow hair over the wound. You’ll still be able to pull the girls, Sir. Talking of which, we’ve found a decent bar in the centre of town, just off Red Square.”

“I thought Red Square was in Moscow.”

“Well, it is, but they’ve got one here too. The local booze is quite reasonable and the vodka will blow your head off. Not that you need anything else to blow your head off, Sir.”

They laughed at his joke and I smiled dutifully.

“Tell me about the platoon, the regiment, what’s happening?”

“We’re billeted here in Kharkov for the time being, division are fortifying the defences, they’re expecting the Russkis to make a counterattack before too long. The half-track is up to scratch, weapons, ammunition and supplies all good. We’re short of men still, of course, but so is everyone else, we’ll just have to manage.”

It was good to hear them and to know that everything in my command was on the top line. They stayed for half an hour, before Nurse Thalberg came to my bedside to throw them out.

“It’s ok, we’re going. Hey, I wouldn’t want to leave here if I had a nurse like you looking after me. What’s your name, beautiful?”

She laughed. “Get out before I throw you out, you’re disturbing the patients.”

“Ok, ok,” Mundt agreed. “We’ll call in again, Sir. Try not to get in the way of any more Soviet bullets.”

“But it wasn’t a Soviet bullet, Scharfuhrer. It was one of ours, German.”

I knew that voice, surely not, not again. Von Betternich was standing nearby, leaning on his cane.

The men looked at him, but his hard gaze was enough to send them on their way, his companion was no less menacing. Heide took the hint too and went off to attend to her other patients. I felt a pang of disappointment as she left. The SD man was with a stranger, a man dressed in civilian clothes. Black leather coat, trilby hat and he carried a briefcase. I knew that my problems were about to get worse.

“This is my colleague,” he introduced the civilian, “Gerd Wiedel.”

I nodded at him, “How do you do, you are working with the Obersturmbannfuhrer?”

Von Betternich interrupted him. “Gerd was with me in the Criminal Police before the war, he was my sergeant, and a very effective policeman.”

“So you have joined the Sicherheitsdienst?” I asked Wiedel.

“I am with the Gestapo, Untersturmfuhrer. The Reichsfuhrer grows concerned at this criminal behaviour, officers being shot at by our own people. He has insisted that we put a stop to it before it totally undermines the morale of our fighting men on the Eastern Front.”

So he was with the Gestapo, as I’d suspected. “It was a German bullet?”

Von Betternich nodded. “Yes, it was. We have taken charge of the bullet extracted from your head, it appears to be identical to the others that were used to kill those officers. You are lucky to be alive, Hoffman, I gather you leaned down at the critical moment, otherwise it would have hit you in the area of the heart. As it is, it almost killed you.”

I recalled the moment of the shooting, when I had leaned down for something, I couldn’t remember what it was.

“Why would they target me, I’m the most junior officer in the regiment, almost the whole of the Das Reich Division?”

“Because you were investigating the shootings, Hoffman. Obviously they thought you were getting close to them,” Wiedel said.

“That’s nonsense, Herr Wiedel.”

“Kriminalkommissar Wiedel,” he corrected. I knew it was the Gestapo rank equivalent of an SS Obersturmfuhrer.

“It is certainly not nonsense, Hoffman,” von Betternich interrupted, “but it is something we can use to our advantage.”

“What do you mean, Sir?”

“If they were trying to kill you, they will try again and we’ll keep a watch on you, see who makes the attempt.”

I had to point out the flaw in his plan. “What if they manage to kill me before you get to them?”

Von Betternich raised his eyebrows. “But Hoffman, this is wartime. We all have to take our chances, don’t we?”

I didn’t feel that being shot at by your own people was a reasonable risk to ask a soldier to take, but arguing with the SD and the Gestapo was not likely to change anything.

“What do I do now?”

“First of all you need to recover your strength, my boy, then go about your duties as normal,” von Betternich replied cheerfully. “We have some resources in the Deutschland Regiment, they’ll keep an eye on things and report back to me if anything looks suspicious.”

“Resources, Sir?”

He smiled. “Nothing for you to worry yourself about, Hoffman. You’d be surprised at the number of people that report back to Prinz Albrecht Strasse.”

Of course, RSHA Headquarters where both the SD and Gestapo were established. As was Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler.

They left me after another few minutes, promising to return in the next couple of days. Nurse Heide Thalberg returned and bustled around for a few moments, checking my dressing and making sure my bedclothes were tucked in properly. Was it my imagination, or was she deliberately spending a little more time with me than with the others?

“You’re doing a marvellous job, Heide. I’m really grateful.”

She looked sharply at my use of her first name. Then she nodded. “You’re more than welcome, it’s no trouble.”

I swallowed my nervousness and blurted it straight out. “Could I thank you in a better way, perhaps you’d have dinner with me when I’m discharged?”

She looked at me coolly, of course she would get lots of invitations like that.

“What were you thinking of, an SS field canteen?”

I nearly choked. “No, no, definitely not, there must be a restaurant around...”

Then I saw her smiling, that wonderful smile again. “I see, you were joking. There must be at least one good restaurant around here, I’ll find out where it is and book us a table, is that a deal?”

I could see she was considering it. Finally, she said, “I’ll think about it. I am very busy at the hospital, we’ve got casualties coming in all the time. But yes, if I can get away for a couple of hours, I’ll probably accept, thank you.”

She was going to say yes, I felt on top of the world. As she bent down to re-dress my head wound, I brushed her cheek with my lips and said, “Thank you, Heide. I’m feeling better already.”

She coloured red a little, but didn’t seem unduly worried, she didn’t slap

me or call a guard. Excellent, it was worth getting wounded to find a girl like this to take out to dinner. Well, probably, she'd said. I would work with that. Mundt came in the following morning with Merkel, the others were preparing our equipment for the next phase of the operation. But it seemed as if our assault on Kursk may have to be postponed, the Soviets were closing in around Kharkov and before we went back on the attack we had to work to defend what we had already taken. They said there was another matter of a huge shortage of Panzers, they were waiting for hundreds of new Tigers to arrive from Germany. I had another mission for them and I whispered the details when I was sure that Nurse Thalberg wasn't around.

Von Betternich came to see me on the third day, once more with the Gestapo Kriminalkommissar at his side.

"We are making progress, Hoffman, we think that we may have identified at least one of the conspirators."

"Really, who is that?"

Wiedel smiled. "We have arrested Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, under a protective custody order."

I said nothing, it was bad news for Muller. The real power of the Gestapo was called 'Schutzhaft', the power to imprison people without judicial proceedings on the theory of 'protective custody'. This power was based upon the law, which in 1933 suspended the clauses of the Weimar Constitution that until then had guaranteed civil liberties to the German people. We all understood Schutzhaft and did our best to pretend that it didn't exist, or if it did, that it wouldn't affect people like us.

"So who is running the regiment?"

"Ah, that's the clever thing," Wiedel replied. "I applied for, and was granted, dispensation for Muller to continue as acting CO for the time being. They've lost one CO, it would not be good for morale to lose another so quickly."

"It simply means," von Betternich continued, "that Muller's freedom of action is somewhat constrained. If he's innocent, it will of course be proved in the course of my investigation."

I ignored that, we both knew that Schutzhaft was the mark of guilt for any German citizen who fell foul of it. Muller's career was in ruins and his future freedom in considerable doubt.

"As a matter of fact, he's coming in to see you later, Hoffman."

How on earth did they know that, I wondered? But then again, what

didn't they know? Except for the identity of the shooter, of course."

"Be careful what you say to him," Wiedel said, "he is under suspicion and he may lead us to the other guilty party, or parties."

"He may be innocent, Sir," I replied.

He smiled coldly. "Naturally, Hoffman, there is always that possibility. In the meantime, do not give him the impression that it was anything other than a Russian sniper that hit you, is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Excellent. We will see you when you report back for duty tomorrow."

That was news to me, I had hoped it would be tomorrow, but obviously the SD and Gestapo were privy to more exact information than mere mortals. The two men left and I spent the morning longing to see the beautiful apparition of Nurse Thalberg appear beside my bed, but it seemed that she was off duty. Her replacement was a burly woman from Bavaria with all the personality of a suet pudding, but rather less beauty than the popular German recipe. She nearly ripped my head off looking at my wound and applying a clean dressing, bellowing at me to make sure that I had regular bowel movements so that the whole of Kharkov could hear. In the afternoon, Muller came to see me. He was a wreck, a shocking sight, his strength and optimism, the burning drive and ambition that had pushed the Deutschland Regiment into the recent counterattack was completely absent. Instead he was faltering and unsure of himself.

"Hoffman, it's good to see you're looking better."

"Yes, Sir, thank you for coming to see me. How are things at the regiment?"

"We're gearing up to repel a Soviet counterattack on Kharkov, no doubt you've heard?"

"Yes, Sir, I have."

"Have you also heard about my problems?"

"Problems? No, Sir," I lied.

"I'm under a Gestapo protective custody order. Still in command of Deutschland Regiment, but for some reason the fucking Gestapo have got their claws into me. What happened to you, was it the same sniper, one of ours?"

"I don't think so, Sir, there were Soviet snipers in the city. It was just a case of me being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not one of our people."

“Good, that’s good.”

We chatted for five minutes or so about aimless things to do with the regiment, then he abruptly left. One thing I knew for sure, Muller was nothing to do with the shooter. It was absurd and made no sense to even accuse him. At the end of the afternoon Heide Thalberg came back on duty. I had found out her shift hours from a medical clerk and knew her dinner break was at ten o’clock that evening. At nine o’clock I slipped out of bed, washed, shaved, and put on my best field grey uniform that Mundt had brought in for me. Then I went back to the ward and got into my bed, pulling the covers over to hide my clothes. Just before ten, Heide walked through the ward checking on the patients and came to my bed.

“How are you, Untersturmfuhrer?”

“I am well, thank you, Heide. Are you going for something to eat?”

“Yes,” she said, surprised, “why do you ask?”

I swept the covers aside and got out of bed, resplendent in full uniform and gleaming jackboots. Her eyes goggled.

“Because I’m taking you to dinner, Fraulein.”

She was laughing now. “But they won’t let you into the staff canteen.”

“Which is why I have a table booked at a local restaurant.”

I had mounted a devastating surprise attack and she had no choice but to capitulate. She tried the usual female excuses, ‘I’ve nothing to wear’ and so on, but I brushed them aside, and following Mundt’s detailed directions led her to the restaurant. As it was run by a Ukrainian who hated the Russians, the Scharfuhrer assured us we were unlikely to be poisoned. When we went into the building, our table was ready for us with candles lit and a bottle of champagne waiting in an ice bucket. Her eyes were shining. “Jurgen, this is wonderful, how did you manage it?”

I had to admit to her that I’d got my sergeant to fix it up, but she was still impressed. Most of the tables were full with SS officers, some of them with female companions. Not all of them looked totally respectable. I hoped she wouldn’t notice, but it was a forlorn hope, she knew instantly.

“I hope they don’t think that I’m one of those women, those, harlots,” she said.

“Of course not, especially in your nurse’s uniform. Besides, some of these women are undoubtedly with our army, clerks, nurses like yourself, some SS Helferin.”

She calmed down. “Very well, then. I am impressed, the officers here all

look like important people."

I smiled. "Probably not, don't let the uniforms fool you, they're probably clerks mostly, quartermasters and administrators. Most of the fighting soldiers will be with their units."

I noticed a chubby Hauptsturmfuhrer at a nearby table look at me sharply, but my head covered in a huge bandage, and my nurse companion, made it clear that I was a fighting soldier. His immaculate uniform made it eloquently clear that he was not.

We ordered the food, a Ukrainian veal speciality rather like our Wiener Schnitzel.

"Heide, tell me about yourself, I'm fascinated."

"You mean what's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this?" she smiled.

"Something like that, but how did you get here, were you always a nurse?"

"Not at all. I'm not really a nurse, just an auxiliary helper. No, I was at university, training to be a teacher but I thought that our fighting men needed me more, so here I am."

"What is your home town?"

"I was born in Dusseldorf, but eight years ago we were forced to move to Bremen."

"Really, why were you forced to move, that sounds very dramatic?"

She looked cautiously around the restaurant. "My father is a communist, he was getting a lot of trouble from the locals."

I thought about the Nazis' persecution of the communists. Along with the Jews, they regarded them as their mortal enemies.

"It must have been difficult, the state gives communists a hard time."

"Yes, it was hard, he was beaten up, thrown in the cells a couple of times. Finally he was threatened with a Schutzhaft, you know what that is?"

"Yes, I've heard of them."

"Well, we moved on to Bremen and he found work there in a shipyard. Of course, he'd left the communist party by then, or at least it had been made illegal and so we were able to live our lives as ordinary citizens."

"It must have been bad for you."

"Not really, we coped, somehow. It wasn't as bad as the disgusting treatment given out to the Jews. That was really terrible."

Her voice had risen slightly, it was obviously something on which she

had passionate views.

"Heide, please don't think me rude, but this restaurant is reserved for SS officers and high ranking Nazi party members. It would be as well to not discuss certain subjects."

She looked around angrily, some diners glanced at her with puzzled expressions. She opened her mouth to make a sharp retort, then relaxed and smiled that wonderful smile. "You're right, it's the wrong place and the wrong time."

The food arrived just in time, a wonderful meal rich with local spices and flavours. Afterwards we had apple pie with cream, real cream, and coffee, real coffee too. I ordered a brandy and cigar to finish, but she declined both. "I don't smoke and I'm going back on duty, Jurgen, so I can't drink."

Afterwards I took her back to the hospital and she allowed me to give her a long, passionate kiss of farewell. Then it was back to business.

"You get those clothes off and back into bed, Untersturmfuhrer, or I'll call the ward sister."

"Jawohl, Fraulein Helferin. Sofort!"

I folded my uniform neatly, put my nightshirt back on and got into bed. I lay there for a long time, enjoying the glow of recalling the evening with her, hoping that she would come into the ward before I dropped off to sleep, but she'd been assigned elsewhere and I was out of luck. Nurse Suet Pudding came in and chided me for not being asleep, how could I ever recover if I didn't get my sleep and so on? The following morning there was still no sign of Heide. The doctor called round and said I could be discharged once my dressing was removed. Two hours later I reported back to SS Deutschland Regiment. Muller had just called an officers' briefing and I went straight into the room of the old school that he was using as a headquarters.

"The Soviets are trying to retake Kharkov," he announced without any introduction. "Our job, gentlemen, is to stop them!"

He unrolled a large chart of the area and we immediately saw the problem. The eastern, northern and southern edges of the Kharkov district were surrounded by arrows, that indicated the Soviet line of advance.

"I want our regiment deployed before first light tomorrow, that's when we expect the first of the new Soviet attacks. If they get through, it means that any hope we have of retaking Kursk is going to be pushed back a long time."

He went on giving orders and directions, our unit was pulling out at two

am. I left the briefing and went to check on my platoon. The moment they saw me, my men let out a ragged cheer and I had to endure several minutes of their obscene jokes about my dinner with Heide. Then I called for quiet.

"Listen, you've heard about tomorrow morning?"

"We have, Untersturmfuhrer, the unit is all ready to go. The half-track is fuelled up, ammunition and supplies all set," Mundt said.

"Thank you, Scharfuhrer. I'm going back to the hospital. I want to see Heide before we go."

"Is that wise, Sir? I mean, just hours before we kick off the offensive, the Feldgendarmerie would have a field day if they caught you."

I touched my bandaged head. "I'm wounded, I need to get the dressing changed before we pull out."

He nodded. "That should do it."

I set off immediately, this time I was prepared for battle, wearing my steel helmet and carrying my MP38 machine pistol, the Walther PPK in its holster, a pair of grenades in my webbing. There were snipers still operating in the city and as the Soviets drew nearer, they would become bolder. When I reached the hospital, the desk clerk told me that Heide was on duty on the ward. I marched through the door and saw her at the other end of the long room, talking to another nurse. They looked at me in alarm. Then she recognised me.

"Jurgen, what are you doing here, you look as if you are off to fight a war?"

"I'm afraid we are. The regiment has been called out to fight, the Russians are trying to break through."

"Are they near?"

"Smiyev."

She started, it was a suburb only a few kilometres away. The other nurse was listening avidly, I asked her to give us a few minutes and she moved away.

"Do you think they will reach here?"

"No, we'll stop them, but..."

"They could break through then?"

"Look, I just don't know. Heide, be careful, I have to see you again."

"I'd like that. I'll be fine, it's not as if I'm on the front line. You be careful."

"Don't worry, they're fighting the SS now."

She indicated the long rows of beds. “Almost all of these patients are Waffen-SS, Jurgen.”

“I’ll be careful.”

She bent forward and kissed me, then we were holding each other tightly, I winced as she pulled against the strap of my helmet, causing it to press on the wound. She noticed instantly.

“Let me dress that for you before you go, I can give you some spare dressings too.”

I sat and enjoyed her fussing with my head wound. Afterwards she gave me a bag of spare dressings and told me not to wear the helmet for as long as possible as it would aggravate the wound and prevent it healing. If she’d asked me to go into battle naked I think I would have. We held each other and kissed long and hard, then the other nurse said that she needed her and I had to leave.

I was sad walking back to my unit, I had no idea when I would ever see her again, if ever. The Feldgendarmerie did stop me, a private soldier checked my papers and called for his officer. The man stepped out of the building that they were using as an office and came up to me with a sneering look.

“And where do you think you’re going, Untersturmfuhrer?”

“To rejoin my unit.”

“Really, and you have a pass to leave them and come into the city?”

“I was injured, Sir. I needed to go to the hospital to get my wound dressed.”

I still had my helmet off, the bandage on my head was already damp, I knew the wound would be leaking again.”

“That’s no excuse, you need a pass.”

“To get injured, you mean?”

His look darkened. No one made jokes at the expense of the Feldgendarmerie.

“Anyone without a pass can be arrested and shot without trial, you know that?”

I was about to reply when another man came out of the office, a civilian in a black leather trench coat and trilby hat. Kriminalkommissar Wiedel.

“Let him go.”

“But, but Sir...”

“Now!”

"Yes, Sir. Untersturmfuhrer, you may go."

I nodded at Wiedel and walked on. I wasn't too sure that having a Gestapo officer as my guardian angel was a good idea. It wasn't as if the Feldgendarmerie were going to shoot a line officer returning to the fight. After all, my wound, and the fact that I was walking from the hospital back to the regiment proved my story. Finally, I got back to my platoon and slept for a couple of hours on an old straw filled mattress that Mundt had found for me. In the early hours after midnight, we prepared to pull out and go into battle against the Slavic hordes that Stalin had once more sent to attack us. The camp was alive with exhaust smoke as engines rumbled into life, soldiers beating their arms against their bodies to try to get warm in the chill of the snowy night. The loud roar of the Panzers, even more deafening, as they started to move and their tracks clanked on the hard ground. Then it was our turn, Voss put the half-track into gear and fell in behind another vehicle. I felt the excitement of being a part of the mighty machine of the Waffen-SS, off to do battle against the Soviets. We were heading for Smiyev.

We reached the front and were directed to laager in prepared positions. They looked like remnants from the last time this ground had been fought over, only weeks before. The Tigers and STuGIIIs deployed in a line facing the expected path the enemy would take when they came towards us. All around my half-track were light armoured cars, motor cycle combinations of the Langemarck Regiment and rows of artillery lined up ready for the coming action. We waited. Our task was to remain in defence and be prepared to go at once should the Panzers see an opening to move forward, in which case we would follow behind them to mop up the enemy infantry. On paper it seemed so simple, in practice I wasn't so sure, the Soviets always seemed to have so many men and so much equipment. Before dawn, Muller came amongst us to wish us well and check that we were prepared. The prospect of action had heightened his mood and he had some of his old fire back. Then he went back to his command half-track and we waited. Snow fell, enough to obscure our view of the Russian positions but not enough to hide them completely. Then our artillery opened up to soften the enemy, every time a shell exploded in their lines it kicked up showers of snow mixed with the more normal detritus of explosions, earth, stones, men and equipment. The artillery pounded on, then the Russian artillery started and shells started falling around us. The barrages continued for over an hour until the Russians decided it was enough. In the distance, we saw movement, almost as if the ground was moving. But

it wasn't the ground, it was thousands of men, tens of thousands, moving forward in a mass attack more reminiscent of the 1914 war.

The Panzers fired first, round after round of high explosives that ripped huge gaps in the Russian lines. The artillery changed their aim and joined in the carnage, but there were so many of them, life was cheap to these Russian generals. No matter how many men fell more rushed forward to fill the gaps. Then they were within machine gun range.

"Open fire," officers shouted frantically, but they could have saved their breath. Even as they spoke, our MG42s and MG34s were sending their rain of horror and death towards the enemy. A few of our men started to fire with their machine pistols but I told my men to wait, the enemy were still outside of effective range and ammunition wasn't inexhaustible. It seemed incredible that anyone could survive that cauldron of hot steel that smashed through their ranks, but they kept coming, there were hundreds of them in the leading ranks and thousands more still behind them. They got to within three hundred metres and I gave the order.

"Fire!"

Our two MG42s had already been firing in short, consistent bursts to stop the barrels from overheating. Now the men joined in with their machine pistols. Merkel had a Kar 98 that he was using to snipe at individual targets, the rest of us just hosed down the enemy ranks as fast as possible, emptying clip after clip at the Russians. Our artillery and Panzers had to stop firing, the enemy had now closed to with a hundred metres of our positions and they would have endangered us with shrapnel from their shells. It was up to us and we poured on the fire, the machine guns grew dangerously hot as belt after belt of ammunition sped through them. No time now for short bursts, it was all or nothing, survival or die. As the Russians got even nearer I saw the front rank fall as thousands of machine gun bullets raked over them and they fell in neat, wide lines. Their comrades stepped over the bodies and kept running, I could see the Soviet battle police, commissars and NKVD men behind them, urging them on, threatening to shoot them if they faltered. But there was only so much flesh and blood could withstand. They were almost within fifty metres of us when they faltered, they had run into a wall of lead that was simply too much to pass. They turned and ran, still pursued by our gunners. The artillery and Panzers opened fire again to finish off the survivors and soon the battle was over. For now.

"Did we take any casualties?" I called out to the men.

They looked around them, but we were all here, no one was injured. Firing from the shelter of the half-track we had been protected from the worst of the Soviet small arms fire. Several of our vehicles were wrecked, two were on fire, victims of the Soviet shell fire. Many of our men were dead and wounded, not all of the platoons had been so lucky. I thought then of Heide, she would be busy attending to the fresh influx of casualties. Soldiers were running around with boxes of ammunition to replenish our supplies, the danger of a second attack was very real. Then there was the sound of aircraft engines, we looked up, ready to take cover but they were our own, Stukas, soon they peeled off one by one and descended on the enemy positions, aiming to take out their armour and artillery. The Stukas punished them for fifteen minutes in endless bombing attacks followed by strafing passes, then they left. During the lull in the battle, I ordered Mundt to stand the men down to eat. We sat around drinking water, someone had stowed a bag of loaves of bread in the half-track, they handed them around and we ate breakfast.

"Do you think they'll come back again?" Merkel asked me nervously.

I looked at Mundt, he was the experienced veteran.

"They usually do, Dieter, but look on the good side. The ones we killed won't be coming back, so the more they attack us, the less they're able to attack us next time. The second wave will be nothing, they'll be the newcomers, inexperienced. We'll slaughter them, easily."

I thought about the counter argument, the Soviets were known to use their green troops to soften up the enemy for the veterans that would come and finish us off. Their lack of concern for casualties was staggering. But perhaps this time it would be different. A flight of aircraft flew overhead and we anxiously looked up at the sky.

"Stukas?" someone asked.

"No," Mundt said, "Sturmoviks."

But they weren't aiming at us, for some reason. Their target was the city itself, perhaps our command and control centres, possibly our supply dumps. Whatever they were aiming at it was the civilians' turn to suffer, as the Russian ground attack planes bombed and strafed the centre of the city. At least they were leaving us alone, but then I thought of Heide. The hospital, oh God, no, surely they wouldn't attack it? I made a vow to make sure she was safe as soon as we got back from this mission. Muller came around to check on us.

"Any problems, Hoffman?"

“No, we’re good, thank you, Sir, no casualties and no damage.”

“How about ammunition?”

“They brought around some belts for the MG42s, but not enough if the Soviets attack in similar strength, we could do with more.”

“You’ll have to manage, I’ve issued everything we’ve got and I’ve sent a message to Division requesting more supplies. I’m sure they’ll get replacements to us very soon, in the meantime, well, do your best. Good luck.”

He went on to the next platoon. The men looked at me, horror struck.

“Sir, we can’t hold them with what we’ve got,” Mundt said. “We’ve only got half of what we used to fight off the first attack.”

He’d already forgotten his reassuring words about killing off the worst of the enemy in the first wave.

“I’m afraid we’ll just have to manage, Scharfuhrer.”

“With what?”

“We’ll have to make the ammunition count. We’ll wait until they’re closer before we open fire with the MG42s, the same for the machine pistols. Merkel, use your Kar 98 as soon as they get in range, that was fine shooting last time, the same for anyone else that can shoot straight and has a Kar 98. When they get in range, we’ll hit them with grenades. Who can throw the furthest?”

Merkel put up his hand. “That would be me too, Sir, I always threw almost twice the distance of anyone else on the ranges.”

“Good, make sure you have plenty of grenades, take some from the other men if you haven’t got enough. We will manage, don’t worry! Don’t forget, it’s only until the supplies come up from Division.”

Then someone shouted. “They’re coming!”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

*‘The war against Russia will be such that it cannot be conducted in a knightly fashion. This struggle is one of ideologies and racial differences and will have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful and unrelenting harshness.’*
*Adolf Hitler  March 1941*

Fortunately for us Mundt's analysis was proved correct. The suicidal enthusiasm of the first assault troops was nowhere in evidence, the second wave was of a very inferior calibre. They came forward piecemeal, small groups leaping from shell hole to shell hole, hiding from our fire, only going forward when urged on at gunpoint. When they did get near they were cut down by short, accurate bursts from our MG42s.

"Hitler's Saws, they call them, the Russkis," Mundt said. "They are noisy bastards too, I guess, just like a sawmill."

"As long as they give us the bullets to use them," Voss said sourly.

He was correct the new machine guns were devastating as long as they had the belts of ammunition to keep them firing. A small group of Russians, more determined than their comrades, did get quite close to our half-track and Merkel got the chance to demonstrate his skills with grenades. His throws were incredible, he drew his arm back, looked carefully at the target and then launched. The soldiers must have been fifty metres away, a group of Russians sheltering in a nearby shell hole that we couldn't dislodge. The stick grenade flew unerringly into the middle of them and exploded, their screams echoed towards us. They carried on screaming for a long time, but they were no longer shooting at us. The attack quickly petered out, the last of the Russians retreated to their positions and the battlefield was empty, except for the corpses that were strewn across the snow, smears of red blood and dismembered body parts giving it the appearance of some kind of surreal camouflage. A runner came around with a message from Muller, we were pulling out to re-arm, a regiment of the LAH would take our places in the line.

Shortly afterwards we heard the noise of engines as the half-tracks, armoured cars and Panzers of our relief began to arrive. We started up and Voss drove us back to our assembly point. Muller was already on the ground surrounded by a group of officers, I dismounted and went to join them.

"The pressure on Kharkov is off for now, Division report that the Soviets are pulling back after the bloody nose we gave them. It looks like we've got a clear front open for us, we're going forward again."

We all cheered, at last, it was what we were here for, seeking and destroying the enemy, not waiting for them to come and attack us.

"HQ want us to get in position to counterattack Kursk, it's time we drove the Soviets out of that city. Our immediate objective is Korenevo, we aim to retake the ground we lost recently. If all goes well, we'll set up our

HQ back in the monastery where we were before. We'll take today to re-arm and re-equip, some of our half-tracks need repairs and I'm waiting for new barrels for some of the MG42s. Attend to your men and I'll try and get the cookhouse to rustle up some food. We leave at two am tomorrow. That's all."

I went back to my platoon and passed on the news. There was more than a little grumbling.

"We're going backwards and forwards like a fucking see-saw," Beidenberg said. "You'd think they'd give us the tools to finish the job, a few more Panzers and some air support from the Luftwaffe and we could run these Soviets the length of Russia."

There were murmurs of agreement. I didn't say anything, our commanders weren't fools. If they had the equipment and troops they would have sent them forward, but I suspected the cupboard was bare. We'd heard of heavy Luftwaffe losses over the past few days, apparently the Russians had new types of aircraft in increasing numbers over the front, our flyers were stretched to breaking point trying to contain them.

We spent rest of the day replenishing our stocks of fuel and ammunition. In the afternoon a Kubelwagen drew up next to us. I tried to ignore it.

"Untersturmfuhrer, a word if you please."

It was Kriminalkommissar Wiedel of the Gestapo.

"Yes, Sir, of course."

We moved off out of earshot of the men.

"Have you seen Obersturmbannfuhrer von Betternich?"

"No, Sir, not today."

"We were observing the battle when he went to check on something that worried him, he saw movement in a nearby building but he never came back. I went to search for him but he has disappeared, the building is empty."

I assumed he meant that observing the battle meant watching to see who would snipe at me.

"Perhaps he was wounded, Sir?"

"The building was subsequently hit by a Russian shell, but there is no sign of him inside. I want you and your platoon to make a search of the rear area and see if you can find him."

"We're departing for Korenevo in the early morning, Sir."

"I know that," he snapped, "so you had better hurry. I'll be with Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, report to me what you find."

The men grumbled about having to be roused to go on a wild goose chase, ‘just to look after an SD man’, especially when the rest of the regiment was getting some rest, but I pushed them into action. I left two of my private soldiers to guard the half-track, the rest of us went over to the ruined building to start the search.

We scoured the rubble but found no sign of him. Then Merkel shouted, he’d found some traces of fresh blood. We spread out to search a wider area, there were more traces of blood some thirty metres away. We followed the direction of the red trail and found more blood. There was a collapsed wall and as we approached calling out for von Betternich, we suddenly heard a groan. There was a pile of masonry, that looked as if it had been a grain store or something similar, another groan came from inside. We started to move the rubble aside, pulling off bricks and rocks to reach the trapped man, finally we made a hole through to a hollow in the middle of the stones, a hollow big enough for a man. Von Betternich’s face peered out, white with dust. We ripped away at the bricks and made a hole large enough to pull him free. By a miracle, he was unhurt.

“I took shelter in here from the bullets, Hoffman, but the building was hit by a Soviet shell and collapsed around me.”

“The Soviets were certainly chucking everything at us, Sir, you’re very lucky.”

“Perhaps, but it was not Soviet bullets that I was sheltering from. Someone else shot at me while the battle was on. Have you seen Kriminalkommissar Wiedel?”

I told him he was at regimental HQ with Muller.

“In that case you can escort me there now, Hoffman. Thank you for rescuing me.”

He was quite able to walk and we made our way to where Muller was talking to his officers. Wiedel was nearby using the HQ radio, he saw von Betternich and signed off, then came to greet him.

“It’s good to see you, Sir,” Wiedel said.

“Yes. Listen, Wiedel, they tried to kill me, did you know that?”

“No, Sir, I didn’t. Who tried to kill you?”

“I don’t know who it was, but I would recognise him if I saw him again, he came quite close to me. What is happening here?”

“We’re pushing forward again, the LAH have taken over our positions around Kharkov, we are heading back to Korenevo prior to jumping off for

Kursk. Departure is set for the early hours of tomorrow morning."

He looked around it was growing very dark.

"Very well, I'll do the rounds of every man in the regiment when we stop at Korenevo and see if I can find the swine that shot at me."

"Assuming it was one of our SS Deutschland soldiers, Sir."

He looked at me thoughtfully. "Yes, that's right, assuming that it was. We will see in daylight when we arrive at Korenevo. Bastards, they tried to kill me!"

I got back to the platoon and settled in for a short night. We bivouacked next to the half-track, again my position as officer in command gave me a privileged place in the cockpit, so I was out of the snow. The men passed around another bottle of schnapps, they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply, I didn't complain. My thoughts were elsewhere and I was happy to drown my sorrows.

"The men won't be sorry to get back to Korenevo, Sir, that church was a lot warmer than out in the open."

"That's true. Has anyone heard any news of Kharkov, the Russian bombing? Did they hit the hospital?"

"You're worried about the nurse, Sir?"

I admitted that I was.

"I heard from someone that they hit several buildings but not the hospital," Voss said. "I'm sure she'll be safe."

My hopes lifted, but when I'd be able to get back to Kharkov and check for myself I couldn't be sure. This battle seemed to be endless, it had started before I arrived for my new posting and there was no sign of it ending. First we took ground, the Soviets counterattacked and retook it, then we took it again, when would there be a real conclusion? I thought about what the men had said, that the Russians had seemingly endless supplies of men and equipment. Our own supplies were becoming more and more intermittent, it was a sobering thought that the 6th Army had perished in the snows of Stalingrad almost entirely through lack of food and ammunition. We all remembered the radio broadcasts, Reichsminister Goering promising to resupply by air, Reichsminister Goebbels constantly assuring us that the city was in our hands, even the Fuhrer claimed that the 6th Army would prevail right up until the end. They had all been wrong. It struck me like a body blow that if the assertions of the men were true, then the Russians would always have the advantage in men and materiel. In that case, the end would surely be

pre-ordained, we couldn't beat them. We had just won a good victory, beating back the fresh Russian offensive at Kharkov. I recalled that they'd sent wave after wave of troops against us as if they did indeed have thousands, possibly millions more to take their places when they fell. Was the war in Russia then doomed? I tried to put that thought out of my mind, as it was unthinkable. Yet at the current rate of attrition, we could win battle after battle and still lose the war, eventually we would just run out of troops, of tanks, of fuel and ammunition.

I helped myself to more schnapps. Mundt raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. I realised how much I depended on the tough, reliable sergeant, he always seemed to be there, always did the right thing. When I drifted off to sleep, I thought again of Heide. It seemed that almost as soon as I'd shut my eyes I was being shaken awake. It was Beidenberg, "Sir, we're getting ready to move out, we've made a pot of coffee. Merkel managed to get some loaves of bread from the cookhouse, so you'll want some breakfast before we leave."

I groaned, my limbs were stiff with cold and the cramped position I'd slept in.

"What time is it, Beidenberg?"

"One thirty, Sir."

We had half an hour before we left. I quickly strapped on my webbing, checked my MP38 and went towards the smell of hot coffee. As usual, it was foul, but at least it was hot and soaked into the bread in my stomach.

"Are we anticipating much resistance, Sir?" Merkel asked.

I smiled, he was obviously keen to follow up on his grenade throwing exploits.

"I suggest you keep a supply of grenades handy, Merkel, you never know."

"Yes, Sir."

"And keep that rifle handy too, we could find having our own sniper might useful."

He nodded and smiled.

When I climbed into the half-track I discovered that Merkel already had a fresh wooden box of grenades by his feet, the lid off and ready to use. That suited me, if we ran into Soviet resistance a well-thrown grenade could well tip the balance in our favour. Then there were shouts for us to start up, there was a massive roar of engines, smoke swirled over the vehicles, even the

light of the campfires disappeared into the dark cloud as the leading vehicles pulled away. We were advancing again, yet I felt little optimism, I was being carried further away from Heide. Even after knowing her for such a short time, she was uppermost in my thoughts. Whatever it took I would get back to see her, whatever.

We were well on the way when I heard the sound of a shell being fired up ahead, one of ours. Two more shells were fired, then there was the chatter of machine gun fire, after that everything went silent, obviously a Soviet outpost that had been taken by surprise. We accelerated and after another kilometre more firing broke out, this time shells and bullets whistled overhead, it seemed that we were engaging the enemy. A flare lit up the sky and I saw the amazing sight of an entire Soviet army encamped on the steppe immediately in front of us. How on earth they'd failed to realise we were heading towards them I couldn't imagine, except that they may have mistaken our tanks for their own. But it was a golden opportunity, by the light of the flare I could see the tankers jumping into their vehicles, clouds of exhaust smoke as they started the engines, men running out of tents, pulling on boots and grabbing equipment. Some of the men were already firing back at us, camp sentries, anti-aircraft guns probably, but it was all too little too late. We smashed through the Twenty Fourth Army, part of the Voronezh Front, as if it was made of paper. The Panzers and STuGIIIs were firing constantly and the Soviet tanks were exploding one by one, as our shells hit the easy stationary targets. The machine gunners of our tanks and half-tracks poured belt after belt of ammunition at the hapless Russians, some tried to regroup to shoot back but there was a desperate panic in the camp, that blocked men's minds and stopped them thinking sanely. Then we were in amongst them.

Merkel lobbed his grenades in quick succession. A small group of soldiers were crouched behind a pile of rubble, popping out to take quick shots at our troops. Two stick grenades sailed over their heads to land, one behind them, one in their middle and they exploded in a shattering mixture of smoke, brick dust and body parts. Mundt was firing the forward MG42 and Beidenberg the rear, they swept the ground of live soldiers, leaving only corpse strewn devastation in their wake. Voss was driving, several times he swerved to run down a group of fleeing Russians, Beidenberg finished off any survivors as we rushed past. Several tanks had started their engines and were fleeing the battle but our Panzers and STuGIIIs pursued them and

finished them off. An armoured car, a command car probably with its large aerial array, was totally destroyed, almost certainly incinerating its occupants including the commander of this outfit, possibly a Soviet general. Our half-tracks were braking to a halt, soldiers jumping out and going around on foot to finish off the survivors. Our job now was to protect the Panzers from infantry attack from the rear, the Russians had a nasty habit of popping up behind our Panzers and hitting them in their vulnerable, thinly armoured rear. We went from cover to cover, shell hole to shell hole, rooting out Soviet resistance and taking prisoner any that surrendered. Not all were quick enough, some soldiers were too slow to throw down their guns and put up their hands and our men mowed them down in droves. I shouted at my men to be careful and spare those soldiers that surrendered, but their blood was up, they were both terrified and exhilarated in the fierce heat of battle and they were hard to rein in. Finally we had cleared the area of the enemy, the prisoners were being herded back to begin their captivity and we pressed on non-stop to Korenevo. The track was clear of any enemy and we were able to drive straight to the monastery and make camp just as if we had never left.

I was surprised to see the monks still in their camp. When we checked out the church and monastery it was obvious that the Soviet army we had just decimated had used them as a headquarters, there were signs everywhere that they had made a hurried departure. We simply moved our possessions back in and took over as before.

“Weird, those monks camped out over there still,” Mundt said to me. “They must be dedicated.”

Merkel was watching them too, an uneasy expression on his face, no doubt he had been religious once. Perhaps he still was.

“It’s almost as if they’re waiting for something,” he said. “They give me the creeps.”

I laughed at his nervousness. “Merkel, they are waiting for something, they’re waiting for the soldiers of both sides to go home and leave them alone. They suffered under the communists, Stalin had tens of thousands of their priests shot. Now we’ve arrived and they’ve got freedom of religion but they are stuck in the middle of a war zone with soldiers occupying their church.”

“That’s right, Merkel, they just want us all to bugger off and leave them alone,” Mundt added.

“Well, they still make me uneasy, seeing them waiting there, silently.

I'm going to go over and see what they want."

Some impulse made me get up and shoulder my MP38. "I think I'll come with you, Merkel, you've aroused my curiosity."

The platoon looked astonished. "Are you religious then, Sir?" Voss asked.

"No, I'm not, I'm just curious, as I said. After all, they're our neighbours, I want to see what they're like."

"Make sure they don't convert you," Mundt shouted after us.

Merkel half turned and flipped a rude sign back at him.

We walked over to the camp, there were six tents, some large, some small. The monks, twelve of them, were sitting on cut logs they had dragged around a campfire to use as stools. They eyed us warily as we approached, I remembered that we were still armed to the teeth, I had two unused stick grenades clipped to my webbing, my Walther in the holster and the MP38 on its strap around my chest. With the steel helmet on my head, it was hardly an encouraging sight. An older man looked up at me, then got warily to his feet.

"I am Bishop Demchak, how may I help you?"

I tried to give him a reassuring smile. "Jurgen Hoffman, Bishop. Don't worry, I want nothing from you, nothing at all. I just came visit your camp and to ask why you are still here."

The older man hesitated for a moment. "And where would we go, Untersturmfuhrer?"

"You know of our SS ranks?"

"I make it my business to know who is occupying our church."

"I'm sorry, it must be difficult for you."

He shrugged. "It has been so for a long time, the communists have not made our life easy. But to answer your question as to why we are still here, we must guard what is ours."

"The church and the buildings, you mean?"

"Our order of monks has many riches, Untersturmfuhrer, not all are visible to men. But yes, the buildings are of course important to us."

"And the other riches, the ones not visible to men?"

He looked alarmed for a moment, then relaxed. I guess he remembered that we weren't a communist raiding party.

"God has many mysteries, my son. We preserve what we can."

I was growing tired of his cryptic way of speaking, I felt as if he was in some way trying to dazzle me with the benefits of redemption.

“Come on, Merkel, let’s get back to the others and see if they’ve managed to find any food.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Herr Hoffman,” the Bishop called after me. “If you are in need of spiritual guidance, do come and see me again, I will be pleased to assist you.”

I waved my hand in acknowledgement as we walked away. Then a thought struck me, how did he know my name was Hoffman? I looked around but he had gone, probably disappeared into one of the tents.

The cookhouse had prepared their inevitable stew and brewed more foul coffee. I took a steaming bowl of potato soup mixed with some indeterminate meat, a hunk of coarse bread and a mug of coffee and sat with the men. My head had started to ache again badly after the excitement of the early morning engagement and I was glad of a rest and hot food.

“So what’s the next move, Sir,” Voss asked me. “Is this the beginning of the attack on Kursk?”

“Why Kursk, why are you so keen on Kursk?” I asked him.

“I had a woman there, bloody beautiful, can’t wait to get back to her. We were in love, you know, she was the nicest girl I’d ever met, said she’d come back to Germany with me after the war, unless of course I settled here on one of these farms.”

“You do that and the bloody partisans will cut your balls off, you know,” Mundt said. “They don’t take kindly to our settlers.”

“But Oberschutze, she could be dead by now, you should prepare yourself for the worst,” I said to him.

“Oh, I have, Sir. She had a couple of sisters so at least one of them is bound to have survived.”

I heard the men laughing, I tried but couldn’t hide my astonishment at human nature. “I hope it turns out well for you, Voss.”

“Yes. What about your girl, Sir?” Voss asked me. “You know, the pretty nurse at the hospital, do you reckon she’s ok?”

“Fraulein Thalberg is in perfect health, I’m happy to say,” a voice said from the other side of the half-track. Von Betternich, as always standing in the shadows where you least expected him. But this time he was welcome.

“Sir, it’s good to see you. So you have news of Heide?”

“Yes, the hospital was untouched by the bombing and shelling, she is fit and well and going about her duties even as we speak. A word with you, Untersturmfuhrer.”

I moved away from the men and we found a quiet spot.

"I found the man I was looking for."

"One of our men, from the Deutschland Regiment?"

"As it turned out, yes, he was."

"Was, Sir?"

"Was. He had been shot, not a rifle bullet this time, as far as we can tell. A shot to the side of the head, doubtful he even saw it coming. When the surgeon has time I will get him to extract the bullet, but I have little doubt it will prove to be one of ours."

"So you think the sniper is one of our own people?"

"Certainly a German, yes, but not necessarily from this regiment. No, he could be from another regiment, Der Fuhrer, perhaps, we have unfinished business there, if you remember. We are due to go back and visit them, I will naturally want you to accompany me."

"Sir, I thought I was finished with all of that business?"

"I need you, Hoffman, to watch my back. It seems you need me too, to watch your back," he looked significantly at my head wound, covered by the bandaging.

"I'm sure I can take care of myself, Sir."

He smiled. "You don't want the men thinking you're being watched over by a policeman, eh? But what about Fraulein Thalberg?"

"What about her?"

"You have been helping us, naturally we are concerned for your welfare and that of your friends. You are aware that the Kriminalkommissar has made it his business to keep an eye out for Fraulein Thalberg's well-being. War can be a very dangerous business, you know."

So that was the quid pro quo, but it was a price well worth paying. And he knew that I would pay it, gladly and in full.

"I appreciate that, Sir."

"Good. Der Fuhrer have set up their HQ outside the city of Kharkov, Hoffman. We'll be going there in the morning, perhaps there will be time for a visit to the hospital if you wish. You could take the opportunity to get your dressing changed and attend to other more personal business. Now, I have some matters to attend to with Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, I will see if he has a Kubelwagen that we can borrow. Half-tracks are so uncomfortable, aren't they? And entirely too warlike, quite the wrong impression for a policeman."

He nodded and walked off, leaving me once more wrapped up in the

dark tentacles of the SD. And now, of course, the Gestapo. But tomorrow, I may see Heide, I could deal with the SD and the Gestapo if meant spending some time with her, even a few precious minutes.

An hour later, a runner came to find me.

"Sir, you are to report to Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, at once!"

"Very well."

I heard the men muttering about their platoon commander being in the shit again, it was entirely possible too, I wondered what I was being accused of this time. I went into Muller's outer office in the monastery, the orderly sent me straight in and I saluted. Kriminalkommissar Wiedel was with the CO, whose face was red with anger. The Gestapo man was as calm as ever.

Muller spoke first. "Hoffman, I've had my attention drawn to some of your reports of the actions you've been involved in since you've been here. I've checked the reports from other officers and talked to the men. Do you have anything to add to what you have already said?"

I thought hard, what the hell could I have said that would have given the wrong impression?

"No, sir."

"I see. Well, I am pleased to inform you that I have decided to promote you to Obersturmfuhrer, effective immediately."

"What, er, I see. Thank you, Sir, thank you very much."

If I had made a list of the one hundred things least likely to happen to me, promotion would be at the very top.

"Congratulations, Hoffman. It is unusually early to promote an officer this quickly, but your actions have been a credit to the regiment and to the SS. See the quartermaster and he will issue you with new rank badges. That's all, dismissed."

I saluted. "Heil Hitler." He returned the salute and I left the office. How things could change, one minute I was on Muller's shit list, the next he promoted me to Obersturmfuhrer. I was walking away, feeling slightly dizzy when Muller's office door opened and Wiedel came out.

"Congratulations, Hoffman."

"Thank you, Sir. Was it von Betternich who pushed the Major?"

He smiled thinly. "He may have mentioned something, but believe me, the merit of your actions spoke for itself. As a matter of interest, I wanted to speak to you about your young nurse, Fraulein Thalberg."

My pleasure at the promotion turned to an icy feeling in my stomach.

“She is well? Has something happened to her?”

“Do not concern yourself, she is in perfect health. At least, as far as the Russian efforts are concerned. You know of her politics?”

“She told me her father was a communist, yes.”

“Quite so. However, she is on a watch list that I brought with me from Berlin. She has certain unwise political views herself, did you know that?”

I was about to say I didn’t when I thought to that time in the restaurant, she’d mentioned something about the treatment of the Jews.

“I suspect she may be a little outspoken, that is all, no more than that.”

“People have been shot for being a little outspoken, Hoffman.”

I reeled. “Is she in any danger?”

“No, not at the moment. But listen to me, the Reich has stern policies in place in certain areas.”

“You mean the Jews?”

“Yes, that is one such area. It is not advisable to question the State in these matters. Or even the wishes of the Fuhrer.”

“What is happening with the Jews, Sir? It’s not the first time that I’ve heard someone mention this.”

“They are being resettled, Hoffman.”

“So why is that a problem?”

Wiedel was silent for a few moments.

“Take my advice, Obersturmbannfuhrer, forget the Jews and do not make any enquiries. It would be sensible to pass that message on to Fraulein Thalberg. People meddling in State affairs risk everything, do you understand? Everything!  Good day to you, Hoffman.”

He walked away, leaving me more puzzled than ever. I rejoined my men and we spent the rest of the day making repairs to our equipment, the re-arming and refuelling that were part of the routine after any action. After the evening meal we had time to ourselves, the men had a camp fire blazing outside the church and coffee brewing in a battered kettle. I joined them and nursed a mug of coffee, feeling more confused than ever. The business with the Gestapo and the SD was obviously more ominous than I had realised, of course they had their teeth into Heide, I knew that now. I wished they’d all go away and leave me to fight a simple, straightforward war.

“Mundt, what have you heard about the Jews?” I asked my sergeant abruptly.

He looked up and by the light of the fire I saw his eyes narrow.

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Nothing? How is it that none of us knows anything? Where have they gone?”

Mundt shrugged. “No idea.”

“For Christ’s sake, man, they can’t have disappeared into thin air. How many are there in the Reich, a million, two million. Where are they?”

“Begging your pardon, Sir, but I prefer not to talk about the Jews.”

I was wasting my time, I knew that. But something was odd, they’d been bullied and beaten, their property confiscated in many cases. They’d been thrown out of their jobs and evicted from their homes. The same had happened to the communists and anyone else the Fuhrer blamed for the problems of Germany under the Weimar republic. It was cruel, sure, but the politicians said it was necessary. But what had happened to these people, especially the Jews, where had they gone? I recalled when I was very young seeing communists and Nazi stormtroopers brawling in the streets, but Jews never, they seemed like well-behaved model citizens. I decided to speak to Heide, she obviously knew something. Despite what Wiedel had said, I wanted to know what was happening in my own country, I had a right to know, didn’t I? But I thought of the dark, mysterious power of the Gestapo and the SD. Perhaps I didn’t have that right, I remembered instinctively asking Heide to keep quiet in public about the Jews. My heart told me I wanted to know, my head told me that some knowledge could be very dangerous. At least war was simple, kill the enemy before he killed you.

In the morning we had an early start, von Betternich and Wiedel climbed into the back of the Kubelwagen with me. We left the camp just after dawn, Voss drove with Mundt and Merkel crammed into the front with him. We drove for an hour to the city of Kharkov, just outside the city we bumped into the camp of SS Der Fuhrer Panzer Grenadier Regiment. It was a farm, it must have been prosperous before the war, the farmhouse looked to be in good repair and quite large. The sentry stopped us at the gate to the farmyard but Wiedel showed him his Gestapo identification disc and the man waved us through. The ground was littered with half-tracks and equipment, men working on the vehicles, a few standing in line at the cookhouse for breakfast, just like our own HQ at Korenevo. A soldier stood guard at the door of the farmhouse, his MP38 at the ready. Once more, Wiedel showed his Gestapo disc and we were waved through. An orderly knocked on the door of the CO’s office, the two security men and I were shown in. Mundt and the

others stayed outside.

"Good morning, Sturmbannfuhrer," Stettner said coldly, nodding at Wiedel and me.

"Obersturmbannfuhrer, Sir, I was promoted."

"I see. Congratulations," he said sarcastically, "what can I do for you?"

He wasn't on his own in the office, the Sturmscharfuhrer sat on a chair by the blazing log fire, a rifle on his knees, a Kar 98 with a telescopic sight. He took his time but finally got to his feet, a Sturmscharfuhrer was the highest rank of NCO in the SS, he wasn't about to let any officer forget his status.

"This is Sturmscharfuhrer Artur Winckmann, he keeps things in order for me around here. Now, tell me what you want, we are very busy!"

The two security men were on thin ice. Stettner was senior to both of them and he was a line officer in the middle of a major military action. Strangely, I noticed that he was still sitting on the ornate, gilt throne, it was obviously a treasured possession of his. But a little over-ostentatious, I thought, for an SS officer, more suited to a nobleman. Was that what he thought he was?

"Sir, you said you would have your regimental journals and movement records ready for us to inspect, we were interrupted by the Russian attack. We've come to look at those documents now."

"Then I am afraid you have wasted you time. They were lost during the Russian counterattack."

There was silence in the office. We all knew what should happen next, a formal enquiry, officers and men questioned, a search mounted for the missing documents, equally we all knew that it would not happen. The CO was blatantly hostile to von Betternich and Wiedel and we all knew that in this place he could please himself. Perhaps he really did think of himself as a nobleman after all.

The SD man and the Gestapo officer exchanged glances, and then nodded formally at Stettner.

"In that case, we need not waste any more of your time," von Betternich said. "Thank you, Sir. Heil Hitler."

We all three saluted and left the office, I could swear that Winckmann was grinning from where he stood near the fire. Outside, we got into the Kubi and Voss drove away and into the centre of the city.

"We have some administrative matters to attend to, Hoffman, we'll drop

you outside the hospital and collect you in two hours, your men will be perfectly safe with us," von Betternich said.

"Yes, thank you, Sir"

I rushed through the doors and asked the clerk on the desk about Heide.

"She is on the ward, Herr Obersturmbannfuhrer."

I went through the double swing doors, the familiar smell of ether, urine and unwashed bodies hit me full in the face but she was there, she looked up, saw me and came towards me, then stopped a metre away.

"Jurgen."

"Heide."

Then she was in my arms and we ignored the cheers, jeers and catcalls from the patients in their beds.

"I thought you might have been killed," she said.

"No, it'll take more than a bunch of half-arsed Russians to kill me, Heide."

But she saw through the bravado and didn't smile. "I'll see the sister and get someone to cover for me, how long have you got?"

"Two hours."

"Then we must make full use of the time we have. One moment."

She came back after three minutes with another nurse who gave me a cryptic smile and walked on into the ward to take care of the men.

"Come with me, there is somewhere quiet we can talk," she said.

We went up two flights of stairs and she opened the door into a tiny room with just a chair and a bed.

"This is the on-call doctors' restroom, it is where they sleep when they may be needed at short notice."

We looked at one other for all of five seconds, then we were in each other's arms, kissing, caressing and tearing the other's clothes off until we were both naked. We fell on the bed and her hands were all over me, our mouths clamped together, I pulled my mouth away and bent to kiss her beautiful, firm breasts, the nipples were hard and erect. Then I put my hand down and felt between her legs, she was already wet with arousal, her own hand was on my penis, softly stroking me.

"Fuck me, Jurgen, now, my darling."

I entered her and we held each other tightly as I moved my hips gently backwards and forwards, she held me, almost as if I might want to leave. I showered her with kisses and she reciprocated, we worshipped each other's

body, revelling in the sheer beauty and innocence of this most basic yet magnificent fulfilment of our needs, a tiny temporary oasis away from the filth, terror and horror of the war. Our bodies clamped together even more tightly as we made love for what seemed like an eternity, then all too soon it was over as we both surged to a climax. Afterwards we lay together, touching and holding in wonder at the newness of the love we had found.

"You know I shall never let you go after this, don't you, Jurgen?"

"That suits me, my darling. I'll be happy to stay with you forever."

But we both knew that our forever was an illusion. We constantly had to check our watches, I only had a half hour left. We slowly got dressed.

"This damn war, will it never end?" she said to me. "I hate this place, the dirt and squalor of Russia, the snow and the cold, the dark, I want you to take me away somewhere it is always warm."

"I would if I could, you know that, Heide?"

"Yes, I do," she gave out a huge sigh. "These fucking Nazis! You're not a Nazi, are you Jurgen?"

I was able to reply honestly to that one. "No, I am not and never have been."

"Yet you joined the SS?"

"Of course, I was in the Hitler Youth, it was an honour to join such an elite regiment as SS Deutschland."

"But some of your people are so brutal, Jurgen."

"Which people?"

She hesitated for a moment, but then she went on. "I was stationed first at a hospital in Poland, there was an SS unit there, they were called an Einsatzgruppe."

"Yes, one of our Task Forces, probably on anti-partisan duties."

"They boasted that they were rounding up Jews, not partisans, Jurgen. Rounding them up and shooting them, murdering them."

"Perhaps they were partisans."

"They were women and children, children as young as two and three, together with their mothers. I saw the bodies. And then there were the camps."

"Camps?"

"Yes, concentration camps."

"I see, they're used to intern political prisoners, that's all."

"No, there are dozens of trains travelling east every day, packed with

Jews, they take them to the camps and then they disappear. Jurgen, they're murdering them!"

"That's ridiculous, why would they do that, they're German citizens?"

But even as I was denying it, I sensed the truth of what she'd said. I had known Jews in my childhood who had long disappeared. The Reich propaganda maintained that they were parasites that should be cleansed from the earth. Until now, I'd assumed it was just words, that they were being sent to territories somewhere far from the Reich. Then I remembered Wiedel.

"They're watching you, you know. The Gestapo."

"I don't care, I'm going to write to the Fuhrer, he has to be told of this."

I was horrified. "The Fuhrer, are you totally mad?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing happens in the Reich without the Fuhrer's consent. You would just be advertising your opposition to the government, to the Fuhrer himself."

"So what can I do?"

"Please do nothing for now, my darling. When the war is over we will make our voices heard together."

"You mean when the war is won?" she said anxiously.

I didn't reply.

"Is it that bad?" she asked.

I think for the first time since I'd joined the SS I faced reality. The enormity of our government murdering our own citizens, Jews and communists, the overwhelming odds we faced on the Eastern Front, and they seemed to be getting worse. I hadn't been here long, but I had seen and heard enough to know the way things were going.

"We haven't lost yet," I tried to reassure her. "Just be prepared for any eventuality."

She gave me a pale smile, the message was obvious, look out for yourself. We both had to get back to our duties. We kissed long and hard, and made promises to each other, then I said goodbye to her at the hospital entrance. The half-track was waiting outside.

"You look thoughtful, young man," von Betternich said, "is anything wrong?"

"No, I'm fine," I said, trying to appear relaxed, but I got the impression that there was little about me he didn't understand. I shivered, hoping that his and Wiedel's protection of Heide would continue for now. If it didn't, I worried for her future. And I realised that I loved her, it was not just the

aftermath of wonderful sex, I loved everything about her, the way she looked, the way she talked, the way she smelt, the way she styled her hair, the way she walked. I knew that I would lay down my life for her. I felt that it might just come to that too, with all of the complications that surrounded our relationship.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

*“Man has discovered in nature the wonderful notion of that all-mighty being whose law he worships. Fundamentally in everyone here is the feeling for this all-mighty, which we call God (that is to say, the dominion of natural laws throughout the whole universe). The priests, who have always succeeded in exploiting this feeling, threaten punishments for the man who refuses to accept the creed they impose. When one provokes in a child a fear of the dark, one awakens in him a feeling of atavistic dread. Thus this child will be ruled all his life by this dread, whereas another child, who has been intelligently brought up, will be free of it. It's said that every man needs a refuge where he can find consolation and help in unhappiness. I don't believe it! If humanity follows that path, it's solely a matter of tradition and habit. That's a lesson, by the way, that can be drawn from the Bolshevik front. The Russians have no God, and that doesn't prevent them from being able to face death. We don't want to educate anyone in atheism.”*

*Adolf Hitler July 1941*

We drove through along the snow-covered tracks back to Korenevo. I felt as if this dismal, dreary place had become the epicentre of my world. If the Soviets wanted it, they were welcome to it as far I was concerned. The men must have known that Heide and I had made love, I knew that people have something about them when they have just been to bed with someone they are passionate about, a faraway look, maybe even the smell of their body, the sweat of a man mixed with that of a woman. They just knew, but tactfully they kept their silence. When we got back to the regiment, von Betternich and Wiedel asked me to follow them to their office. They had taken the same office as before, the Soviets had even left the furniture as it was. Their orderly had got a fire going in the grate and it wasn’t totally

freezing in the office, though not as warm as Stettner's luxurious quarters. Von Betternich limped in and sat behind the desk, Wiedel stood in front of the fire warming his hands and I was left standing rigidly in front of the desk, once more the naughty schoolboy about to be told off by the headmaster.

"It seems we have much to discuss, Hoffman."

"Yes, Sir." About Heide? Surely not!

"We are nearing some conclusions about this shooting business, give me your impressions."

I was astonished, I thought they were stalled, hadn't any idea as to who may have done it or why.

"I don't have any, Sir."

"Really? Young man in love, eh? How was the delightful Fraulein Thalberg today?"

"She was well, thank you."

He looked at me with a smile on his face. "That much is obvious, Hoffman. You did not discuss politics with her, then?"

I hesitated only for a moment. "Not really, Sir, no."

"No? You are very wise. Well, perhaps we will come to that later. After the war, perhaps?"

I made no reply.

"Well, back to the shooting of our officers. An open and shut case, yes?"

"Sir, how can it be open and shut, it seems to be a major conspiracy, the Soviets could well be behind it."

I must have betrayed my naivety, they both looked at each other in amazement.

"Conspiracy," Wiedel said in a surprised voice, "what conspiracy?"

"The conspiracy to shoot our senior officers, Sir."

They both smiled. "My dear Hoffman, I have been a policeman for many years. With a very few exceptions, murder is either a crime of passion or an act of criminal gain. This was clearly for gain."

Wiedel nodded. "You'd better explain it to him before he starts a major panic."

Von Betternich nodded. "It is quite simple, my friend. We know that certain high-ranking officers have taken it upon themselves to relieve the population in occupied territories of valuable artworks, paintings, sculptures and other artefacts. Russian icons, in particular, are well regarded, as are

paintings by Renaissance masters, Van Gogh, Titian, Rubens and so on. I believe I mentioned that Reichsmarschall Goering has a large collection at his estate, Karinhall, generously held in trust for the German people."

He lips twitched in a small smile as he said that and even Wiedel grinned. He went on.

"Reichsfuhrer Himmler has established a special unit to search out these confiscated artworks and make sure that they are sent to the Reich through official channels, to stop individuals pilfering these historical treasures. The unit reported that many pieces of art were going missing before they reached them and the indications were that these thefts occurred in areas fought over by the SS Das Reich Division. We have been investigating the various regiments within the Division to find out who is responsible. We thought we were getting near to the culprits when the shootings started, someone seemed to want to prevent us from talking to certain officers. Our current investigation centres on locating a stolen crucifix, solid gold and encrusted with precious stones and worth millions of marks. It was stolen from the church here at Korenevo. This crucifix is regarded by the Orthodox Church as one of their most precious possessions and dates back to the second century, it was made by a Greek craftsman and taken to Russia when Christianity was first brought to this country. It is a priority to both the church and the Fuhrer that this artefact is recovered."

"Senior SS officers stealing valuable artworks, looting churches, committing murder, are you serious?"

"It's not unique, Obersturmfuhrer," Wiedel said. "The Gestapo has many similar investigations in progress. But now, of course, it has taken a more sinister turn, the killings are interfering with our ability to prosecute the war."

"Do you know who is responsible for these thefts and murders?"

"Standartenfuhrer Stettner of Der Fuhrer Regiment is the person who is at the centre of it, yes."

Stettner? It did make a mad kind of sense, his obvious preoccupation with artworks, I recalled the gilt antique throne he used to sit on in his office.

"Surely you need to locate the crucifix before you can arrest him?"

They exchanged glances. "It is not quite that simple, Hoffman," von Betternich replied, "we know where the crucifix is, certainly, but arresting him is fraught with danger."

"You know where it is? Then why not just go and get it to prove his

guilt? Where does he keep it?"

"In the base of that antique throne he uses."

"Really? How do you know that?"

"Because it is the one possession that he has with him at all times and carries everywhere, guarded and protected. Where else would he put a solid gold artefact worth millions of marks?"

"But why were the other officers killed?"

Von Betternich smiled broadly. "A simple falling out amongst thieves, my friend. I sometimes tire of hoping that criminals will one day come up with a more interesting motive, but that's what it usually comes down to. Simple greed, and when the thieves fall out, it is by no means unusual for them to start killing each other. They were all in it, all of the officers who were killed, even Brandt, your own CO, I'm afraid."

I was staggered by the terrible implication that our own commanders couldn't even be trusted.

"So you know who the culprit is and where the crucifix is yet you can't arrest him, I don't understand."

"He is surrounded by several hundred heavily armed troopers who are fiercely loyal to him and we're in the middle of one of the bloodiest wars that has ever been fought. If we went in to make the arrest, he would probably order his men to shoot us and blame the partisans."

I recalled Stettner's Sturmscharfuhrer with his telescopic rifle. "So his sergeant is the sniper?"

"Yes, probably, we checked the marksmanship of every man within Das Reich who could shoot that well, Vinckmann is one of the best they have, if not the best. There is Merkel, of course, from your own platoon. But Vinckmann looks most likely, he just missed the 1936 Olympic Games rifle shooting competition due to illness and he is Stettner's right hand man. Yes, almost certainly, it's him."

"So what will you do next?"

I had a vision of hundreds of Gestapo and SD personnel arriving in lorries to hold back Stettner's regiment while they went in and made the arrest, but it was ludicrous. Back in Germany it would be easy, we had rules and laws people generally obeyed. With us here in the wild snowy Russian wastes, there was little or no rule of law, and very little order. The commander of a Waffen SS Regiment possessed huge power in a region where our own legions had stormed in declaring that 'might is right.'

“We will go back to Der Fuhrer tomorrow and speak to Stettner. With any luck, we will gain an opening and be able to make the arrest. If, for example, we can reveal the location of the stolen artwork, that may persuade his men to let us arrest him, and Vinckmann too if he is the sniper.”

“Couldn’t you just have him recalled to Berlin, then question him there?”

Wiedel smiled. “We are not amateurs, Hoffman. Do you honestly think he would arrive carrying the crucifix in his suitcase? We would have no evidence and besides, the man is a war hero, Iron Cross First Class and The Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves. He is distantly related to Reichsleiter Bormann, the Fuhrer’s secretary and has connections with several high-ranking members of the Nazi party. Without evidence, he could well turn the tables and have us arrested on some trumped up charge. No, we need to tackle him again, but carefully and cautiously, to see if we can literally catch him red handed. We will require you and three members of your platoon to accompany us again tomorrow. We will revisit Stettner and try to get him to incriminate himself, perhaps he will even give himself up, although I’m afraid that is very unlikely. We will leave at eight am, we won’t have the opportunity to go sightseeing in Kharkov this time, I’m afraid.”

“No, Sir,” I saluted and left. As I walked away, I could only reflect how politics could be both the making and the ruination of any man. As, of course, could war.

I walked back to my platoon, noting with approval that Mundt had made sure that everyone was working on repairs and restocking the ammunition. They already had a fire going and I sat around it going over the unending paperwork that is part of an SS officer’s lot. Mundt brought me a hot mug of coffee.

“Are we all finished now with the police stuff, Sir?”

“I’m afraid not, Mundt. I want you and two other men, we’re going back to Der Fuhrer in the morning, they have more questions for the CO, I believe.”

“Any chance of some time off in Kharkov?” he asked. “Maybe a few hours?”

“None at all, I’m afraid. They’ve said it will be a quick visit.”

He grunted and was about to say something more when someone started shouting, “Alarm!”

We ran for cover, the nearest for us was the stone structure of the

church. I looked up and saw a Sturmovik swooping down on us. Too late our anti-aircraft battery opened fire but the Russian was gone before he could find its range, the bomb dropped straight down and exploded on the perimeter of our camp, destroying a water tanker and killing several men who were clustered around it. It was firing its machine guns and cannons in long, raking bursts as it pulled out of its dive, flew over the camp and soared away. The second aircraft followed, another Sturmovik, firing continuously as he dived down on us, released his bomb and roared away, pursued by anti-aircraft fire. The bullets and cannon fire stitched a line across the camp, killing several unfortunate soldiers who were in its way, but the bomb failed to explode. We waited in the shelter of the church, but there were no more aircraft. The bomb bounced up in the air a couple of times, finally came back down to earth and rolled across to lie next to a half-track that was in process of being repaired, the engine had been pulled out and was hanging on chains from the framework of a portable crane positioned above it. Two mechanics for some reason had sheltered inside the fragile thin armoured body of the vehicle. They looked over the side at the bomb lying next to them, their expressions as frozen as the ground we were camped on.

The whole camp stopped, where normally people would carry on almost as if nothing had happened after a raid, except to repair the damage and carry away the dead and wounded. Now it was like a frozen tableau. Then one of the mechanics gingerly jumped down from the half-track and looked closely at the bomb. We heard him calling for tools from the vehicle and his companions handed them down to him. In front of the eyes of the whole camp, he calmly unscrewed the housing that held the fuse in place and gently removed it. He looked at it for a moment and then tossed it to one side.

“It’s ok, the fuse is defective, it’s rusted solid, couldn’t go off if you hit it with a hammer. Look.”

He picked up a hammer.

“Rottenfuhrer, no!” a voice roared across the camp.

It was Muller, who no doubt admired the man’s bravery as much as the rest of us but had no wish to see any further demonstration of it. The man put down the hammer and we all relaxed.

“I think another mug of coffee would go down well, Scharfuhrer.” I needed something to calm my nerves, it had been nail biting to watch that mechanic disarm the bomb.

“I’ll see to it now, Sir.”

I sat down to get on with my paperwork. Merkel was staring at something on the perimeter of the camp and I noticed it was the monks, huddled in their own shabby camp, hunched around a tiny fire. Did Christianity keep them warm, I wondered. Their ripped and ragged habits seemed to offer little protection from the biting cold, although they did wear fur boots on their feet rather than the more traditional sandals. Merkel was looking at them with a glance that seemed like hate, he'd behaved very strangely when we went over to see them. Perhaps he was a true atheist, a Christian hater. I'd better keep an eye on him, the last thing I needed was for one of my men to start giving the monks a hard time. After all, we were supposed to be more civilised than the previous rulers of this place, the Soviets.

We spent the rest of the day watching the sky for a return of the fighter-bombers and going about the daily business of a fighting regiment. Muller ordered the anti-aircraft defences doubled and called Division for some additional artillery. They must have taken his request seriously for within two hours a vehicle mounted 20mm Flakvierling 38 anti-aircraft gun rolled into camp. Until now our anti-aircraft defences had consisted of two sets of twin MG34s mounted on a frame arrangement, the gunner sat behind an emplacement of sandbags and endeavoured to target enemy aircraft, it was an unenviable task. Mostly they missed completely, frequently low flying raiders strafing the camp targeted these gunners and they had a high mortality rate. The Flakvierling 38 was a different matter, mounted on a half-track chassis the gunner sat behind an armour-plated screen. Additionally, the guns themselves were 20mm cannons, four of them putting up a fearsome rate of fire. If nothing else, the men all visibly relaxed when the new gun was installed in position. There were no more raids that day and we were able to work on getting the regiment ready for the next day's operations without interruption. The following morning I got Mundt, Bauer and Beidenberg to ready the borrowed Kubelwagen. I had intended taking Merkel but Bauer took his place, apparently Merkel was suffering from stomach pains and had gone to report to the medical officer. We collected von Betternich and Wiedel, crammed into the vehicle we made our way towards Kharkov and Der Fuhrer's HQ.

We never made it. Halfway there Mundt had to grip the wheel as we hit a series of rough bumps in the track. We thought they were corpses, frozen in the snow but it was a trap, logs placed to slow us down for an ambush. Three

shots rang out in quick succession and smashed the windscreen of the vehicle, two of them whistled past my head, between Wiedel and me. The third hit von Betternich in the upper arm. Mundt was desperately trying to steer the Kubi, he regained control and swerved off the track and drove into the trees, out of direct line of sight of the sniper. We jumped out with our MP38s and looked for the position of the sniper. Wiedel was pulling off von Betternich's tunic to dress his wound, thankfully it didn't look too serious. I shouted orders to my men.

"Mundt, take Bauer and start working your way around to the left, I'll go with Beidenberg to the right! We need to flush out this Russian bastard before we can get out of here. Are you able to use your pistol, Sir?" I said to Wiedel. "There may be more partisans hiding in the woods, so be ready just in case."

He nodded, "I'll be ready, don't worry about us, Hoffman, just get the bastard!"

This was what I had been trained for, dealing with enemy riflemen. I directed the men to follow a series of shallow ditches, to keep us out of the shooter's sights. The Russians had made much of their snipers at Stalingrad, even distributing leaflets shouting about the skills of Vasily Zaitsev, who they said was their best man and the best sniper in all Europe. It all sounded like bullshit to me, but still like the other soldiers on the Russian Front, we all hoped never to meet with this Zaitsev or any of his companions.

Mundt and Bauer were making quick dashes from cover to cover, twice shots rang out and bullets clipped the bark from trees next to where they were sheltering. I rushed forward with Beidenberg, we had almost reached the next tree when a shot clanged on my helmet, wrenching my head back and leaving my ears ringing, but at least I was alive. Beidenberg sent a burst from his MP38 in the direction of the sniper to keep his head down and we dashed forward again, I could see Mundt and Bauer fifty metres way doing the same. But the sniper had picked his lair well, he was in a clump of trees another fifty metres ahead, surrounded by clear ground, we would be totally exposed rushing across the open space. There was nothing else but to rush it. I gave Josef my MP38.

"Can you fire both of these at once, empty the magazines at the sniper and I'll run at him?"

"Sir, that's crazy, he'll get you for sure."

"Just keep his head down, Josef, I'll have to run a little faster than usual,

that's all."

He looked at me as if I was truly mad. Perhaps I was, but no way was that Russian bastard going to shoot up my platoon without me doing my damndest to finish him. I pulled out my Walther PPK checking the clip. It was full. I cocked the weapon and took off the safety.

"Now, Josef!"

He opened fire with both machine pistols, putting a barrage of 9mm bullets towards the enemy. Mundt and Bauer caught on immediately and laid down a storm of fire, I ran. The clump of trees was fifty metres away, forty, thirty, I dodged to the left as a bullet cracked past where I had just been running. Beidenberg had reloaded, another hail of bullets lashed out from his position towards the sniper. Mundt and Bauer were still firing bursts from their own machine pistols. Then I threw myself down behind a tree as another bullet cracked out overhead, once again I'd missed death by a split second, but I was behind cover.

For some long minutes, there was silence then I started to crawl forward, moving from tree to tree. There was no more shooting. I crawled forward again then I heard a rustling, someone moving through the trees, moving away from me. I didn't want him to get away so I jumped up and ran, but he cut the main track where there were thousands of boot and vehicle marks where an army had passed backwards and forwards. I'd lost him, I couldn't see which way he'd gone so I retraced my steps. Mundt, Bauer and Beidenberg were coming up, I gave them the bad news.

"Beidenberg, go and guard the officers, we'll try and find the sniper's stand, perhaps we'll find out more about him."

We spread out and walked through the clump of trees where the shots had come from. There was a shout from Beidenberg and we went across to where he was gesticulating. He was standing beneath a huge, old tree. Low branches had enabled the shooter to climb into it from where he could cover anyone coming along the track. I saw something on the ground and bent down to retrieve a cartridge case, ejected from the breech when he'd fired. I put it in my pocket and started to search for more. I found another four, while I was bending down searching the ground von Betternich and Wiedel came up with Beidenberg.

"Show me," Wiedel said, holding out his hand for the brass cartridge cases.

I put the ones I was holding in his hand and he looked at them then

passed them to von Betternich. “7.92mm. Almost certainly a Kar 98, a German rifle.”

“Often used by partisans,” I said.

He smiled. “Sometimes, but used all of the time by our own men. Let’s go and ask Stettner what he knows about this little episode, ambush, I imagine would be the best way to describe it.”

We were only three kilometres from Der Fuhrer’s camp, when we rounded a bend and literally ran into a band of partisans who were hacking a hole in the frozen ground, almost certainly to lay mines. There were eight of them, they were wrapped in thick furs and were so noisily hacking at the ground with pick axes that they hadn’t heard us until the last moment. Mundt didn’t hesitate, he accelerated the Kubi and charged straight at them. They scattered, one of them picked up a weapon, a rifle, but we stood up with our MP38s and fired burst after burst. After the debacle with the sniper, we were determined not to let these Russians get away. Three of them were bowled over by our hail of bullets, the other five managed to reach the shelter of the trees, one to the left, four to the right of the track.

“We’ll watch the man on his own, Hoffman, you take the others,” von Betternich ordered. He was still in pain but the wound was in his left arm. With his right hand, he fumbled his pistol out of the holster, a beautiful Luger Parabellum. Wiedel reached under his coat and took out a PPK like my own. Then they started after the Russian at a surprisingly fast pace.

“Spread out,” I said to the men. I didn’t want to bunch together and get caught in a fusillade of rifle fire. I’d only noticed the Russians with one rifle, I hadn’t seen any automatic weapons, but who knew what they were armed with? We moved rapidly through the trees, ahead of us we could hear them crashing through the foliage. Then the noise stopped. We slowed down and went cautiously ahead, it sounded as if they were waiting in ambush for us. We got within ten metres of where I estimated they had stopped. Then a Russian stepped out, holding a prisoner in front of him, an SS officer, barely recognisable, ragged and filthy.

“That’s far enough, Fascist,” the Russian shouted, speaking good but accented German. If any of you come another step nearer your comrade will get a bullet in his head.”

He held a pistol, probably a Tokarev, pushed into the side of the officer’s head.

“You will go back to the track and we will leave. If you try to attack us,

your man dies," he continued.

I saw Mundt slide to the ground and crawl away to the right. Good, he was an experienced fighter, if anyone could surprise these partisans, it would be him. I called out to the Russian to gain time.

"If we leave, will you release that officer to us?"

The man laughed. "No, that is out of the question. He is a prisoner of the Russian People."

"What would it take to persuade you to let him go?"

"Are you mad, does your own army give up their prisoners? Besides, if we release him you'll start shooting at us."

So why would that worry him, I wondered? Partisans were notoriously brutal fighters, often known for fighting to the last man to rid their land of the German invaders, surely they would do their best to kill us all, there were several of them. Then it struck me, they were almost unarmed apart from the single rifle. The Russians used penal units extensively in many battles. Although our own army used them too, Soviet penal units were much harsher, considered to be certain suicides. They were often brought forward and issued weapons moments before they were ordered to attack, then their machine-pistol armed NKVD guard companies would herd them into the teeth of German fire. Sometimes they even had to attack without any weapons at all. Frequently they were forced to march through minefields, their bodies marking the cleared passage for the Red Army to pass through. In many Soviet attacks entire penal battalions were completely wiped out. The partisans had a similarly ruthless attitude to prisoners, especially those regarded as politically unreliable. It seemed likely that most of these partisans were prisoners, coerced into digging holes to plant mines. It made our task much easier. I wondered about von Betternich and Wiedel, were they pursuing a partisan or a prisoner? Well, they were trained to deal with it, they would have to cope.

"I can't leave here without that officer," I shouted back. "Either you leave him with us or we will be forced to attack."

"Then he will die!" the man shouted back. "Get out of here, SS men. I will count to ten, if you have not started to leave your man dies."

He started counting, "One, two, three..."

I saw movement in the trees five metres to the right of where the Russian stood with his prisoner.

"four, five, six..."

I could see Mundt clearly now, he was standing behind a tree only three metres from the Russian.

“seven, eight, nine...”

A short burst from Mundt’s MP38 ripped across the short gap between him and the Russian. The man was thrown to the ground, leaving his prisoner still standing, thank God he hadn’t been hit. Then Mundt was beside the prisoner, his machine pistol covering someone else behind the trees that I couldn’t see. I went forward cautiously with Beidenberg and Bauer, we stepped behind the trees and saw the other four partisans standing with their hands held high. They were unarmed.

“Cover them,” I ordered the two men. Then I went to check out the prisoner. He was a Hauptsturmfuhrer, his cuff title showed him to be Das Reich Division, like us, but he was from Der Fuhrer Regiment, one of Stettner’s officers. Two shots rang out from across the track where the two security men were hunting the single partisan, they sounded like pistol shots.

“Scharfuhrer, would you go and check on von Betternich and Wiedel, make sure they’re not in any trouble.”

Mundt nodded and went at a fast pace towards the location of the two security men.

I attended to the SS officer, his hands still tied with thin rope and I got out my knife and cut him loose. He rubbed his hands together to get the circulation moving.

“I’m Max Mosel, Hauptsturmfuhrer, my thanks to you, Obersturmfuhrer. That bastard was aiming to kill me.”

Before I could reply, Mundt returned with the two officers.

“They were already on their way back, they dealt with that Russian,” he said.

I nodded. “Was he a partisan or a penal unit prisoner?”

Wiedel shrugged. “He was Russian.”

I introduced the released prisoner to them. “We can crowd him into the Kubi, we were going to his regiment anyway.”

“What about the others?” Mundt asked.

Beidenberg and Bauer were covering the four men with their machine pistols. I asked Mosel which of them was penal unit and who was a partisan. He pointed to one Russian, a man slightly less ragged than his companions with a thick, bushy black beard.

“Him, he’s the only partisan, apart from the man you shot.”

“Does he speak German?”

“No, only the one you killed.”

“Perhaps we’d better try and question him,” von Betternich said.

I was surprised. “But he doesn’t speak German, Sir.”

He was still clutching his Luger. “That’s not a problem, Hoffman, I have something that speaks a universal language.”

“Sir, you can’t shoot an unarmed man, a prisoner.”

He looked at me with a cold gaze. “Yet the Fuhrer has decreed exactly that, Hoffman, where combatants in civilian clothes are captured. Would you argue with the Fuhrer, your Supreme Commander?”

I felt sick. “No, Sir.”

“Good, Wiedel, let’s see if this man can come up with any words of German.”

They took him a few metres away, I heard their raised voices trying to bully him into speaking German, but his replies were all in Russian, his voice terrified, clearly he had no idea what they were talking about. Then a pistol shot rang out and we heard something heavy hit the ground. They came back.

“All done,” Wiedel said cheerfully. “What will you do about the others?”

“They’re penal unit, Sir, I’m going to let them go, they’ve got more to fear from their own people than they have from us.”

“I’m not happy about that, Hoffman.”

“Damnit, Sir, we’re talking about men who were prisoners already, they were unarmed and they weren’t fighting us. Chances are that they’ll do some damage to the Russians, God knows they hate them enough.”

“That is true,” Mosel added. “They are all Ukrainians, they do hate the communists.”

Wiedel considered. “Very well, let them go. You’d better be right, Hoffman.”

One of them understood a little German, I told him to go. They all looked grateful, but wary. They backed away from us, when they were ten paces away they suddenly turned and fled. Poor devils, they suffered Stalin’s Red Hordes devastating their homeland, now they had us to contend with.

“We’d better press on to Der Fuhrer and finish our business, otherwise we’ll be pushed to get back to Korenevo before nightfall,” I said to them.

“What was your business with my regiment?” Mosel asked.

None of us answered and von Betternich and Wiedel studiously ignored

him. I shrugged, as if to say ‘I’ve no idea’.

“I see,” Mosel said heavily, looking at Wiedel’s leather coat and trilby hat, the uniform of the Gestapo.

We walked back in silence and piled into the Kubi, it was too small for all of us but we crammed ourselves in and Mundt drove away.

The two security men were busy talking to each other when Mosel turned to me and spoke quietly.

“Was it the thefts?”

There was an abrupt silence. Wiedel overheard him and fixed him with a hard glare.

“Which thefts are you referring to?”

“Just before I was captured, someone was talking about the Gestapo investigating the theft of artworks, I assumed that it was something similar.”

Von Betternich and Wiedel exchanged glances. “We were looking into the unexplained deaths of some senior officers, Mosel. But do tell us about the thefts.”

Mosel went bright red, he realised he’d opened his mouth prematurely. He didn’t reply.

“Mundt, stop this vehicle,” Wiedel shouted. “Turn around and take us to Division, perhaps we can show the Hauptsturmfuhrer how the Gestapo interrogates its prisoners.”

Mundt pulled in to the side of the track, Mosel’s face paled. “No, there’s no need for that. Look, we all knew that some senior officers were stealing artworks and selling them on. I thought all of the regiments were doing it.”

“How do they dispose of these artworks?”

“There’s a quartermaster from Division, when they go to collect supplies they hand them over to him in exchange for cash and he ships them back to Germany.”

“So which of the Der Fuhrer officers are involved?”

“I can’t, he’ll kill me.”

“Would you prefer me to get it out of you in a Gestapo cellar, Hauptsturmfuhrer?”

He was silent for a few moments. “No. It was the CO.”

Von Betternich and Wiedel got out of the Kubi and walked a few metres away to talk quietly between themselves. Then they ordered Mosel to join them and I heard them arguing, voices raised in anger, Mosel started shouting, both fear and anger in his voice. They came back to the Kubi.

“Change of plan, Hoffman. The Kriminalkommissar has put Hauptsturmfuhrer Mosel into protective custody. We are going back to the Deutschland HQ at Korenevo, we have much more to discuss with this officer.”

I saw Mosel’s face go several shades whiter. The dreaded ‘Schutzhaft’ meant that he was now in the clutches of the Gestapo. It seemed to be a card, that Wiedel played often, but I could see the logic of returning to Korenevo. If we pushed on to Der Fuhrer with Mosel, the presence of the Gestapo and SD would tip them off that von Betternich and Wiedel had made a deal with the officer. Instead, the Schutzhaft would be like a collar around Mosel’s neck, no matter what he did it would stay in place until Wiedel decided to remove it. In the meantime he now belonged to them, body and soul. Wiedel explained that they were going to get someone else to return Mosel to Der Fuhrer and keep his testimony secret. It had been a stroke of luck for them when we came across the Der Fuhrer officer with the partisans and a witness literally dropped into their laps. We got back to the monastery and they whisked Mosel away to their office. Wiedel curtly dismissed me, and the men, to go back to our duties until they needed us again. Mundt drove over to the vehicle park and left the Kubi with the Scharfuhrer in charge, then we walked back to our quarters in the church.

I’d already sworn them to secrecy about the investigation, on pain of being placed under arrest by the Gestapo. They resented it until I told them that I was under the same threat.

“It’s not as if we’d shout our mouths off if we were told to keep quiet,” Mundt grumbled.

“I’m sorry, Willy, but it’s out of my hands. You could talk to them about it if you wished.”

“Very funny, Sir.”

At least he understood that we were held on the same leash.

“So what next, are we still in the service of the SD and Gestapo?” he asked me.

“We are to remain ready to escort them whenever they wish.”

“It’s crazy, why don’t they get a squad of Gestapo here instead?”

“To take on an SS regiment, Scharfuhrer?”

His jaw dropped. “Is it that serious? A whole regiment?”

“No, not the whole regiment, but it involves certain senior officers who could persuade their men to deal harshly with anyone that tries to arrest them.

This is not Berlin, my friend. This is the Russian Front. Rather like the Old West in the American cowboy films."

We reached the church, the men still had a merry fire going outside. Merkel was putting some extra logs on it, we came up behind him."

"Merkel, how are you feeling now?" I called in a friendly greeting.

He abruptly dropped the logs he had been carrying and whirled around. "Obersturmfuhrer, I didn't expect you back yet."

His face was pale. "Well, here we are," I replied wearily, "you still don't look very well, what did the medical officer say?"

"I didn't see him, Sir, but I'm sure it's nothing, it'll be gone after a good night's sleep."

That was strange, I thought he'd been ill, but it was his business. "Fair enough, would you try and rustle us up some coffee."

He went away and I spoke to Mundt. "I saw Merkel looking at the monks with a strange expression on his face, Scharfuhrer. I've got a feeling it may be some religious thing, perhaps he's troubled by us occupying church property or it could even be the opposite, maybe he hates them, I'm concerned about him."

Mundt looked dubious. "He's never said anything to me, if he is a bible-basher, or even bible hater, he's certainly kept it quiet."

"Perhaps I'm wrong."

I looked across at the monks in their ragged camp. They were holding some kind of an outdoor service, one had a censer, an ornate metal container on the end of chains that contained burning incense. He was swinging it from side to side, the smoke from burning incense swirled out of it. I couldn't hear him from this distance but he appeared to be reciting some kind of ritual.

"They're probably praying for us to go away," Mundt said.

"True. They'll get their wish before long, I would think, we'll be on our way soon."

"Will we be heading east or west, Sir?"

I knew what he meant, but it was a dangerous question with SD and Gestapo in the camp.

"Why don't you go and ask Wiedel?" I replied lightly.

Mundt laughed. "He'd tell me we were going north."

"And von Betternich that we were going south?"

"You've got it, Sir."

"Mundt, I'm sure that the Russians are at the limit of their capabilities,

they’re exhausted and I doubt they have many resources left to hit us with.”

As the last word came out of my mouth, the air-raid siren started to wail and our new four-barrelled Flak gun started turning to seek out a target. Both of our twin MG42s were alerted and swinging around to engage the enemy aircraft. The first one swooped down on us, mentally I ran through my aircraft identification lessons at training school, it was a Lavochkin LaGG-3, a Soviet fighter equipped with both machine guns and cannons, I seemed to recall they also carried rockets for ground attack. Streaks of fire leapt out from under the wings, that at least cleared up any doubt about rockets. As soon as they were released the pilot started strafing us with machine gun and cannon fire. He came so low that I could make out his face through the glass of the cockpit, then he zoomed back up into the sky as the second aircraft came in to attack. Mundt and I had jumped behind a solid pile of broken masonry near the church. He looked at me.

“What were you were saying about the limit of their capabilities, Sir?”

I realised that I had in fact spoken far too soon. They were obviously a long way from being out of ammunition and resources.

# CHAPTER NINE

*“Stalin is one of the most extraordinary figures in world history. He began as a small clerk, and he has never stopped being a clerk. Stalin owes nothing to rhetoric. He governs from his office, thanks to a bureaucracy that obeys his every nod and gesture. It's striking that Russian propaganda, in the criticisms it makes of us, always holds itself within certain limits. Stalin, that cunning Caucasian, is apparently quite ready to abandon European Russia, if he thinks that a failure to solve her problems would cause him to lose everything. Let nobody think Stalin might reconquer Europe from the Urals! It is as if I were installed in Slovakia, and could set out from there to reconquer the Reich. This is the catastrophe that will cause the loss of the Soviet Empire.”*
*Adolf Hitler July 1941*

The second salvo of rockets roared out from their wing pods and hammered into our vehicle park, the machine gun and cannon fire chattered

again. It didn't hit near where we were sheltering. I looked up and saw to my horror that there were at least another ten aircraft in the sky, some already diving down on us, the others circling, awaiting their turn to begin their attack run.

Unlike the Sturmovik the LaGG-3 was a single seater. The aircraft carried two heavy calibre 12.7 mm Berezin machine guns, a single 20 mm ShVAK cannon and six rockets. It was a lot of firepower, especially when attacking ground forces.

The third and fourth aircraft came in and unleashed their cargo of devastation onto the camp, then the four-barrelled Flak cannon hit the fifth one. The shells ripped through the cockpit and shredded the pilot, the massive firepower seemed almost to stop the aircraft dead in the air, then it exploded, showering the camp with broken and burning pieces of aluminium and rubber, as well as bloody flesh and bone. The other aircraft were undeterred, they roared in one after the other, turning our camp into a scrapyard filled with broken metal and bloody human tissue. The Flak gun managed to down another aircraft, it went away burning furiously, too low for the pilot to parachute out. It had barely disappeared from view before a huge explosion and sheet of fire shot up into the sky, marking its final resting place. Finally we got up to survey the damage, we had been hurt badly.

Immediately in front of me our half-track had been struck with machine gun bullets, the bodywork had several new holes in it. Fortunately none of the Soviet rounds appeared to have damaged anything vital, at least, not vital to the vehicle. Two of my men had been sheltering underneath it, Bosch and Kramer, they were both beyond help, their bodies riddled with Soviet heavy calibre bullets. I looked around the camp and could see that we had taken extensive damage. Everywhere men were helping to get their wounded comrades to the medical aid station, a large tent with a red cross that was miraculously undamaged. Some of our half-tracks were clearly wrecked, as were a number of other vehicles and motorcycles, two Kubelwagens were burning fiercely and piles of stores were ruined, blown to pieces and flames leaping out of them. Our ready use drums of petrol had been untouched, but even as I was looking at them flames licked around their base, probably one of them had been leaking and a spark had ignited it. As I watched, the flames rocketed up and around the drums and within seconds they exploded in a shower of burning petroleum. The cookhouse tent was only twenty metres away, some of the burning debris descended on the canvas and men ran to put

out the flames before everything was destroyed. I could have made it over there to help them, but they had enough men to deal with it. The attack weighed heavier on me than I could have believed possible, one moment we were a proud, fighting regiment, now we were a smouldering heap of scrap. Muller started around the camp to inspect the damage.

"Any casualties, Hoffman?"

I told him about my two men.

"That's about it, Sir, most of our equipment is undamaged. What about the rest of the regiment?"

He looked grave. "It's not good, we were already understrength and waiting for new equipment to arrive. We are down to less than two hundred men, even with so few we have barely enough transport. Fuel is critical, but Division is bringing more up," he laughed bitterly. "With any luck we can put a company into the field to fight the next Russian attack, that's about it."

"When do you think that will happen?"

"It could be as soon as tomorrow morning, who knows?"

I thought I'd heard wrong. "Tomorrow morning, but that's impossible!"

He smiled. "Sadly, the Russians are unlikely to see it your way, Hoffman. The pattern of Soviet attacks is consistent. The Soviets use their aircraft differently to the way we use ours, particularly the dive-bombers. Theirs are more of a preliminary softening up process, probably as much psychological as much as anything, they're damned good chess players, after all. First the ground attack fighters, then the artillery barrage, after that they send in the infantry and the tanks, often the infantry in front."

"To clear the minefields?"

He nodded. "Exactly, they send over the penal units first, then their weaker divisions and finally the T34s with the Guards tank rider regiments."

"So what do we do, Sir?"

"I'm waiting for replacements and fresh troops to come up with new vehicles and more fuel. We need anti-aircraft guns, of course, that Flak gun really paid off, but four of them could have prevented the worst of the Soviet attack. Ideally, we would move out so that the Soviets waste their shells on an empty area, but we are part of a defensive strategy, we're the neck of the Panzer Corps salient. If we leave here, the Soviets could come through and cut off an entire division, so here we stay until we are ordered to move. Cheer up, Hoffman, there's going to be some hard fighting but we'll beat them in the end, even if we only have one or two platoons left when we get to

Moscow. We'll beat the bastards, Hoffman, we'll beat them."

I only wished that he sounded more convincing.

I returned to my platoon and set them to repairing the damage to the half-track. There were no spare mechanics, they were all overburdened after the raid and we needed to have a working vehicle. Fortunately, there was no serious damage and with a few patches and repairs to some of the wiring, the half-track was ready to go into action by the evening. The church had not been hit during the raid but I didn't expect that to last, we ran the half-track into a nearby gully that would hopefully shelter it from the worst of the artillery shells, it would shelter us as well. Three other platoon commanders noticed what we were doing and followed suit, we moved our blankets and bedding next to the half-track and rigged a temporary shelter to keep out the worst of the weather. We stocked our makeshift shelter with as much ammunition, water and supplies as we could find and settled for the night, there were perhaps fifty of us crowded into the makeshift trench. We had fifteen half-tracks left and a variety of other equipment, including two Kubelwagens and the mobile anti-aircraft four-barrelled gun. We were well equipped with MG42 machine guns and stick grenades, we also had two anti-tank guns that were towed behind the half-tracks. That was almost our entire compliment, Muller was right, we would be hard pressed to field much more than a company. If the Russians shelled us badly in the morning and then followed up with massed infantry attacks backed by tanks, we may not be in a position to hold them off at all. I wondered where our Panzers were, they were the key to the forthcoming battle. With a couple of regiments of tanks, we could hold off a Soviet army, maybe two Soviet armies. Where were the Panzers? And just as importantly, where were the Luftwaffe? That last raid shouldn't have happened, our own aircraft should have been in the air to prevent it. Didn't they have enough aircraft, enough fuel and pilots to operate on the Eastern Front, surely they did? Or could what the men were suggesting be true, that the overwhelming Soviet advantage in men and munitions was swallowing us up like a giant shark? But no, that was not possible, we had the toughest, the most feared armies in all Europe, the best aircraft and guns, the best armour. And we had our soldiers, of course, we prided ourselves that we were better trained, tougher, more dedicated and more professional that any other soldier on the battlefield. I resolved to discuss these issues more with the men, they should know that we were a part of the most feared army on earth and we were going all the way to Moscow. Weren't we?

I slept badly that night, constantly waking to expect to hear the sound of the Russian guns. At four am the camp started to wake, I stood up to see that everyone was dispersed under cover, finding niches and holes in the ground like us. Just as dawn was breaking we heard the drone of aircraft engines, a large number of them, it grew to a roar but it was coming from the west. It meant they were ours, soon the distinctive shapes of Luftwaffe Heinkel He 111 came into view, dozens of them, there must have been almost fifty aircraft. I knew that our Heinkels could carry two thousand kilos of bombs, they would do enormous damage to the enemy. They droned past us, when they were about eight kilometres away I saw the bombs falling from their bomb bays and explosions that sent smoke and flames soaring into the sky. There was no doubt they were hitting the Russian artillery hard, I think we all prayed that their aim would be accurate and there would be no Russian guns left to shoot at us. Then the Soviet fighters arrived, swarming out of the sky to take on the bombers, but our fighters were ready. The Russian fighters were more LaGG-3s, I could see them distinctly through my binoculars. There were fifteen of them, a deadly threat to the Heinkels. On their first pass two Heinkels started to billow smoke, one exploded, the other turned west for home. Our fighters swooped, eight Focke-Wulf 190s, they tore through the Russian LaGG-3 s and their cannon destroyed four of the enemy on the first pass. The Russians broke off the attack to defend themselves and a dogfight developed, allowing the Heinkels to release the remainder of their bombs.

The sky was a kaleidoscope of noise, smoke, movement and colour, the fighters ranging wider and fighter, battling each other in whirling circles as each manoeuvred for the advantage. The Heinkels were still not entirely unopposed, Russian Flak hurtled up towards them from the artillery positions beneath them, streams of tracer from lighter weapons and puffs of smoke exploding amongst the bombers from their heavier anti-aircraft artillery. Another of our Heinkels was hit and literally exploded in mid-air but the rest had finished their bombing runs and turned for home and out of the range of the Flak. The Focke-Wulfs had lost two of their number but the Russians were reduced to only six fighters, the others had fallen to the superior performance of our 190s. Two more LaGG-3s were downed before the Focke-Wulfs broke off the fight and turned east to escort the bombers home, the Russians circled for a few minutes and then tore off to the east, apparently they'd had enough.

"Quite a spectacle, Hoffman."

I turned quickly, it was Muller, making another round of the camp.

"Yes, it was, Sir. We gave the Reds a good hammering."

"We did indeed. You've found a good position here, is everything buttoned down?"

"Yes, we're ready, Sir."

"Good. I'm expecting the Russian barrage to start soon, they'll quite likely follow it up with another counterattack, so be ready to move. We may yet have to pull back again."

I was appalled. "But we were told to hold here, Sir. Can't we fight them off, they must have taken a pounding from the bombing raid?"

"We'll do our best, of course. You're right, it is vital that we hold as long as possible to stop the Leibstandarte in the salient being cut off."

"Can't the Leibstandarte pull back to straighten our line?"

"The Fuhrer says no, Hoffman. They have been ordered to hold, Das Reich is to defend the salient for as long as possible. In fact, the Fuhrer has ordered our Division to hold to the last man, but General Hausser had made it clear that he will not see his troops slaughtered for nothing. We will just have to hope for the best."

He looked across at the monks' camp. "Don't they realise the artillery will be shelling this place before long?"

They were sitting around a campfire, talking, possibly praying.

"Probably not, Sir."

"Very well, go and get them under cover, Hoffman, I don't want the poor sods to be killed."

"Yes, Sir."

I walked over to the camp. The older priest in charge, Bishop Demchak, stood up to greet me.

"Bishop, are you aware that we are awaiting a Russian artillery barrage, it's due to start at any minute?"

He looked calm. "I was not aware of it, but thank you for warning us."

"You will need to take cover, Sir. All of your people, it'll be bad, anyone not under cover is likely to be slaughtered."

"We have no cover, Obersturmfuhrer, so we shall have to take our chances. But I thank you again for the warning."

I thought about our makeshift shelter, three platoons crammed into the gully with the half-tracks. But it was all we had, it would have to do."

"Bring your people, we have a place that will shield you from the worst

of the barrage."

He smiled. "I think we would prefer to stay here than join with your soldiers."

I felt irritated, his calm patience, his unflappable manner in the face of the metal storm of death we expected the Red Army to throw at us. But I had my orders, 'get them under cover' Muller had said.

I unslung my MP38, pointed it at them and shouted. "Now listen, there's a Russian barrage expected at any minute, I've been ordered to get you under cover so you will come with me. Now! If you do not get under cover I'll shoot you myself!"

The monks all looked at the Bishop, who shrugged. "Very well, we will accompany you."

He nodded at them, they got to their feet, and I led them over to our gully. Before we reached it, the sound of gunfire sounded from the east, the barrage had started. Within seconds, the first of the shells landed in the camp, a pressure wave hammered at us as I pushed the last of the monks down into the shallow defile. More guns joined in and the whole camp was swept by explosions and hot steel, that shredded everything in its path.

As the last of them got under cover, Merkel saw them and flinched, surprised that they'd joined us, I assumed, although his look was one of guilt. He tried to push past the Bishop and move to another part of the gully.

"Merkel, what's the problem? Stay where you are, there's no need to move."

"I don't like bloody monks, that's the problem."

I was amazed, I'd seen him staring at the monks' camp before and assumed it was because of his religious affiliation. Obviously, I'd been wrong, mistaking his hatred for genuine concern.

"My son, we don't mean you any harm," the Bishop said.

Merkel brushed him off. "Just leave me alone, stay away from me."

He scuttled off to find somewhere else in the gully to shelter, but as he left I caught sight of his face, mixed with the rage there was something else, it definitely looked like guilt. Demchak saw it too. In the town where I was brought up there was once a scandal involving a priest, not a monk, who had been accused of buggering one of the boys that attended catechism classes. The priest was quietly transferred to another parish, we never knew for sure how genuine the allegations were, everyone denied it and it was only the boy who insisted that it had happened. He never went to church afterwards and I

once saw him catch sight of a priest, that was the look he had on his face, a combination of hate and guilt.

"I'm sorry your man is so unhappy with us being here," Demchak said.

I nodded. "Maybe it's something in his past, something that causes him to dislike men of the cloth."

"Yes, I'm sure it is. It is the past that shapes our future actions, does it not? For good or for bad."

I waited for him to explain what he meant, but he had already turned away. So I had a Bishop prone to vague philosophical statements and a Schutze who seemed to hate everything religious, to cope with. Apart from the Soviet bombardment, of course.

The barrage lasted for an hour, both the church and the monastery were hit, though neither were completely destroyed. The monks' camp, the few tattered tents totally swept away by the heavy explosions from dozens of shells, I felt better at getting them down into cover. Several shells struck near us and fragments of metal spun all around, though most over our heads. A few of the men in the gully were hit but they suffered only minor wounds. Not all of the camp was so lucky, our remaining stores of fuel went up in a spectacular explosion, as did one of our anti-tank guns and three of our half-tracks. When the guns stopped, we stepped out to survey the damage. We had lost about thirty men killed and wounded, but we were still a fighting unit. Muller was out in the open with his radioman, calling for new supplies of fuel, vehicles, anti-tank guns and men. His voice shouting and snarling at Division rang around the camp, he was clearly having a hard time getting what he needed.

I heard the first rumble of tanks in the distance but it was our own armour, a unit of our Sturmgeschutz assault guns, the reliable STuGIIIs advancing to take on the expected T34s. Behind them, came a regiment of our SS Panzers, Tiger tanks, the formidable armour that could slice through the T34s. More tanks and mobile assault guns arrived and took up position, then they halted. I began to understand, we were setting an ambush. When the Soviets swept in here expecting to find a decimated Panzer Grenadier Regiment, they would run straight into our armour. Everyone was heartened by the huge show of force. We backed our vehicles out of the gully and began to prepare for the coming action. Muller came around again to check on his troops.

"Impressive, eh, Hoffman? None of us had any idea what they were

planning, trust General Hausser to have something up his sleeve. Did you take any casualties?"

I explained that we only had minor casualties, then asked him what we all wanted to know. Exactly how much of our formidable Das Reich Division was coming?

"All of it. Der Fuhrer Regiment is deploying about two kilometres away and our Artillery Regiment has dug in ready to fight off the expected Soviet attack. All three of our Panzer Abteilungen have come forward, it's the biggest show of force on a narrow front since we reached the outskirts of Moscow."

"Why now, Sir, what's the strategic thinking?"

"Kursk, Hoffman. That city is the key to our forward campaign on the Eastern Front, but in order to take Kursk we have to secure Kharkov, it's the hub of a vital road and rail network. As you know, it has been a yo-yo battle so far. The Fuhrer knows how critical the two cities are to support the renewal of our campaign, as does Stalin and his Generals of course. The next few weeks will be critical."

"So the Russians are being lured into a trap?"

"That's our sincere hope, Hoffman. General Hausser has prepared this plan carefully, the Fuhrer is unhappy about his frequent retreats from positions he'd ordered to hold. However, conserving his men and equipment has enabled him to harbour his resources and keep his Panzer Corp intact. This is his big plan to regain the initiative."

Muller went away to speak to the next platoon and I gave the men the news.

"So you see, this is the big one. We have not been abandoned and the Russians have not got the advantage in men and materiel, we're going to hammer them."

Mundt got one of his unending bottles of schnapps out of his pack. "I'll drink to that, Sir."

"Just a small one, Mundt, we're expecting the Russians at any moment."

We had a quick drink to celebrate the new beginning on the Eastern Front. He barely had time to put the bottle away, before a battery of guns opened fire. They were tank guns. Shells landed around our position, Russian shells, they were here.

Our Panzers roared into action, Tigers and STuGIIIs, soon the new day was a chaos of smoke and flame, the roar of engines and the constant gunfire

and shells exploding.

"Deutschland, let's move!" Muller shouted across the camp.

Voss started up the half-track and we moved out to follow the Panzers. We drove onto the flat steppe outside Korenevo where our forces had surprised the Russian advance, our Panzers had tangled with T34s and vehicles manoeuvred for advantage as shell after shell flew across the battlefield. Russian tank riders were jumping off their vehicles and setting up positions in shell holes, quickly bringing their anti-tank rockets into play. As we watched, a rocket hit the armoured side of a nearby Tiger tank and bounced off the heavy armour, but a hit on the thinner rear plate or on the more lightly armoured assault guns could be devastating.

"Voss, over there, head for that position," I shouted, "eleven o'clock, about sixty metres ahead!"

"Got it," he shouted back, wrenching over the wheel and heading for the Russians in a breakneck charge.

Mundt was manning the frontal MG42 and he emptied a belt at the Russians to keep their heads down. They ignored the machine gun bullets that buzzed all around them and started to deploy their own light machine gun, a Degtyarev DP with its round pancake magazine. Several rounds buzzed overhead before Mundt corrected his aim and fired off a hail of bullets that knocked out the gunner and wrecked the gun. Two heads popped up and started shooting at us, one had a PPSh sub machine gun, the other a Mosin-Nagant rifle, but the weight of machine gun fire was too much for them, the PPSh gunner was flung back when several rounds took him in the chest, the rifleman ducked back down. Then we were adjacent to the shell hole, we simply leaned over and poured fire down from our MP38s until the Russians were all dead.

All around the battlefield our half-tracks were doing the same deadly task, protecting the attack from enemy infantry. We moved on to the next enemy position and proceeded to deal with it in the same way, it was brutally effective. Within a few minutes, hundreds of the enemy were dead or wounded, burnt out tanks and broken Russian artillery pieces littered the battlefield. Then the Russians hit back with the Katyushas. One moment the distant slope was empty of Soviet armour and then it was lined with thirty or more cumbersome looking lorries, each carrying the framework that supported the Katyusha rockets. When they opened fire it was devastating, the eerie 'whoosh' as they fired and hurtled over the battlefield, trailing

smoke from their exhausts, then the explosion as they hit.

"Should we take cover, Sir?" Mundt asked.

I considered it for a second, then I saw the CO's half-track rushing towards the far slope, accompanied by three other half-tracks.

"No, head for the Katyushas, we'll see if we can't knock some of them out. Voss, move it!"

He drove like a demon across the battlefield. Several times we passed pockets of Russians shooting at us, we fired again and again, both machine guns flat out to cause the maximum amount of death and destruction.

"Merkel, the grenades, give them a present or two as we go by."

"Yes, Sir," he grinned. He seemed to have recovered from that bad moment with the Bishop, I felt sorry for him if as I thought, a priest or a monk had abused him as a boy.

His aim was devastating, we passed the first shell hole, the machine guns hammering at the defenders and Merkel simply leaned out and lobbed two stick grenades into their position. A few metres further on we heard the explosions behind us as another Russian irritant was removed from the battle. We had a bad moment when a small group of Russians launched an anti-tank rocket directly at us, we held our breath as it struck the rear bodywork of our half-track, then it went straight through the other side before impacting itself into the ground and exploding. It was a good omen, we were untouchable, we were the lords of the battle, the Soviets couldn't even touch us. We caught up with Muller and the other half-tracks, two more joined us in our mad dash. He smiled across as he saw us. Then he bent down to use the radio fitted inside his vehicle. We were about two hundred metres away, the Katyushas had little hope of hitting us, several Russians had begun to shoot with rifles and sub-machine guns but the lorries were manoeuvring to turn around and flee. They had left it too late, within seconds we were among them. They had miscalculated badly, half of them were trying to flee, the other half trying to defend their position, they were in total chaos. We tore through them, machine gunning them and lobbing grenades amongst the soldiers and the vehicles. Several of them got away, driving crazily for the safety of a wood in the distance, but two STuGIIIs had come up to join our action and they fired shell after shell at the retreating Russians. I estimated that we had knocked out more than twenty of their Katyusha launchers, a considerable result. Then the tide of battle ebbed and the firing stopped, apart from the odd single shot.

We spent some time on the battlefield, mopping up Soviet pockets of

resistance and repositioning our defences against a possible Soviet counterattack, but we had scored a major victory, they were unlikely to be back. Muller called us in for a briefing.

"I've heard good news over the radio, Der Fuhrer has wiped out two divisions of Soviet infantry and armour, virtually an entire army. We've done it, men, this is a major setback for the Soviets, they'll think again before they launch any more attacks!  Well done, all of you. We are moving to the outskirts of Kharkov, we'll return to Korenevo first to collect the remainder of our people and supplies and then pull out. Next stop Kursk and then Moscow!"

We all cheered, at last, through all the snow, the wet, the cold and the misery, all of the setbacks the regiment had suffered, we were back in the game. We drove back to Korenevo in triumph, I was convinced that nothing bad could happen now, but as I had learned, hubris is not a good thing. Laughing at the gods carries a strong risk that they'll have the last laugh on you. So it proved. I was checking the inventory of our stores and equipment to make sure that nothing got left when we moved into Kharkov when I heard a voice from behind me.

"An excellent result, Hoffman."

Von Betternich.

"What can I do for you, Sir?"

"I need an escort to take Wiedel and me back to speak to Standartenfuhrer Stettner."

"Sir, Der Fuhrer is in the middle of a fight against the Russians."

He smiled. "I have it on good authority that they won their action, like your own regiment. It seems that the Soviets have been driven away from the main areas of Kharkov, Der Fuhrer is even now being directed to set up their new position on the south western side of the city."

"We're redeploying too, moving to our new camp."

"Of course you are, Hoffman. Fortunately our destinations are similar, Wiedel and I will accompany you, we just want you to detour to Der Fuhrer's new camp on the way."

"We're taking the half-track, Sir, it's not very comfortable." I was doing my best to dissuade him, our camp was in chaos as everyone prepared to move, it would be no less chaotic when we arrived at our new position, Der Fuhrer would be no different.

"In that case the Kriminalkommissar and I are in for a bumpy ride. Shall

we say one hour? That should give you time to refuel and re-arm, perhaps get something to eat as well. I understand the cookhouse has a good stew on offer today. The meat is even edible. Don't worry about Muller, I'll speak to him now."

He limped away smiling and left me cursing.

An hour and a half later we were bumping along the trail towards Kharkov.

"Is this business likely to take long?" I asked von Betternich.

"Why, are you in a hurry, Hoffman?"

"Only to get everything settled into our new quarters, Sir, otherwise no, of course not."

"I am pleased for you. Your pretty nurse is likely to be at Der Fuhrer Headquarters tending to the wounded."

"What? You mean Heide Thalberg, what the hell is she doing there?"

"Der Fuhrer took heavy casualties during the battle. The hospital was overrun, literally no more space to attend to the wounded and so they sent out some nurses and a doctor to help on site, so to speak. They've set up a triage centre and an emergency operating theatre too, your friend is assisting."

I could hardly believe it. Yesterday I'd wondered if I would ever see her again, if I'd be killed or wounded in battle, if she would fall victim to an air raid. Now I was heading straight towards her, where she would be working. We arrived at their new camp, they had obviously suffered very badly, there were only six half-tracks that I could see in working condition, three more were being frantically repaired by the mechanics. The Headquarters building looked like an old barn, Stettner had set up his office inside and the wounded were being attended to in a huge white tent with a red cross on it. The duty officer told Von Betternich and Wiedel they would have to wait an hour to see Stettner as he was busy. They just smiled and nodded, and said they'd wait, it was no problem. Von Betternich suggested I find Heide, but to be back within the hour in case they needed me.

I walked across the camp through rows of terrible devastation. Almost everything had been damaged during the fight, broken vehicles towed back to await repair, men lying in disconsolate positions on the ground in the snow. Even the unwounded seemed tired and demoralised beyond hope. Outside the Red Cross tent the wounded were a piteous sight, there must have been nearly a hundred men lying on the ground, just left in the snow. I went inside and walked straight into Heide. Her eyes were like saucers, as if I'd just

landed from an alien planet.

"Jurgen! What are you doing here?"

I took her in my arms and held her to me, then I bent down and kissed her, ignoring the stares of the men around me. Amidst the death, the stink and the destruction it was like meeting a vision from a beautiful dream. I explained that I had been detailed to escort the SD and Gestapo. Her nose wrinkled in disgust.

"It's a pity, I wish you didn't have to help those people. But enough of that, tell me how you are, did your regiment suffer badly?"

"Nothing like this lot, no. We're not too bad, just a few casualties."

"Until the next time."

"Heide, you shouldn't worry, I told you I'd be ok."

"Don't be crazy, of course I'll worry, you can't stop an artillery shell or a bomb with words, can you? None of us will be safe until this stupid war is over. Look at these poor devils here!"

She forced me to look around. There were men with no arms, men with no legs, men blinded, men screaming in agony. It was sickening.

"I have to get back," she said, "they need me urgently, there are so many of them."

"Look, Heide, my regiment is camped nearby, I'll try and get over to see you again tomorrow."

"We could be back in Kharkov General Hospital by tomorrow."

"In that case I'll come and find you there. You can't keep me away, you know."

She smiled, but it was a tired, wan smile. "I shan't complain, then, Jurgen. Come back safe to me."

We exchanged kisses and she hurried away to deal with the wounded. I went back to the half-track to check on the men. Normally there would be plenty of banter between them and troopers from the other regiment, but not this time. I thought about Muller's optimism. If many more of our troops were hit this hard, we would never even get to Kursk, let alone Moscow.

Von Betternich and Wiedel were standing nearby, drinking mugs of coffee that one of my men had found for them. As usual, they were relaxed and calm.

"How was your young lady, Hoffman?"

I told them she was fine.

"Good. We have a unique opportunity here, Der Fuhrer has taken a

battering. It could be a good time to deal with Standartenfuhrer Stettner."

"Very well, Sir, what do you want me to do?"

"Make sure that all your troopers are armed and prepared to move. I want the half-track kept manned and ready to leave at a moment's notice, then you can accompany us, bring one of your men, Scharfuhrer Mundt would be a good choice, I think. I suggest you leave Oberschutze Voss in command."

"Right, Sir."

"And make sure that you and Mundt have your machine pistols with you."

"Yes, Sir."

An orderly came out of the barn and told us that Stettner was ready to see us. We walked into the wooden building and into a separate room, it was like a storeroom that had been hastily set up for the CO to use. It was freezing cold there was no heater. I was amused to see Stettner still sat on the gilt throne. Like before, Sturmscharfuhrer Vinckmann was with him. In the corner, the Kar 98 rifle with the telescopic sight I'd seen before was leaning against a chair.

"What can I do for you gentlemen that cannot wait?" Stettner asked.

"It is quite simple," von Betternich replied. "I have come here to recover a stolen artefact, a gold cross, a solid gold crucifix inlaid with precious stones."

Stettner stared at him, his gaze as cold as his office. Vinckmann shifted uncomfortably.

"Why would I have such a thing?" Stettner asked.

"Intelligence suggests that you do, Standartenfuhrer. Will you please hand it over to us?"

"Damn you, von Betternich, you and your Gestapo friend! I haven't got your cross and you can get out of my headquarters before I call my men to put you in chains for your damned impudence. I could have you shot!"

Wiedel had moved next to Vinckmann. He pulled out his Walther and put it against the Sturmscharfuhrer's body. "Vinckmann, would you prefer to cooperate with the Gestapo or would you prefer to risk being sent back to Berlin in chains for execution like your commanding officer?"

"But, I don't know anything..."

"Shut up, Vinckmann!" Stettner snapped. He jumped up and made a grab for his machine pistol but Mundt and I were ready.

“Stop, Sir,” I said to him. “Leave the gun, I’ll have to shoot you if you reach for it.”

“You’ll never get away with this,” he snarled. “If I give the order my men will be all over you, you’ll never get out of here alive.”

“We’ll see about that,” von Betternich said in a menacing tone. “Scharfuhrer Mundt, break open the base of that throne, let’s see what ‘King’ Stettner has been sitting on.”

“Don’t you dare touch that throne,” he shouted, “I’ll have you shot if you go near it!”

Mundt looked at me and I nodded. “Do it!”

He smashed the butt of his machine pistol against the base of the throne several times before it splintered and a hole opened in the side. He gave it several more blows with the MP38 until the hole was wide enough to see inside. He put his hand in and withdrew it clutching the most beautiful object I’d ever seen, a richly jewelled crucifix, the metalwork had a dull yellow sheen, the sheen of solid gold. Vinckmann’s face fell, we all noticed. He obviously didn’t know.

“Standartenfuhrer Stettner,” von Betternich said solemnly, “I arrest you on the charge of looting state property and murder. You will be returned to Berlin for trial. It may be that the SS want to try your case as a military matter but it is unlikely, I think the Gestapo will arrange everything. Do you wish to make a statement?”

“Fuck off, Gestapo man,” Stettner hissed, “you won’t get ten paces from here before my men shoot you like rabbits!”

“Put the handcuffs on him, Wiedel.”

The Gestapo man stepped forward and put the manacles on Stettner’s wrists.

# CHAPTER TEN

*“The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity. Bolshevism is Christianty's illegitimate child. Both are inventions of the Jew. The deliberate lie in the matter of religion was introduced into the world by Christianity. Bolshevism practices a lie of the same nature, when it claims to bring liberty to men, whereas in reality it seeks only to enslave them. In the ancient world the relations between men and gods were founded on*

*instinctive respect. It was a world enlightened by the idea of tolerance. Christianity was the first creed in the world to exterminate its adversaries in the name of love. Its key note is intolerance. Without Christianity, we should not have had Islam. The Roman Empire, under Germanic influence would have developed in the direction of world domination and humanity would not have extinguished fifteen centuries of civilization at a single stroke. Let it not be said that Christianity brought man the life of the soul, for that was in the natural order of things."*
*Adolf Hitler July 1941*

"Well, that all went well, didn't it?" von Betternich smiled.

"Did it, Sir?"

"Of course. Now, before we go any further, Sturmscharfuhrer Vinckmann, tell us what you know of this business?"

"Nothing, Sir, absolutely nothing! Good God, I wouldn't do anything like that, it's sacrilege to steal from a church."

He crossed himself, the look of horror on his face was evidence enough, clearly he'd not known of his CO's theft. And worse, the murders.

"You are a sniper, Vinckmann. There have been some murders committed by a skilled marksman, what do you know about it?"

"I'm a sniper, that's true, it's how I got my promotion to Sturmscharfuhrer. But murder? No, Sir."

"I thought not," von Betternich said, "but in that case, I wonder who did do it?" he said it almost with the fake puzzlement way of a stage conjurer about to pull the rabbit from the hat. In the background, Stettner laughed, a grating, sneering laugh.

"You should have got your act together before you got here, you clumsy oafs. Now you know that Vinckmann is not the sniper, how do you know that the real one is not outside waiting for you to leave the barn?"

"Thank you for your warning, we will be sure to take precautions," von Betternich said, still infuriatingly calm.

"How will we find the sniper?" I asked him. "He's right, the man could be waiting outside for us."

"I'm sure he is outside, when he does makes himself known to us we will arrest him."

"Unless he shoots us first," I muttered.

“Quite so,” the SD man replied. “Would you ask your Scharfuhrer to arrange for the half-track to be brought near to the door of the barn and we can take this gentleman into custody.”

“Don’t be stupid, von Betternich, you’ll never get away with it,” Stettner hissed.

The SD man ignored him and Mundt went out to arrange for the half-track. At least I’d feel better having my platoon around me in the armoured vehicle. Wiedel spoke sternly to Vinckmann, he told the terrified NCO to use what influence he had with the men to help get us out of here. In return, he would escape being charged with the thefts and murders. His guilt or innocence was of no consequence, all that was required was his frightened cooperation. It was a masterly way to handle everything, I thought, the two security men coming here for Stettner and using his sergeant-major against him when the regiment was at its lowest ebb after a devastating battle. But the question of the real sniper still worried me. If it wasn’t Vinckmann, who the hell was it, and was he waiting outside for us? Mundt came back into the office.

“The half-track is outside now, Sir.”

“Thank you, Mundt.”

“Scharfuhrer,” von Betternich said to him, “would you ask Schutze Merkel to come in here to assist us?”

“Merkel?” Mundt looked puzzled. “You want Merkel in here?”

“Yes, if you would.”

I had been looking at Stettner, when the name of Merkel had been mentioned he’d gone pale. Then it clicked, of course. When our CO, Standartenfuhrer Brandt had been killed by a sniper, Der Fuhrer hadn’t been anywhere near him. The best marksman by far in our regiment was probably Merkel. I remembered the easy way he’d handled the rifle, his skill with grenades. But why?”

“I can see the puzzlement on your face, Hoffman. But it is really quite simple, once you’ve eliminated Vinckmann as the most likely suspect. In fact, I did eliminate him as a probable suspect some time ago. He wasn’t anywhere near when your Standartenfuhrer was killed. So I checked out the background of every trained sniper attached to the Division. We were naturally interested in Merkel because of his skill as a marksman and of course the fact that he had the opportunity. He and Stettner are from the same town, which was an interesting coincidence.  Apparently Merkel came across

Stettner when he was a member of the Hitler Youth and Stettner was in charge of weapons training for that splendid organisation. When he found out that Merkel his protégé, had been abused by a local priest he was so enraged that he took up the case personally, and demanded that the priest be prosecuted. I believe he wanted to shoot him at one time. The church moved him out of the area and covered up the case, but from then on Merkel hated everything religious and was prepared to do anything for the man who had championed his cause, anything at all, including murder."

So it was Merkel, a member of my platoon. I thought of the victorious moment only hours earlier we looked to be on victorious path to Moscow. Now I knew that one of my men was a thief and a murderer. Mundt came rushing back into the office, his face grave.

"When I told Merkel you wanted him he grabbed his weapons and ran for it, I'm sorry, he was too quick for me to stop him. Was it something important?"

I explained quickly why we wanted him.

"Do you want me to go after him, Sir? I can get the platoon to mount a search, perhaps Der Fuhrer would assist." He saw our faces, the prisoner Standartenfuhrer Stettner sat at his desk enjoying our discomfort. "No, perhaps not. What do we do?"

"Tell Voss to stay with the half-track and get one of the men in here to guard the prisoner. We'll go out with the rest of the platoon and look for him."

"Right, Sir."

"Vinckmann, stand outside the door and don't let anyone in here for any reason. Remember, man, your life depends on it!"

He nodded.

"We'll locate him," I said to von Betternich.

He smiled thinly. "I hope so, good luck, Hoffman."

We walked out to the half-track and I asked Mundt which way Merkel had gone.

"I last saw him running over there, towards the Red Cross tent, Sir."

Heide! Damn, if he put a finger on her I'd rip his guts out and hang him with them.

"Right, bring the men and let's go and find him. No shooting, remember, there are wounded men and nurses in there."

We rushed across the camp. Several Der Fuhrer troopers looked at us

with curiosity but no animosity, their faces bore the deep, etched scars of defeat on them. Even though they had technically won the battle, they had lost more than half the regiment in doing it. A pyrrhic victory indeed.

I told the men to wait outside the huge tent and I unslung my MP38 and walked in. There were lines of groaning men, nurses and medical orderlies struggling to ease the worst of their pain, a doctor moved up and down the lines rapping out orders to the nurses. A clerk was stationed just inside the tent flap with a portable field desk piled with stacks of papers.

"I'm looking for one of my men, Schutze Merkel."

"Merkel? Was he the one carrying the rifle?"

I nodded. "That's him."

"He came in here and said that Obersturmfuhrer Hoffman needed to speak urgently with Nurse Heide Thalberg."

"Where are they now, quick, man?"

"I've no idea, Sir. They left a few minutes ago, went out of the tent and turned to the left, I believe. Towards the vehicle park."

I rushed out. "They're heading for the vehicle park, let's go!"

"They?" Mundt asked.

"He's got Heide, Nurse Thalberg, probably he wanted her as a hostage once he realised the game was up. I expect he's going to try to steal a vehicle, we need to stop him!"

We reached the compound, a Scharfuhrer was inside the guard tent talking to one of his men. He came outside when I shouted.

"Did a trooper come through here a few minutes ago with a Red Cross nurse?"

"Why, yes, he did, Sir, said he needed to borrow a Kubi to go out and attend to one of our officers, seriously wounded on the battlefield he said."

"Come on, let's go," I shouted at them. If the man had stopped to think for a moment, he'd have realised that they'd send a field ambulance, not a Kubelwagen to attend to a seriously wounded soldier. But he'd just come out of a hard fought battle and wasn't thinking straight, none of this regiment were. We ran into the vehicle park just as a Kubelwagen shot out from between a wrecked half-track and an armoured car. Merkel was driving, his face wild but determined, Heide was sat next to him, cowed by the pistol that Merkel had in his hand. He lifted it as he saw us and fired two shots but both went wild. One of the men raised his machine pistol and was about to fire when I stopped him.

“He’s got the nurse with him, man, don’t shoot unless you’re certain of your target!”

“Sorry, Sir.”

“Back to the half-track, we need to get after them.”

We dashed back to our vehicle, climbed aboard and I shouted at Voss to follow the Kubi. We roared out through the camp gate, the sentries only looked at us briefly as we swept past, still too numbed to care after suffering so many losses.

“Voss, give it everything you’ve got, the trail forks about a kilometre up ahead, I don’t want to lose them.”

He floored the pedal and we roared along the trail, Voss took the bends at high speed but the caterpillar tracks kept the 251 stable. Too stable, we were a slow, top-heavy lightly armoured half-track, Merkel was in a Kubelwagen, though by no means a racing car it was lighter and faster than us. Except that he only had a two-wheel drive. Merkel turned his head to look at us, then left the main track to drive into the woods, obviously hoping to lose us in the trees. We bumped and pitched after him, but he was still drawing ahead. The wood opened out into a clearing almost half a kilometre wide, he was nearly the other side and about to drive into the next patch of dense woodland when he hit a snowdrift, his wheels sank in deep and we heard him gunning the engine and slipping the clutch, trying to free the Kubi. He looked around again and saw us drawing nearer and nearer, realised that he wasn’t going to make it and dragged Heide out of the vehicle and started running across the snow and into the woods. We could see him clutching the sniper rifle as he ran. We were gaining on him fast but then he made the shelter of the woods and disappeared. Thirty seconds later we reached the spot where he’d gone into the trees and we stopped.

“Everyone fan out, we’ll have to sweep through on foot to find them, watch for that rifle, he’s a marksman, remember.”

I took the lead in the middle of our line, there were thirteen of us, six on either side with me in the middle. I shivered slightly, it was an unlucky number, but I dismissed the thought, there was only one person who was going to suffer bad luck today, and that was Merkel. I turned to Mundt who was the next man to my right.

“Watch out for Heide, remind the others not to shoot if there is any risk to her.”

He nodded and passed it on to the next man. I told the man to my left

who passed it on. We trudged through the wood, moving from tree to tree, trying to make best use of the cover. At every step I cringed, waiting for the crack of a rifle shot, for the moment when a bullet hit me. Would it all end here, killed by a German bullet from a German gun fired by a German soldier? What a useless waste, after all my plans for a glorious military career, killed by a criminal in a cold Ukrainian wood. I cursed the policemen for getting me into this, then there was a vicious 'crack' and I felt a tug on the sleeve of my tunic as a bullet snapped past, ripping the cloth and grazing my skin.

"Down!" I shouted to the men, but they didn't need my warning, they'd gone to ground instantly, crouched in the snow behind the nearest trees. Mundt crawled over to me, keeping behind cover. "I could crawl around to the flank and try and take him that way?" he suggested.

"That's our normal tactic, Scharfuhrer, he'll be waiting for it. We need to try and get nearer to him and see if he makes a mistake. Let's go forward some more, tell the men to keep low."

He grinned. "No need for that, none of them are looking to get shot, especially by a shit like Merkel."

We crawled forward to the next line of trees. I peered around the trunk and a bullet lashed into the bark of the tree, I snatched my head back. We were close, very close. I looked around for Mundt, he was only two metres away, hiding behind the next tree.

"I'm going to try and negotiate with him to distract him, try and flank him, if you get a clear shot, you know what to do."

He nodded. "I'll do it, but are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Not really, but I've got to do something, the only way we can get at him is to distract him."

"Rather you than me, Sir. Good luck."

It wasn't the most encouraging remark I'd heard that day, but I had to do something. I shouted out to Merkel.

"We need to talk, Dieter, how can we resolve this? If you give up the girl we'll let you get away."

The reply came back immediately. "You must be joking, Hoffman. As soon as I let the girl go, you'll rush me and shoot me."

"Let me come forward and we'll talk about it, Merkel. I'll be unarmed."

There was a silence for a few moments. Then he shouted back, "Ok, come forward, slowly. If I see a gun in your hand I shoot the girl!"

I put down my MP38 in the snow, took out my Walther, and tucked it into the rear of the waistband of my trousers. My combat knife went into my boot, I needed some kind of an edge with which to deal with him.

“I’m coming out now, Merkel, no tricks, I’ll show you my hands.”

I walked out into the open, my heart thumping, and walked towards him. I advanced twenty metres and then saw him ahead of me, kneeling down in the gap between two trees whose lower branches formed a V shape, in which he had rested his rifle. It was a perfect sniper stand, offering both concealment and a support for accurate shooting. I couldn’t see Heide.

“Where’s the nurse, Merkel, has she been hurt?”

“Worried about your girlfriend, Hoffman? She’s fine, she’s lying on the ground by here. I’ve got my pistol handy, if your men try to rush me she gets it, understand?”

“Yes. Now how can we settle this, Merkel? You want to get away. We want the nurse. If you wish I’ll give you the half-track, you’ll have no trouble getting through the forest in that.”

I waited for half a minute while he considered my offer. Finally, he agreed.

“Pull all of your men back to the vehicle, no tricks. All of you lay down your weapons and stand with your hands up. I’ll come to you and take the half-track and leave the girl.”

“Agreed, we’ll do as you say. Don’t do anything stupid, we can all get out of this alive.”

He didn’t answer and I called out for the men to return to the vehicle. We didn’t hide behind cover, we just walked back in the open to show that we would keep our side of the bargain.

“Men, put your weapons on the ground where Merkel can see them and we’ll stand to one side with our hands up, I don’t want anyone doing anything stupid.”

They looked uneasily at one another but finally put their machine pistols in the snow. Then we all raised our hands. Merkel stepped out from behind a tree, pushing Heide in front of him, a pistol pushed into her back. He looked around suspiciously.

“How much fuel is in the half-track?”

“I believe it’s about half full.”

He sneered. “Excellent, thank you, Obersturmfuhrer. He looked at the platoon. His expression was crazy, his eyes wide and staring, he uniform was

even more dishevelled than usual, he'd crumbled in minutes from being one of my troopers to a crazed felon.

"I've got no quarrel with you men, so I'm going to leave you alone. But you, Hoffman, you had to stick your nose into our business, didn't you? It was only those fuckers from the church, after all. They're a bunch of perverts, you know that?"

I nodded tiredly. "Yes, some of them are, I know that. But not all. Let the girl go, Merkel."

He ignored me. "It was worth taking their stupid treasures to get back at them, you know. They abuse little boys but when it comes to losing their precious toys, they get upset. They deserved to lose them, you know, deserved all of it!"

His voice had risen to a shout, spittle was coming out of his mouth.

"You don't know what they did to me, do you?"

"Yes, I do know, and it was terrible. But those senior officers you killed didn't deserve to die because of it."

"Didn't they?" he laughed hysterically. "You don't know anything, anything at all. They were all in on it, you didn't know that, did you? Even Brandt, our own commanding officer, he was part of the robberies."

"Brandt, so why did you kill him?"

"It was because of Stettner, he killed one of the monks when we stole that crucifix, Brandt called him a murderer and said he was going to report him. He contacted the other officers involved to get their support, he wanted to make a deal with the SD to hand over Stettner in return for immunity from prosecution. They'd all agreed, the only way was to silence them."

I was astonished that the conspiracy went so high. I'd joined the SS on a wave of enthusiasm, believing the newsreels and the glossy recruiting banners. They had given the impression that we would be the elite, a new breed of chivalrous warriors, tough fighters but honest and loyal, and the senior officers were regarded as shining examples for the men to follow. SS officers were famous for leading their men into battle from the front, they were known for their courage and sacrifice. All that lay in ruins, now they would be known for being little more than thieves, looters and murderers. It seemed that the only difference between the SS and other branches of the military was that when they went crooked, they did it in a more brutal fashion. To kill their own officers during such a desperate campaign was unthinkable, despicable, leaving men leaderless and confused at a time when

they were desperately needed to fight the seemingly limitless Soviet hordes. Merkel was speaking again.

"I'll take that half-track now, Hoffman. Tell your men to move to one side."

I ordered them to move back. He grinned and pushed Heide to the ground where she lay sprawled in the snow. "Now, Hoffman, I'll be leaving you. Just one thing before I go, I'm going to give you what's coming to you."

So that was it. I should have realised.

"What's that, Merkel?"

"A bullet, Herr Obersturmfuhrer. It's what you deserve for wrecking everything.  Kneel down in the snow."

"No. If you're going to kill me, you can do it standing up and look me in the eyes."

He leered at me. "Brave to the end, eh? Fair enough," he stepped forward.

"This is what happens to officers who stick their noses into other people's business," he said to the platoon. Then he looked puzzled. "Where's Mundt?"

"I'm here, Merkel."

He whirled around and Mundt stepped out from behind the tree with his machine pistol raised. He pulled the trigger and emptied the clip into Merkel who dropped his pistol as he was flung to lie in the snow, now streaked with the bright red blood that flowed from his broken body. Heide got to her feet and ran to me and I held her in my arms.

"Is it over, Jurgen?"

"Not quite, I'm afraid, we need to get back to Der Fuhrer's HQ. I suspect that von Betternich and Wiedel may need us."

We climbed into the half-track and Voss drove rapidly back to the camp. We left Merkel's body at the side of the wood, nobody wanting to be soiled by touching the corpse of one who had murdered his own comrades. Heide sat next to me on the front seat.

"Are you expecting trouble at the camp?"

I nodded. "There could be trouble, yes, it depends how the men take the arrest of their CO."

"So what do you think will happen when you try to take him away?"

"Either we'll leave with him or without him," I said airily. But it was nonsense, of course. If his men freed Stettner from arrest, he would not want

us to leave the camp just to call up a squad of troops, possibly one of the Einsatzgruppen that fought the partisans, to storm in with the Gestapo and SD to re- arrest him. I was troubled about Heide's safety, but I had few options. Leaving her out on the Russian steppe with a couple of men to guard her was not a good plan. When we drove back into the camp, my worst fears were realised, a crowd of soldiers was gathered around the barn, Wiedel was talking to them from the open doorway, Vinckmann was next to him.

Voss pulled up the half-track behind them and we listened to Wiedel while I tried to decide on the best course of action. First things first.

"Heide, climb down from the vehicle and go back over to the medical tent, no one will notice you and you'll be safe there."

She shook her head. "No, I'm staying here with you."

"Heide, there could be some shooting!"

"In that case you'll need me more than ever, won't you?"

The typical female logic, they always seemed to get the last word.

"Men, stay here and cover us, Mundt, I want you to come with me. Voss, you're in command. For God's sake look after Heide!"

"I will, Sir."

We climbed down from the half-track and I pushed my way to the door of the barn with Mundt. There were no officers present, only troopers and NCOs, Wiedel nodded to me. Vinckmann looked very nervous and was sweating, even in the bitter arctic temperatures. I stared at the Der Fuhrer soldiers, "All right you men, what's going on here?"

A burly looking Scharfuhrer spoke arrogantly to me. "It's damn all to do with you, Obersturmfuhrer, they're trying to take our CO away and they're not getting away with it."

"So you want to be an accessory to murder, do you?"

He shifted nervously. "There's no proof that the CO had anything to do with any murder, this is a war zone, we're trying to kill Russians, not our own people."

I explained what had happened, that Merkel had confirmed all of it, but of course, Merkel was dead, his bloody body lying back along the track. Vinckmann shouted at them and told them to stand down but they ignored him.

Wiedel stepped half out of the door, he had his Walther in his hand, his face was furious.

"I'm telling you men to get back, how dare you interfere, this is a

Gestapo matter. I could have you all arrested as accessories, now get back. We are taking Stettner away for trial and that's final!"

"No way," the NCO shouted, "get them, men!"

They surged forward, there must have been forty of them, far too many for us to deal with. Behind me I heard the loud 'click' of weapons being cocked, then a single shot rang out, I whirled around expecting to see more Der Fuhrer troopers threatening us with guns, but it was Hauptsturmfuhrer Max Mosel clutching a smoking Walther PPK pistol, he was at the head of a platoon of men, all armed with MP38s.

"What the hell's going on here?" he asked.

"It's this Gestapo shit and his friends, they're trying to take the CO," the NCO replied angrily.

"Scharfuhrer, get back to your duties!" Mosel shouted angrily. "Standartenfuhrer Stettner has got a serious case to answer, are you men really trying to defend a murderer?"

The NCO looked aghast. "You mean he might have done it?"

"I certainly do, I have seen the evidence and he looks guilty as hell to me. Do you want to let someone who shoots his own men in the back go free?"

They looked around at each other, there was a loud murmuring and shuffling of feet but the fire had gone out of them, Mosel's passionate argument had won the day. The Gestapo had probably leaned on him, of course, but in this case it was justified, the arrogant bastard knew about the thefts and was as guilty as hell. The troopers drifted away with sheepish looks on their faces. Wiedel went back inside the barn, soon the door opened wide and they led Stettner out, still manacled. He was red faced with anger, shouting at his men, his voice hoarse.

"You men, they're trying to arrest me, your Commanding Officer, I need your help. Stop them!"

When they turned away and ignored him it was a joy to see the bewildered expression on his face. We led him across to the half-track. I helped Heide down from the vehicle before he got in.

"Sir, I'll escort Nurse Thalberg back to the medical tent, I'll be five minutes."

"No more than that, Hoffman," von Betternich replied.

I walked her across the camp. "What happens next, Jurgen?"

"Oh, we'll take him back to Division, I imagine that he'll be sent to

Berlin for trial as it's such a complicated affair."

"I meant between us?"

"Us?" Her question left me totally confused.

"Well, I intend to get away as often as I can and come and visit. Will you be based permanently at Kharkov Hospital?"

"Yes I will, at least for now. If the war changes things I could be moved elsewhere, who knows?"

"I think this front may be static for some time, the Russians have taken a hammering and they're in no position to mount any major offensives. Division needs to bring up spare vehicles and ammunition, as well as more men to cover the losses."

"Won't the Russians be doing exactly the same thing?"

I thought about that. "Yes, probably they will."

"So it looks as if you will have to do it all again."

"I'm sure we'll beat the Russians, it's just a matter of time."

She was thoughtful. "Jurgen, lots of people at the hospital say that we can't win this war, that no matter how many Russians we kill, no matter how many tanks we destroy, they'll just keep bringing up more and more until we're smashed into the ground."

I didn't know how to answer her, I tried to think of something clever to say, something that would defeat that argument, but I couldn't.

After a few moments, she said, "So it could be true, we could lose this war?"

"Schh, don't say that, my darling, it's not the done thing to sound defeatist."

"Well perhaps if they are true we should say these things so that we can leave this miserable country."

"Heide, I have to go, I'll be back in a few days and I'll look you up in the hospital."

I kissed her passionately and we hugged each other. Then I broke away and went back to the half-track. The men carefully avoided my eyes, but they must have seen our embrace. Von Betternich was not so tactful.

"Very touching, Hoffman, and such a pretty young woman, a credit to the Reich."

"Thank you, Sir."

I noticed that he was holding the gold crucifix. Would that find its way to some high-ranking Nazi, to be held in trust for the German people, I

wondered.

Voss started the engine and we drove away. Stettner sat in the back glowering all the way to Division, where we handed him over to the SD unit that based there. The two security men disappeared for half an hour to speak with General Hausser, afterwards they came back with us to our HQ to collect their things. When we arrived, Muller came straight out to greet us.

"Gentlemen, how did it all go?"

"Very satisfactory, thank you," von Betternich said. "You heard about Merkel? No? Well, he was involved in the conspiracy, he won't be returning to your unit, he was killed during the operation to arrest Stettner. They were in it together, they knew each other in Germany."

"So it's all over?"

"Yes, it is, Sturmbannfuhrer, all the loose ends are tied up."

"And what about my Schutzhaft?"

"Rescinded, of course," Wiedel said. "No need for any of that, you are free and clear."

"Thank goodness," Muller said.

"Just a little tip, Muller, General Hausser may well be paying you a visit sometime soon."

"Hausser? My God, I'll need to make sure everything is in order."

He bustled off to start shouting orders to his clerk to make sure his paperwork was up to date. Von Betternich held out his hand. "Thank you for your invaluable help, Hoffman."

"You're welcome, Sir."

"We're always looking for good young officers for the SD, you could make yourself a valuable career with us."

It was a tempting offer. I had no wish to be a policeman, but I thought about what it could mean to Heide. I would have much more freedom to see her and with her rather radical political views, could protect her from the worst of the damage she caused herself. But would she want that? No, of course not, it was an organisation that people like her would fear and detest.

The RSHA was the organisation that administered both the SD and the Gestapo, when Reinhardt Heydrich combined the police units they had various sections, including Amt IV, the Gestapo under Heinrich Muller. Walter Schellenberg became Chief of Amt VI, the Sicherheitsdienst-Ausland. Ernst Kaltenbrunner was named Chief of the RSHA by Reichsfuhrer Himmler after terrorists assassinated Heydrich. Their functions would include

the investigation and imprisonment of anyone expressing views that were in any way critical of the Nazi Party, which would include defeatist talk about the war.

I had little doubt that if I joined the SD she would tell me to go to hell. Besides, I wasn't cut out to be a policeman, I was a fighting soldier, an officer in the elite of Europe's armies, perhaps the world's. Except that I had serious misgivings about the war I had been sent to fight. I had no way of knowing the truth, back home in the Reich it had all seemed so clear. I served in the Hitler Youth rising to the rank of Oberscharfuhrer, I also did duty as a Flakhelfer, manning an 88mm Flak gun to defend our cities from the British and American gunners. Because of my early military experience, I'd been able to enter the SS as a junior officer and the day that we marched past Reichsfuhrer Himmler on our passing our parade, when I'd been awarded my SS commission was the happiest day of my life. I was a soldier, a warrior, about to be sent to defend the Fatherland from its many enemies.

After only a short time, I already had strong doubts. When I had been defending the Reich it seemed so simple, they were bombing our towns and civilians, and we did our best to stop them. But now I was on foreign soil, fighting against an enemy that seemed unstoppable and after all, they were only defending their soil against us, a foreign invader. Even discounting the morals of our invasion of the Soviet Union, and there were surely many good arguments, we had clearly been misled. Just before leaving Germany, we'd heard so much about the heroic Sixth Army that was sweeping all before it at Stalingrad. Now it seemed that a quarter of a million of our soldiers were either dead, wounded or captives of the Russians, after all of the promises we'd heard, some from the Fuhrer himself, that Stalingrad had been captured. Then there were the stories of the sub-human Russians, cowardly soldiers who would run at the first sight of the German Army and SS. Yet I had seen them advancing in heroic human wave attacks, attacks doomed to fail with fearful casualties and still they came on. In short, I had been lied to. I felt like a mercenary, perhaps like one of the Hessians, German soldiers who'd sold their services to the highest bidder to fight in foreign wars, strangely many for the British. Was that my lot, to roam foreign battlefields bringing death and mayhem?

"Hoffman, one moment, would you accompany me to the monks' camp?"

He was still holding the crucifix, I could hardly believe my eyes when

he gave it to Bishop Demchak.

“For you, Bishop. With the apologies of the Fuhrer that it was stolen from you. Our Leader understands it is important to you and your church, we will do our best to protect it in future from looting by our soldiers.”

The Bishop looked totally stunned, too astonished to speak. The look on the faces of the monks was amazing, as if Christ had just descended to earth. Von Betternich just nodded and smiled and we walked away.

“What the hell was that all about, Sir?”

“Politics, my young friend. The Fuhrer has had protests from the Russian Orthodox Church about the theft of that cross, it means a lot to them. The SS is in the process of building an army of Russians who can be loyal to the Reich, the issue of the cross was threatening everything, Reichsfuhrer Himmler was very angry about the whole business. It was vital that we returned it and punished those responsible.”

He explained further. “Look, Hoffman, our General Staff persuaded a certain Russian General, Andrey Vlasov, to become involved in aiding the German advance against the rule of Stalin and Bolshevism. Vlasov agreed , he even wrote a memo to our military leaders suggesting cooperation between anti-Stalinist Russians and the German Army. He was taken to Berlin under the protection of our propaganda department. Together with other captured Soviet officers, he has been drafting plans for the creation of a Russian provisional government and the recruitment of a Russian army of liberation under Russian command. He has even begun the foundation of the Russian Liberation Army. Together with some other captured Soviet generals, officers and soldiers, this army's goal will be to overthrow the Soviet state. A lot of our Russian prisoners, as well as soldiers who received Vlasov’s propaganda leaflets, are interested in becoming a part of his new army. It was all threatened by the theft of that damned crucifix. Bloody fools, all of them, but you see how important it was to get it back and stop all of this nonsense.”

“Perhaps you should have told me, Sir, it would have made things easier to understand.”

“You were told everything you needed to know to do the job required of you, Hoffman.”

“And if the Reichsfuhrer hadn’t needed those Russians to join the SS?”

He shrugged. “Priorities, Hoffman, that’s what war is all about.”

“What about those officers who were murdered?”

He spread his hands. “But they were criminals, my friend, just a band of thieves, hardly a task for the SD to concern itself with. I am sure the Gestapo would have dealt with them in due course.”

I thought of all of the deaths, murders and misery that had occurred so that these people could play their games, games of politics and deception. A Russian army fighting for us, it sounded like a fairy tale. It all seemed such a waste, especially for me when all I wanted to do was to fight.

“Hoffman, are you certain you won’t consider joining the SD? You really should consider it. You could make a fine career for yourself and of course, protect your friends. The SD always looks after its own.”

“No, thank you, Sir.”

“Very well,” he smiled, “just remember that I did make the offer, Hoffman.”

What the hell did he mean by that, why wouldn’t this man just come right out and say what he meant? I felt confused about everything, who was my friend and who was my enemy? Did the SD and the Gestapo have that effect on everyone they associated with?

My misery didn’t last long, I looked around the camp and saw my platoon grouped around our half-track. Damnit, I was an SS officer so whoever came up against us was going to have a fight on their hands. I was a member of the finest fighting elite in the world. If that wasn’t enough I had a girl who was one of the prettiest girls for five hundred kilometres, or maybe a thousand.

“Right, men, what’s the deal with the half-track, are we fuelled up and ready to go for the next action?”

“We’re attending to it now, Sir,” Mundt said.

“Thank you, Scharfuhrer. And Willy, thank you for taking out Merkel, you saved my life.”

“No problem, Sir, the little shit deserved to die.”

“That he did, Scharfuhrer.”

There was a sudden flurry at the entrance to the camp and a black limousine roared in, followed by a Horch armoured car. My God, I’d forgotten, General, or rather Obergruppenfuhrer und General der Waffen-SS Hausser, commander of the SS Panzer Corps.

“Men, get your kit, look smart, General Hausser is about to inspect us!”

They jumped to it and threw on their kit, webbing, steel helmets, rifles and machine pistols made ready. Voss was hastily running a rag over the

half-track to try and wipe off the worst of the mud and snow, I told him to give it up, he was only making it worse. We were called to attention in the middle of the parade ground.

"Soldiers of the Deutschland Regiment, you have fought well for Kharkov and I'm sorry to say that the fight isn't yet won. The Reds are regrouping to make a final push to take the city in its entirety and there's going to be some hard fighting. The Fuhrer has made it clear that we have to hold the city at all costs. That may be so, but I won't lose this Division the way they lost the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Believe me, if the situation demands it, I will pull you out of the fight until I believe we have a chance of winning. So make sure that you are completely ready to fight and remember, however it goes, if we do have to pull back at all, it will only be to pull the Russians in so that we can counterattack and wipe them out completely. We are going to wipe the Bolsheviks off the face of the earth!" he shouted.

The men cheered lustily. Then his adjutant gave him a box of medals and one by one, he pulled them out to award to officers and men for bravery on the field. I was half-asleep, I must have been, for Mundt nudged me.

"They're calling you forward, Sir."

"Me?"

"Yes, Sir."

I marched forward and saluted smartly, "Heil Hitler".

"Obersturmfuhrer Hoffman, for bravery on the field in single-handedly destroying an enemy tank with a Panzerfaust, an extraordinary feat of arms, you are awarded the Tank Destroyer Badge and the Iron Cross, Second Class."

He pinned the medal on my chest and handed me the badge, my head was dizzy with exhilaration.

"Congratulations, Hoffman." He shook my hand.

"Thank you, Sir."

"You've got a fine career ahead of you, Hoffman. Try and stay alive to enjoy it."

"Yes, Sir."

I stepped back and saluted, "Heil Hitler," turned on my heel and went back to my platoon. The men were cheering and I felt my cheeks bright red with embarrassment.

"Shut up and behave yourselves," was all I could think to say, it had the immediate effect of making them cheer even louder.

Hausser went on about glorious feats of arms performed by the SS, the ambitious plans for Greater Germany, how we would win the war by superior soldiering and weaponry. I wasn't really listening, I had mixed feelings, pride at my awards and dread for the immediate future. Once again, the position was under threat, Kharkov was under threat and that meant Heide was under threat. Even as the General was driving out of camp, I was trying to work out how I could safeguard the future, for Heide, for my platoon and myself, I was definitely not giving up, not yet anyway. In training, we had been told to keep going forward, always go forward, never give the advantage to your enemy. That's exactly what I planned to do. Once I had worked out exactly who my enemy was and who it wasn't, in the snowy steppes of the Eastern Front, I could indeed go forward, but for now, it was by no means clear.

A week later I was just stepping out of the half-track, we had come in from a particularly hard fight and I felt more tired than ever. I'd lost two men, the regiment had been hit especially hard and our casualties were lying on the snow in rows, waiting for medical attention. Suddenly a military ambulance drove into camp with the distinctive red cross on the side. My spirits leapt, could Heide be assigned here? But when the nurses climbed out she wasn't among them. I walked up to ask them about her.

"Heide Thalberg," they looked worried, "didn't you know?" a nurse asked me, she was the suet pudding-faced woman I had met in the hospital at Kharkov.

"Know what, is she hurt, tell me?"

I trembled with fear waiting to hear the worst.

"No, she wasn't hurt. She was arrested three days ago under a Gestapo Schutzhaft."

Von Betternich, or Wiedel, of course! I hadn't realised at the time but they had obviously already targeted her. Their offer made sense now but stupidly I hadn't understood it at the time. 'Join us and we'll leave her alone.'

I suddenly was aware the nurse was speaking to me. "Herr Hoffman, I have a letter for you."

She was thrusting an envelope into my hand, looking around to make sure that no one saw her do it.

"It is from Heide. She said to get it to you if I could."

I tore the letter open and read it with shaking hands.

*My Dearest Jurgen,*

*They are coming here to arrest me, I haven't much time. I have deceived you, my love, but only out of necessity and fear. The truth is I am Jewish. The name you know me as, Heide Thalberg, I took from a girl killed in an air raid. My true name is Rachel Kaufmann, but I had hoped to be able to live my life under an assumed name without fear of arrest and imprisonment. My father, Aaron Kaufmann, was a well-known communist and disappeared into the camps, I have been on the run ever since his arrest. I now realise that it was only a matter of time before the Gestapo caught up with me. They will of course put me in a concentration camp. My love, you should know that these camps are not simply places of imprisonment, they are death camps, it is most likely that I will be dead by the time you read this letter. Jewish prisoners are often executed on arrival.*
*Do not grieve for me. It is over. I will remember your face until the moment of my death. Find someone else to love and live your life in as much happiness as we shared in the brief time we were together. It was worth a lifetime.*

*Rachel*

I thanked the nurse and walked away, I knew it was of little use enquiring further, no one ever concerned themselves with concentration camp victims. I desperately tried to think of a way to help her, was there anything I could do? But it was beyond me, stories abounded of people disappearing under the Schutzhaft, even high ranking Nazis had been known to vanish into the camps and for Jews it was invariably their only sentence. Despite what Heide said, or Rachel, I didn't care what her real name was, her religion even less, I would try, but I knew it would certainly be hopeless.

I had to force myself to accept that this was to be my war, never knowing on which side the enemy was or where they came from. All I could do was fight to the very limits of my ability and from this moment on, I had to understand that my enemy would not always be wearing a Russian uniform.

THE END

# DEVIL'S GUARD BLOOD & IRON

by

Eric Meyer

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# FOREWORD

After the bloody battles that took place around Kharkov, the Germans eventually retook the city. Under the control of Field Marshall Erich von Manstein's Army Group South, Hitler felt that once again he was in such a position of strength that his offensives into the Soviet Union could begin again. To the north and east of von Manstein's forces lay the Kursk salient, a tempting bulge into the German lines in the centre of which lay the city of Kursk. Despite evidence that the Soviets had constructed massive defences in depth, it was too much for Hitler to resist.

The Battle of Kursk began in July 1943. It became the largest armoured clash in history and at its climax, the Battle of Prokhorovka, thousands of armoured vehicles were deployed throughout the salient. That battle was also to be the costliest single day of aerial warfare. It was the last strategic offensive the Germans were able to mount on the Eastern Front. The result was neither a convincing victory nor a defeat for either side, but the German losses were irreplaceable and the Red Army took the initiative for the rest of the war.

Like most battles in most wars, there were colossal errors or judgement, as well as epic feats of bravery. Hitler's insistence on waiting for the new Panzer V heavy tanks was to prove disastrous, the delay allowed the Soviets to reinforce their positions even further and when they did arrive the new Panzer Vs proved to be unreliable and virtually useless in the battle.

Arguments still rage over a number of issues related to the battle. Perhaps chief among these would be the role of the intelligence services of both sides. The Lucy spy ring certainly did exist and was a thorn in the side of the Germans and they never truly uncovered the traitors who were passing their secrets to the Russians. The role of Martin Bormann was never fully understood either, whether he was a Russian spy or not, as unlikely as it seems. Other leading Nazis were suspected of treachery too, not least of which was Admiral Canaris, head of the Abwehr, Military Intelligence, who was executed in 1945 for complicity in the plot to kill Hitler.

After the battle, von Manstein insisted to Hitler that his forces should be allowed to continue and he maintained his view that victory was possible. Nonetheless, the high tide of Hitler's war on the Soviet Union had passed. The Italians had surrendered in Africa, the Allies had landed in Sicily and his armoured divisions were needed to plug the holes in his defences.

Afterwards, Hitler was asked, "Was it really necessary to attack Kursk, and indeed in the east that year at all? Do you think anyone even knows where Kursk is? The entire world doesn't care if we capture Kursk or not. What is the reason that is forcing us to attack this year on Kursk, or even more, on the Eastern Front?"

Hitler replied:

"I know. The thought of it turns my stomach."

There are indications that The Fuhrer may have realised even then that his forces were unlikely to ever recover .

# INTRODUCTION

After his experiences in Devil's Guard – Blood and Snow, the young SS officer Jurgen Hoffman leads his men into the maelstrom of the Battle of Kursk. Before the main battle has even begun there are opportunities for Obersturmfuhrer Hoffman to lead his men into action. The pressing need is for intelligence and he leads his men on a dangerous mission behind the lines to uncover the secrets of the Soviet defences.

Once more, the enemy is not always recognisable by the uniform he is wearing. There are traitors sending the German military secrets directly to Moscow. Known as the 'Lucy' spy ring, the Gestapo, Sicherheitsdienst and Abwehr hunt the traitors who are leaking information, yet it seems that not every senior German officer is anxious that the traitors are found. Even Martin Bormann, Hitler's secretary and the second most powerful man in the Nazi hierarchy behaves in a way that suggests his motives are far from clear.

Under attack from the Red Army, Cossacks, Soviet partisans and German traitors, Jurgen finds that this time he is up against almost insurmountable odds. Escorting the Sicherheitsdienst is no guarantee that they will treat him fairly and he finds that they are as brutal with his friends and allies as they are with the enemy.

When General Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army moves to attack the southern part of the Kursk salient, Jurgen finds himself pitted against a storm of fire from the Russian defences that have been built into an impregnable wall of tanks, guns and mines. It is a battle of attrition and victory will be decided by who is left standing on the battlefield when all else had fallen.

# Chapter One

*‘Whenever in future wars the battle is fought, armoured troops will play the decisive role.’*

*Heinz Guderian*

We were on an island called Kharkov, an island of shattered, broken apartment blocks, houses and factories. An island surrounded by a sea of mud and line after line of parked, mighty but impotent Panzers, the armoured might of the Third Reich, waiting for the chance to strike again into the Russian heartland. The rasputitza had arrived, the twice-yearly season when unpaved roads become difficult or impossible to traverse in Belarus, Russia and the Ukraine. Immediately outside the city the paved roads ended and the mud started, in some cases it was a metre deep, possibly more. The mud stopped all movement in the countryside. We could at least content ourselves that the enemy suffered similar difficulties, so the risk of counterattack was low. I remembered reading an information leaflet written by General von Greiffenberg, ‘the effect of climate in Russia is to make things impassable in the mud of spring and autumn, unbearable in the heat of summer and impossible in the depths of winter’. He finished with the dramatic statement, ‘climate in Russia is a series of natural disasters’. Was I the only military officer that had listened to his warning? We’d suffered the counter-offensive outside Moscow in December 1941 when our armies had reeled back from the Russian ability to fight in sub-zero conditions when we were all but immobilised. We’d retreated and attempted to fight back through the clinging mud of the rasputitza in 1942 and then seen the Sixth Army literally freeze to death in Stalingrad before the weakened survivors were forced to surrender. Yet the Red Army still seemed able to constantly catch us on the back foot. From knocking on the door to Moscow eighteen months previously, we had been thrown back into the Ukraine and now we were facing the battle of our lives around the Kursk salient. It was a battle that many of us suspected would decide the victor and the loser in this war. We were certainly all agreed on one factor, a German victory was by no means a foregone conclusion. As soon as the mud began to dry we had to hit the Russians hard and fast before they could use the drier conditions to put in place the formidable defences that we had encountered in the past. And yet there was no obvious sign that we were ready to attack any time soon, we were still

very understrength, deficient in men, materiel, food, fuel and even aircraft. Armour was the most serious shortage, the open steppe inside the salient was tank country and yet we had barely two hundred tanks operational within our Army Group South to combat the massed Soviet armour that we knew we would have to face when the battle started.

My platoon was quartered in a house on the edge of the city, sharing it with a surly Ukrainian family who showed their bitter resentment every time a German soldier came through the door of their miserable concrete dwelling. There was only one opening that served as a window but it was normally covered with a piece of tarpaulin, there was no glass. Neither was there any electric light, a huge luxury in the Soviet Union, this dwelling had an old oil lamp to light up the room and even that was a luxury for most. The walls were papered with old newspapers with prominent pictures of Stalin, Communist Party newspapers, probably all that was available in the workers' paradise. The family slept outside with the animals, a cow and two pigs that were kept in a straw lined shed at the back, and only came inside during the day. Despite the primitive conditions, the lice that caused us to scratch incessantly, the stink of unwashed bodies, rancid cooking fats and animal dung, we were relaxing around the warmth of the stove of the single room that comprised as the whole house. Voss had cooked up a meal using our pooled rations. He'd become quite a good chef and sometimes talked of his ambition to open a restaurant after the war. Another soldier's dream, none of us expected to survive the Eastern Front but we had to keep our dreams alive, otherwise we would collapse into a welter of despair. Scharfuhrer Mundt was as good a thief as Voss was a cook and he spent part of each day foraging for supplies, fresh meat and vegetables, often in the Division's stores.

When the meal was prepared we offered part of our food to the Ukrainian family, it wasn't their fault that enemy soldiers were billeted on them. They looked half-starved, as did most of the citizens in Stalin's benighted empire. The children looked especially malnourished, with the extended bellies of the starving, and yet we were in the Ukraine, supposedly the breadbasket of the Soviet Union. It seemed to us more like a basket case than a breadbasket. Mundt passed around a flask of Ukrainian vodka and we lit up cigarettes. Mundt lit his pipe and we settled down to spend a rare, peaceful afternoon, warm, well fed and lubricated with alcohol. Even the occasional hit and run raid by Soviet fighter-bombers was no more than a nuisance, except for the mysterious U-2 night bombers, the almost silent,

black biplanes that flew over, dropped their bombs and disappeared. They were invisible to our fighters and anti-aircraft guns in the dark sky. Here in Kharkov we were outside of enemy artillery range and our main worry was the local snipers, partisans who popped up, shot a couple of soldiers and vanished. The Gestapo were doing their best to track them down, aided by an Einsatzgruppe company, but their tactics were too heavy handed. Most of us thought they did more harm than good, often they captured ordinary citizens and then tortured them for information they didn't possess. As far as we could see, all they achieved was to create hostility against us that served to recruit even more partisans. Why couldn't their senior officers see what damage they were doing?

"How long do you think we'll be stuck here?" Schutze Bauer asked me. "Some of the lads from Der Fuhrer Regiment reckoned that we'll be moving on down to Sebastopol soon, what do you think, Sir?"

I looked up. They were all watching me, waiting on my reply. "As soon as they let me know, I'll tell you, but until we're told to move, Bauer, you may consider that we're stuck here for the duration. Where's Wagner, he's overdue?"

He'd been sent to collect our mail from Division and was due back almost an hour ago. They shook their heads, but just then we heard a shout outside, "It's me, Wagner, I'm coming in, I had to use a longer route because of the snipers."

Mundt stood up and moved the tarpaulin to one side to look out. "Yeah, it's him, he's carrying our mail packet."

I saw him wave to Wagner, and then sit down. We all heard the shot, the loud 'crack' of a rifle bullet fired from somewhere close.

"Sniper!" several voices shouted at once, we dived to the floor, out of sight of the window, grabbing for our weapons.

"Mundt, see if Wagner is ok," I called out to my Scharfuhrer.

He crawled over and peered over the window ledge. "He's down, Sir, the sniper got him, a head shot."

"Damn. Voss, Bauer, set up the MG34 to cover us, the rest of you, let's go out through the front and work our way around. We need to finish this bastard, he's making our life a misery!"

The day before the Second Platoon, billeted three houses along the same street, had lost two of their men to a sniper, probably the same man. He'd never been caught. We picked up our MP38s, put on our steel helmets and

stuffed stick grenades into our webbing, all done on the run. One of the men opened the door carefully, shouted, “Clear!” and we swept out into the street.

“Mundt, take Voss and Bauer and work around to the south side, I’ll take the rest of the men to the north. Trottman, Beidenberg, Wesserman, come with me and keep your heads down!”

We sprinted around the side of the building and I skidded to a stop. The sniper’s stand was obvious, a tall warehouse less than a hundred and fifty metres away, an unshuttered window was on the top floor. While the men waited I looked through my binoculars, there was no sign of a rifle barrel poking through. We had to move fast, he had already moved away.

“Follow me, we’ll run across to the alley between the next two buildings.”

One was a house, the other some kind of a small workshop, with a narrow alley in between, strewn with rubbish. I ran across the open space, jumped over a heap of rusting ironwork dodging into the alley, out of direct sight of any windows. We kept running and came to the end where we could see the warehouse, but there was no sign of the sniper. As we watched, a person wearing a long black coat and clutching a rifle darted out of a side door and walked diagonally away from us across a patch of open ground. I heard Beidenberg catch his breath, “The fucking bastard, he thinks that he doesn’t even need to run.”

“Probably because it would attract more attention if he ran, Josef. Let’s disabuse him of that notion, we’ll get him before he vanishes.”

We ran out, there was little need for caution now that we could see him. We got halfway across when he heard the clatter of our boots and looked around in alarm. Then he jerked up his rifle as if to shoot, decided that he was vastly outgunned and turned and walked quickly away. We ran at full speed, I looked around as I heard a grunt and a clatter as one of my men tripped and fell, when I looked again the sniper was disappearing into an apartment block, thirty seconds later we reached the door. I looked around. Josef Beidenberg and Gerd Wesserman were still with me. Roland Trottman was walking towards us, nursing an obviously sprained ankle.

“Trottman,” I shouted, “hurry up and get under cover, the sniper is still around her somewhere!”

He waved cheerily to us. “It’s my fucking ankle, I tripped on something. An old pipe I think. Don’t worry about me.”

“Get down, man, you’re in full view!” I shouted again.

I saw him smile, heard the crack of another rifle bullet, then he flung his arms up and spun around, dropping his machine pistol with a clatter.

"Roland!" Wesserman shouted to his friend.

I took hold of his arm. "He's finished, Wesserman. All we can do for him now is get this sniper."

The partisan was incredibly brazen, knowing that heavily armed Waffen SS soldiers pursued him he'd stopped to find a target and kill another of my men. I determined to finish him no matter what it took. Until he was killed we'd be hamstrung in the city, unable to move in the open without fear of being shot. "You'd better stay here and watch our backs, Gerd. Leave Trottman, he's finished, we'll try and flush out the sniper."

"I want to come with you and kill the bastard!" he shouted.

"You'll stay here, Wesserman, I've lost two men already, and I don't want to lose another one because you're too hot-headed to obey orders."

I was about to enter the apartment block when Mundt came running around the corner with Bauer.

"I've left Voss to guard the back door of the building, Sir, we've got him sealed in."

"Very well, Scharfuhrer, let's go and find this gentleman. Be careful, he knows we're coming."

Glass crunched underfoot as we crept through the lobby. I heard a noise, we swung our machine pistols around but it was a woman descending the stairs, shapeless in a long, black dress, apron and headscarf. The babushka, without a doubt the building's concierge. She would also be the resident NKVD spy. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the NKVD, was the public and secret police organisation of the Soviet Union that directly executed Soviet control for Joseph Stalin. The NKVD controlled the police force as well as the Gulags and State Security. It conducted mass executions, ran the Gulag system of forced labour camps, suppressed underground resistance, conducted mass deportations of entire nationalities and Kulaks to unpopulated regions of the country. It also guarded state borders and possessed a network of informers, including the concierges who reported to them from almost every apartment block in the Soviet Union. She would need to be watched carefully, I beckoned her over to us.

"Did you see a man up there with a rifle?"

She shook her head in incomprehension.

"Josef, try her with Russian."

He asked the question and this time she pointed up the stairs. I nodded to thank her and we started moving, but something was wrong, something jarred with the way she'd given up the information so readily. In the police state of the Soviet Union no one ever gave away information that easily. I whirled around, she had a gun in her hand that she'd been hiding under her apron, a pistol, and her face was now contorted with hate. In one continuous motion I swept up my MP38 and fired off the whole clip in a single burst, the 9mm bullets hit her and threw her body to the ground where it lay in a shapeless, bleeding mass. Her pistol skidded across the floor and stopped at the feet of Wesserman who had just run in when he heard the firing.

They all gaped in astonishment. "How did you know it was the woman, Sir?" Mundt asked.

"She was too helpful, Willy. People are not helpful in the Soviet Union, not to anyone. Take a look for her rifle, it will be upstairs somewhere close. We need to find it, we don't want to leave it here for someone else to use against us. "

Mundt found the rifle leaning against the wall at the top of the first flight of stairs. We left the body where it was, burying partisans who'd slaughtered our comrades was not a task we were interested in doing. We picked up the body of Trottman and carried him back to our quarters. We laid him out carefully in the woodshed and put the body of Schutze Wagner, the first casualty of the sniper, next to him. Then I walked the five hundred metres to Regimental Headquarters to tell them about my losses. Obersturmbannfuhrer Muller, the acting CO, saw me approaching.

"Hoffman, you're the very man I want to see. What's the problem?"

I told him about the sniper. He nodded. "It's good news that you got the bastard. I'm not surprised that they used a woman, they use a lot of them, soldiers, pilots, partisans, maybe they think we won't be so quick to shoot them as men."

"They're quite correct, Sir, she almost got past us."

He grunted. "I'll make sure that the rest of the Regiment is warned. I've got a reconnaissance mission for you, come into my office and I'll show you what I need."

The room was festooned with maps pinned on the walls, orders, organisational charts and unit rosters. There was a large-scale map of our part of the front, a wavy line that pushed a bulge, or salient, into the German lines. In the middle of the salient was a city marked in bold letters, Kursk, and the

bulge surrounded by German armies. To the south Erich von Manstein's Army Group South that included Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army, of which our regiment was a part. To the north was von Kluge's Army Group Centre, stalled in their drive on Moscow and desperately trying to win back the offensive. In the centre were the unknown hordes of the Red Army. Most of the Russian area was blank with no information. He saw the direction of my gaze.

"Exactly, Hoffman. We know they're there, but we don't know who they are and how many of them. How many Soviet armies, artillery, infantry, anti-tank guns, minefields, we need to know what they have."

"So we are going to try and take Kursk, Sir?"

"As you can see, we can bring the weight of Army Group Centre and Army Group South crashing down onto the Soviets, one group from either side of the salient. It's the classic encirclement manoeuvre, one that we've succeeded with many times before. The Fuhrer is anxious to restart the offensive and Kursk is our best opportunity."

"Kursk must be two hundred kilometres from here, Sir."

"There's no need to go that far, other units will carry out their own reconnaissance. We'll get you to the nearest front line and from there you can cross over and observe our assigned sector. It is also very important that you capture a couple of Soviet officers that you can bring back here for interrogation."

"And the mud?"

"What do you mean the mud?"

"It prevents all movement, Sir. How can we move around the salient when the whole of the country is one huge swamp?"

He dismissed my question with a wave. "Use your initiative, man. You're an officer in the SS, not a boy scout. Besides, the muddy season is ending. There will be routes that are passable, you'll just have to find them."

I had a picture in my mind of my platoon staggering through mud like in a Flanders battlefield.

"When do we leave, Sir? My platoon is under-strength. I was hoping to get replacements. We're even worse off now since the sniper killed two more of my people."

Muller looked tired, even worse than usual. "I want you to jump off tomorrow evening. There aren't any replacements, I'm afraid we all have to make do with what we have. Since the surrender of the Sixth Army, the

Waffen SS has been called on more and more to fill the gap. Our manning levels are critically low, we have the volunteer units, the SS-Freiwilligen from the Greater Reich, but they're not of the calibre we're used to. Not the same commitment as our own men."

I nodded. "I understand, Sir."

"Look, I'll see if I can find someone to help out with the manual tasks when you get back, there are thousands of Hiwis serving with our Fourth Panzer Army. That'll take the pressure off you, allow you to get some rest."

The Hiwis, or Hilfswilligen, were enlisted volunteers from the occupied territories and worked as drivers, cooks, hospital attendants, ammunition carriers and messengers, some even fought alongside our front line troops and were known as Cossack Sections.

"I'll ask intelligence too, they may know of someone who has local knowledge. If there is anyone suitable, they will report to you before you leave. I've arranged for a half-track to transport you to the front, you leave at six o'clock tomorrow evening. Just make sure you bring back some prisoners to interrogate. I'll send the maps over to you in the morning, everything we have that may be useful."

"Yes, Sir."

"One more thing before you go, Hoffman, we have a new CO taking over the Regiment shortly."

I stared at him, surprised. "I thought that they'd given it to you after the death of the previous CO, Sir."

A sniper had killed Standartenfuhrer Brandt during the fighting around Kharkov and Muller had taken charge. He was an honest man, perhaps not the most imaginative senior SS officer, but he always did his utmost to ensure the security and welfare of his men.

"Yes, I had hoped to keep command, but our superiors decided otherwise."

"Who is he, this new officer, Sir?"

"His name is Standartenfuhrer Ritter von Meusebach, he transferred only recently to the Waffen-SS."

Muller's tone was slightly derisory, he obviously thought that this new man might be a problem.

"Was he an infantry officer before he joined the SS?" I persisted, wondering what fighting skills he could bring to our Regiment. We needed every advantage in the battles to come.

“Not exactly, no. Standartenfuhrer von Meusebach served in the Hauptamt SS-Gericht in Berlin, he has only recently transferred to the Waffen-SS.”

The Hauptamt SS-Gericht was the legal department of the SS. It was responsible for formulating the laws and codes that the SS and the secret police, as well as the Wehrmacht, had to adhere to. In fact, our new commanding officer was a lawyer. He saw my crestfallen expression.

“He made a brave decision volunteering to take over a fighting regiment on the Eastern Front, Hoffman, I’m sure that he’ll do his best.”

I didn’t believe it, and neither did he.

“Christ, a bloody lawyer, it’s not just me, Sir, even the Fuhrer despises lawyers.”

“We’ll just have to do our best to help him then, we have no choice. Give him the benefit of the doubt, Hoffman.”

I saluted him and left. I decided to make no mention of the new commanding officer for the time being, we had enough problems as it was without worrying about being led by a damned lawyer. I was glad I’d made the decision to keep it quiet, when I told them we were going into the Kursk salient the men were thought it was incredulous.

“They want us to invade Russia all on our own, do they?” Voss snarled. “It’s a damned suicide mission!”

Mundt was uncharacteristically gloomy. “He’s right, you know. The Soviets could have half of the Red Army packed in there, in fact they probably have. They know that an attack is certain once the rasputitza has ended. Our chances are not good, Sir, not good at all.”

I tried to ignore the pessimism. “They’re trying to locate us a guide, someone who knows the area well. When he arrives we’ll go over the maps and find a good route in and out. We’ll be fine.”

“Or we’ll be dead!” Voss snapped.

I took no notice and looked at Mundt. “Scharfuhrer, you’d better make an inventory of our weapons and equipment, we’ll travel light so bear that in mind. We won’t need the machine gun. The half-track is collecting us at six o’clock. We’ll need rations for three days, as well.”

“Three days?” he grimaced. “I thought this was to be in one night and out the next.”

“You never know, Willy.”

That evening I sat drinking vodka on my own. Eventually I drifted off to

sleep, thinking that the men seemed to blame me, as if I'd volunteered for this mission. I drank too much and fell into a deep sleep and in the morning Mundt shook me awake.

"Our local guide is here, Sir," he said in a strange voice.

"What is it, Mundt, what's wrong with him? Is he eighty years old?"

"Not exactly, no. You'd better come and take a look."

I pulled on my boots, ran some fingers through my hair and buttoned up my tunic, I was ready to face another day on the Eastern Front. I looked for a mug of coffee to start the day and heard Mundt asking the guide to enter. She was nearer twenty than eighty, a very pretty young woman. She was of average height wearing rough, Ukrainian peasant clothes, woollen trousers, a cloth cap on her head and a short heavy woollen coat fastened at the waist with a belt. She unbuttoned her coat, she had a perfectly proportioned body, breasts that jutted firmly forward, slim waist and short, dark hair that shone as she removed her cap and shook it out. Her skin was smooth and cream-coloured, anything but peasant in appearance. A wide mouth, huge, dark brown eyes and fine cheekbones framed a face that could have broken a thousand hearts.

"This is Irena Rakevsky," Mundt said.

Voss looked up from the stove where he was pouring some coffee.

"What's she here for, is she taking over my cooking duties?"

He grinned, but I noticed her give him a venomous look.

"She's our guide," Mundt said, "she's taking us into the Kursk salient."

I knew I looked stupefied. I just couldn't help it.

"What's the matter, do you think women are not up to the task, Obersturmfuhrer?" she said abruptly. Her voice was slightly lower in pitch than I would have expected. I could have described it as sultry, but I doubted that she would appreciate me saying so. To gain time, I asked her where she learned to speak German.

"I trained to be an interpreter, I was at the University of Kiev when the war started."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"German, Russian of course and Ukrainian. I also learned some French and English. I was brought up outside the city of Kursk and I also know the countryside quite well. My father had his own estate, he used to hunt and I often went with him."

"I didn't think there were any landowners left in the Soviet Union?"

"He planned to become a member of the Politburo. He was a very powerful man."

"Was?"

"Yes, was. The Communists accused him of treachery and executed him, it was one of his local rivals, of course, he seized the excuse when the Germans invaded."

"So is this about vengeance?"

She laughed. "My father would have done the same thing to him. It's not vengeance at all, for him it was just politics. For me I hate the Communists and I would anything to help bring them down. But you haven't answered my question, is a woman not good enough for you?"

I sighed. "It's not that, Miss Rakevsky. For us it's not so normal for women to fight, not in the SS, nor in any of the German armies."

"In that case you'd better make sure you don't us get into a fight, hadn't you? I shall be back later to go over the route with you. Make sure you have a good map, I don't want to waste my time."

She swept out of the room leaving us open-mouthed.

"My God," Mundt said, staring at the door, "that is some woman!"

"Damn right," Voss added. "I wouldn't mind having her guiding me, but not behind enemy lines."

I could see Miss Irina Rakevsky causing problems even before we left. Already my NCOs were feeling their testosterone levels beginning to rise.

"We'll have to treat her properly, all of us, just like she's one of the men."

The both looked at me incredulously. Yes, it was going to cause problems. But I had a feeling that the beautiful and feisty Miss Rakevsky was well able to take care of herself. Voss produced some breakfast, a thick potato soup with black bread and I ate it with ersatz coffee to wash it down. I spent the morning checking and inspecting the weapons and supplies. A trooper brought the packet of maps and I went over the whole area of the Kursk salient. It was obvious to me that we would attack, we had powerful, well-equipped armies deployed to north and south, it was equally obvious that the Russians knew and they would be well prepared. Shortly after lunch the girl came back. She picked up the maps without asking, looked at them closely and tossed them to one side.

"Is this the best you can do?" she asked. "They're not even accurate, look, the distance between Sumy and Kursk is much greater than they show

here."

I felt the crazy need to defend myself from this fiery Ukrainian. "Miss Rakevsky, they're the maps that Division supplied, they're the best we have available."

"They'll have to do then, where do you intend to cross the lines?"

I pointed at the map. "Here, at Belgorod."

"No, not there. It's no good."

"Why not?"

"Because it's flat, open country. There is nowhere to hide, the Russians will see us coming from kilometres away."

"We'll be travelling at night, Miss Rakevsky, I doubt they'll see us at all."

"And when something goes wrong and we're stuck in the middle of the Red Army in broad daylight, what then?"

The men were listening intently and I had to concede she had a point.

"What do you suggest?"

"Here! We can cross over fifteen kilometres south of Belgorod. I know that area well, I can get us through the Soviet lines."

I nodded. "In that case we'll do it your way. Are you armed, do you need a pistol?"

She reached under her thick coat and pulled out a long, vicious-looking hunting knife. "I have this, it is all I need."

"Good enough. All of you be ready to depart at six."

The half-track arrived an hour late, at seven o'clock.

"Engine wouldn't start, damp electrics," the driver said miserably. A sad looking SS-Oberschutze, he looked as if he'd sooner be anywhere in the world than here in Kharkov, about to go up to the front line. We piled on board, our packs laden with additional ammunition and food. For once, our Hanomag SDK 251 half-track clanked along the Ukrainian tracks without bogging down, the mud was obviously drying out. We already appreciated having the girl with us, she directed us along a route that was less churned up than the roads the military used. It took us two hours to reach our forward positions, after I had to convince a suspicious Haupsturmfuhrer that we weren't deserting and taking a valuable vehicle as a present for the Soviets at the same time.

"Don't be crazy, they'd shoot us full of holes if we tried to cross the lines in this noisy thing. We're on a straightforward recon mission, Haupt,

we’re not even taking the half-track with us.”

“Alright, you can go forward. There’s a Russian position about three hundred metres in front of us, if you go straight ahead you’ll run straight into them.”

“We’re not going straight ahead,” Irina said.

He looked at her keenly. “A woman?”

“Have you never seen one before?” she asked caustically. “If you men are finished chatting we need to make a start. If we’re not well behind their front lines by dawn we’ll be in trouble.”

The officer raised his eyebrows and looked at me.

“She’s a local,” I said with a shrug.

We dismounted from the half-track and Irina led us forward, striding along confidently in the darkness of the steppe. Within a hundred metres we dropped into a culvert, it was heavily overgrown and we stumbled along out of sight of the enemy. They called them balkas in Russian, the ravines, dried up riverbeds that littered the steppes, some shallow, and some deep enough to swallow a regiment of Panzers. After another hundred metres Irina stopped.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“Russian sentry, he’s about thirty metres ahead. Can’t you smell the pig? He hasn’t bathed for months! He’s smoking Russian tobacco, it’s called mahorka, smells like a garden bonfire.”

Was she serious? I sniffed the air and sure enough the faint, rank smell of unwashed human body overlaid by the pungent stench of the Russian tobacco smoke assaulted my nostrils. I turned to the men.

“Willy, there’s a sentry up ahead, take Bauer with you in case there are two of them. Knives only, no shooting, for God’s sake!”

He nodded and signalled for Stefan Bauer to accompany him. We waited quietly while they slipped forward. After an agonising ten minutes, Mundt called out softly in the dark.

“It’s Mundt, we’re coming in.”

They materialised quietly out of the darkness.

“All ok?”

He nodded. “No problems, there were two of them, we dragged the bodies together and put their bayonets in their hands as if they’d been fighting.”

It was feeble, but it might confuse the enemy for a short time.

“Well done. Irina, take the lead, let’s move on.”

She knew the ground well, we were able to move along balkas and paths that were less muddy and better hidden than those that the military would use. Most of the ground around us was little more than quagmires waiting to trap those men and their machines that dared to try and traverse them. We saw the occasional vehicle that had been left stuck in the mud for later retrieval.

"In Finnish, they call this season rospuutto, it literally means roadlessness," she said quietly.

"I'll bear it in mind if I ever visit Finland, Miss Rakevsky."

She smiled. "You may call me Irina, Obersturmfuhrer."

"In that case you must call me Jurgen, Obersturmfuhrer is much too military for a pretty girl like you."

Did she blush? I couldn't be sure, but she quickly looked away and concentrated on the path ahead. We made good time and I estimated we'd covered around thirty kilometres on a northeast heading. We'd find somewhere to lie up during daylight, watch the enemy, and try to assess their strength. Tomorrow night we would head back and attempt to find at least one Soviet officer to take back with us for interrogation. Then we could cross back south of Belgorod. It sounded so easy, and perhaps it would be, for once. We found a natural place to make camp. It was in a shallow bowl at the top of a low ridge that would give us a good view across many miles of the open steppe. Dawn was breaking by the time we were all inside cover. I took the first watch and took out my binoculars to watch for enemy movements, that was when the cavalry came.

Willy Mundt saw them first. "Cossacks," he hissed.

I didn't need to give the order, we all ducked low, but clearly something had alerted them, they'd probably seen movement before we were all properly hidden. There were six horsemen, no, seven, one of them had a woman riding behind him. They approached from the north, the slope was steep and rocky making it impossible for horses to climb up to where we sheltered. They dismounted and the woman tethered their horses to a tangle of bushes while the men drew their sabres and started to climb, slashing the foliage out of the way as they came up. They looked magnificent, wearing dark blue breeches tucked into knee-high riding boots, standard Soviet pattern baggy brown tunics and dark grey Cossack Astrakhan hats. More worrying than the sabres, they carried PPSh sub-machine guns slung over their backs. A development of the older PP type, Georgi Shpagin had

designed the new weapon for use by untrained conscript soldiers. The PPSh mounted a drum magazine loaded with the shorter 7.62mm pistol round. They were appearing in huge numbers on the Eastern Front, at close range they had proved to be devastating. The Cossacks came within close range and we could see their features distinctly. They all had large and fierce moustaches, some had beards, with dark-skinned weather-beaten faces. They looked magnificent, men who were born to make war. Mundt looked at me with his eyebrows raised and whispered.

"Any ideas, Sir?"

"Do all of the men have pistols?"

He nodded.

"We might just get away with a few pistol shots but if the enemy hears automatic fire they'll be all over us."

Our MP38s were fine weapons, like the PPSh they were also devastating at close quarters, but they differed from the Soviet weapon in that they had no single shot capability. All that was needed was a heavy finger on the trigger and the gun would blaze away all thirty-two rounds until the magazine was empty. Mundt spoke to the men quietly. "Pistols only, knives if we get close enough but I doubt we'll get past those sabres. Try and take your target out with a single shot. What about the woman?" he nodded at the woman at the bottom of the slope, tending the horses.

"I will take her," Irina said, touching her jacket where her huge combat knife lay hidden.

"Very well, let's do it. We need to wait until they almost trip over us. If we miss one and he uses his PPSh we're done for. Wait for me to shoot first."

We crouched low, keeping out of sight. Each of us holding a pistol, mine was a Walther PPK 9mm. I noticed that Voss had a Luger Parabellum, an expensive weapon normally carried only by more senior officers. I idly wondered where he had looted it from, but I didn't care, only that it fired when it mattered. We were covered in mud from the night's journey and the foliage hid us well so they didn't see us at first. They were swishing the bushes with their sabres, but not very intently, they obviously doubted that they would find anyone. One of them came up and stood only a metre away, sheathed his sword, unbuttoned his fly and started to piss almost on top of me. He was obviously having happy thoughts, perhaps about the previous night with an attractive woman. It would be his last. His eyes caught sight of something strange, his brow wrinkled in puzzlement, then he squinted and

suddenly realised he was looking at a man, a soldier. He grabbed for his sabre with one hand, trying to tuck his cock back inside his trousers with the other. I shot him in the heart, I wasn't confident of a headshot at the sharp upward angle. Simultaneously five further shots rang out and the six Cossacks all collapsed to the ground. Two of them were still alive, one started to cry out but Mundt and Bauer had their combat knives ready, they swiftly knelt down and their knives slashed across the two throats, the Russians sagged to the ground lifeless. I could see Irina sprinting down the slope towards the woman who tended the horses. She was standing still, looking up at what had happened to the Cossacks. She was undoubtedly in shock and didn't respond to the woman crashing down the slope and just watched as Irina hurtled towards her. Even when she saw the raised combat knife she didn't move, our Ukrainian guide reached her and held her tightly. I looked around at the scene of bloody carnage.

"They're all dead," Mundt said. "We've been looking around for signs of the enemy, but I think you were right, a few pistol shots will most likely go unnoticed."

I looked at the bodies, the magnificent, outlandish costumes, covering the lifeless corpses inside. Wesserman was gathering up the sabres and Voss their PPSh sub-machine guns. I spoke to Mundt.

"I'd better see how Irina is doing with that woman, Willy. Do you know anything about horses?"

He grinned. "I spent my summer holidays on a family farm, yes, I know my way around horses. What are we going to do about them, they're not easy to hide?"

"I've no idea, probably hide the saddles and let the horses loose, come and take a look at them."

We climbed carefully down the slope and walked over to Irina who was standing with the other woman, speaking in Russian, I assumed.

"What's going on?" I asked her. "I thought you were going to kill her."

"There's no need, Jurgen. She was a prisoner, they took her three days ago and used her as their whore. She was smiling when she realised that we were killing them all."

I looked her over, she was pretty too, no wonder the Cossacks had abducted her. Her features were not as fine and delicate as Irina's, she was slightly larger and heavier, but still very attractive. Her hair was blonde, her eyes blue, a genuine Slavic maiden.

“Does she speak any German?”

Irina shook her head. “Only Russian and some Ukrainian. I told her we wouldn’t kill her.”

I nodded. “Of course not, provided that what she told you is true.”

She shot me a venomous look. “I have told you the truth.”

“Yes, but has she?”

She didn’t reply.

“We’d better get back up the slope and out of sight,” I continued. “I’ll send two of my troopers down to deal with the horses.”

“What will you do with them?”

Two of the men wanted to take the horses and disguise ourselves as Cossacks so that we could cover the ground quickly on the way back. I told them to forget it. In the end Mundt and Bauer went down to remove the saddles, and set the horses loose. They were local Panjes, better than the horses we brought in from Western Europe which were not able to last for long in the sub-zero conditions found in Russia. These shaggy, hardy Russian Panjes proved indispensable to both armies for transport in bad weather and as mounts for cavalry. Many of our larger horses had died from the cold, but these native breeds could survive in the open at almost any temperature. I shuddered to think of six German soldiers racing around behind enemy lines in broad daylight dressed as Cossacks, especially if we were caught. The Russians were tough enough on captured SS soldiers, but dressed in their own uniforms would mean an immediate bullet in the back of the head. I watched the two women talking quietly to each other.

“Irina, we need to send this woman back to her own people.”

“Her name is Alina Gordievsky, Jurgen. Of course she would like to get back to her people. We were just discussing it. Her home is a small village of west of Kharkov, she was taken during a raid.”

It was not unusual, the Cossacks had an almost free run of the territory during the harsh winter and the rasputitza that followed, they roamed the steppes with impunity, secure in the knowledge that pursuit was impossible. They would sweep in suddenly, often hundreds of them in huge formations, killing and looting and then disappear as quickly as they came.

“So she needs to get back across the front lines, you’re suggesting she comes with us, aren’t you?”

“Of course. What else can she do?”

“Very well, but make certain she keeps out of our way and out of sight

until it's time to go."

As the day wore on, we took it in turns to either sleep or observe the broad steppe below us, we could see for ten kilometres to the north and east. What we saw was enough to take back to our intelligence people. In the distance tanks were on the move, hundreds of them, probably T34s, although they were too far away to be certain. There were teams of people digging tank traps and tank pits to hide tanks and artillery, half-buried in the earth where they could be used as defensive positions to shoot at enemy tanks with relative impunity. Some parts of the steppe were bare of enemy vehicles, just hundred of men working with shovels. Minefields, without a doubt! They knew that we were coming as soon as the rasputitza ended, that much was transparently clear. I was on watch as darkness started to fall and I woke Mundt.

"Willy, get the men moving. We've seen enough, this place is a death trap. If we can collect a prisoner on the way back our mission will be complete."

He smiled. "So all we need is to find a Soviet General to make our masters happy, is that what you're saying, Sir?"

"No, Willy. I'm sure a Colonel would be sufficient."

He grunted. "They may have to be happy with a Lieutenant."

"Provided that it's another of Stalin's sons, he would no doubt suffice," I replied drily.

Lieutenant Yakov Dzhugashvili, Josef Stalin's eldest son, was taken prisoner in Smolensk during the early days of Barbarossa when our German forces overran western parts of the Soviet Union. He'd been held since then in Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp until the news had emerged that he'd been killed, apparently shot while trying to escape.

"Has he got any more sons?" Mundt asked with interest.

I laughed. "I wouldn't count on it, my friend. Let's content ourselves with a senior officer."

As darkness fell we started to make our way back to the crossing point, fifteen kilometres south of Belgorod. At first the going was easy, Irina kept us out of the worst of the mud although we were still plastered with it. We almost ran into a Soviet encampment, a regiment of tanks were positioned across the track we'd used the previous night, the crews were working to camouflage them with huge nets stretched over each tank. Cossacks were dragging bushes and branches behind their horses, delivering them to the

crews who threaded it through the netting. It explained why our reconnaissance flights had been unable to detect the enemy positions.

"I know a path that leads around this place," Irina whispered. "It means we will have to cross a shallow river."

She led us away from the camp, into a narrow balka that hid us and we detoured for two kilometres to the south before we were able to continue west again reaching the river, it was about twenty metres wide.

"How deep is it, do you think?"

"About a metre, no more. During the dry season it is completely empty. It is..."

I told her to be quiet and whispered to the men to be still. Irina murmured to Alina and held her arm. I could hear footsteps, pebbles being kicked aside as someone came nearer. A sentry? The sound of voices reached us, two men. A match flared and they both lit cigarettes, they were nearer now and we could hear their voices. Irina whispered to me. "They are talking about whether to build a hidden bridge under the surface of the river that their tanks could use to counterattack."

So they had to be officers, or at least one of them was. These would have to do.

"Scharfuhrer," I murmured to Mundt. "We'll take these two. Tell the men not to shoot, we'll jump them as they come past."

He nodded.

We spread out above the riverbank, invisible in the dark. As the two Russians walked past chatting happily to each other, we launched ourselves at them. Two troopers dragged each of them to the ground with a hand clamped over their mouths and a combat knife at their throats. Irina ran over and spoke to them urgently.

"It is alright, they understand that if they try to make any noise they will be killed, your men can let them up."

I nodded to Mundt and the two Soviets were allowed to get to their feet, their uniforms covered in mud from the riverbank. One was a major, the other a lieutenant. It was enough, if they were discussing a bridge they were almost certainly combat engineers, they should have a wealth of information for our intelligence section to extract from them.

"You'd better gag them, Willy, in case they get second thoughts while we're crossing the lines. Tie their hands too, we don't want them making a grab for one of our weapons."

They searched the two Soviets until they found strips of cloth, shabby white winter camouflage hoods that were stowed in their packs, they wrapped them around their mouths as gags. We had to take the lanyards from their pistols to tie their hands, I was about to tell them to toss the guns in the river when the men picked them up and they abruptly disappeared as if by magic. Souvenirs, of course, our armies had 'liberated' thousands of these Tokarev pistols during the early days of Barbarossa. They still held some kind of fascination for the men as a war memento, with a very practical use if the going got tough.

I asked Irina to come up and walk with me.

"We can't cross in the same place as we came over," I said to her. "We left two dead soldiers, they'll be more alert this time."

"Yes, I understand, I'll do my best to find another crossing point, but that one was the safest. Anywhere else will be much more risky."

"Then we'll have to take the risk."

She gave me an unpleasant look, "It's alright for you, you're a soldier", and then went back to join Alina. Women! Would I ever understand them? Probably not, but what more did she want from me? I could hard sprout wings and fly us over the lines. I could hear her talking in low tones to Alina, presently she came back to speak to me.

"Alina says there is a crossing point much nearer to Belgorod, the Cossacks used it two days ago to raid into German-held territory. It would be a good place for us to try."

"Do you trust her?" I asked.

"As much as I trust you, Obersturmfuhrer," was the tart reply. It wasn't Jurgen anymore, I noticed.

"Very well, we'll go that way, would you ask her to come forward, she can take the lead and you will interpret. Warn her that if she is lying to us, she'll be the first one to get her throat cut."

She gave me a venomous glance and then hurried away to fetch Alina. The Ukrainian girl led us in a direction that I calculated would intersect the city of Belgorod. Although it was in German hands, a few kilometres outside the city were the Russian defences, manned by tens of thousands of Soviet troops and hundreds, maybe even thousands of tanks.

We could see the city buildings in the distance when we came upon a single-track railway line, she led us due west, following the path of the line. She spoke some words of Ukrainian or Russian to Irina.

“She says that this was a local line that closed many years ago, it was used by a quarry to take stone into the city.”

“Ask her where the crossing is.”

She questioned her closely. “She says that there is a tunnel that was dynamited when the Russians retreated, but there is a hidden way through. It runs underneath the front lines, we can go through the tunnel and come out on the German side. It is not defended, most people don’t know it even exists.”

We followed the line for two more kilometres until the ground rose into a series of low hills. The rails disappeared into the side of a hill, when we reached it the entrance to the tunnel was blocked with huge blocks of stone. Alina went to a tangle of debris leaning against the hillside twenty metres away, she asked Irina for help and we moved heavy sheets of rusting corrugated iron to one side. Irina pointed to a dark opening.

“That is the entrance of the old part of the tunnel, Alina says that fifty years ago there was a branch line that came in here but it was closed. We can go in through this entrance. She says to put the corrugated iron back afterwards, otherwise the Soviets may follow us.”

The narrow tunnel was barely high or wide enough for a horse. Clearly the Cossacks had dismounted before they came through. Inside, we marched in single file, Alina first, Irina behind her. I followed them, and then Mundt, who had his combat knife ready in case they tried anything untoward, pushed along the two Soviet officers. The other men came after and I heard them replacing the corrugated iron. There was no light, I took out my small combat torch and played it over the walls. It was just as well, our narrow tunnel forked into the larger tunnel and we narrowly avoided sprawling over the broken steel of the old rails and the boulders that lay littered all around.

“Ask her how long this tunnel is,” I said to Irina.

She spoke softly to Alina. “She says about a kilometre.”

We stumbled on in the dark, aided by occasional flashes of my torch, until we saw glimpses of moonlight ahead of us. We finally came out into a dark, ruined building which even the roof had been destroyed.

“She says this was the factory where they crushed the marble, the trains came into here and unloaded and it was immediately put on to conveyor belts.”

I looked up. The old conveyor belts criss-crossed the huge, empty space, almost like giant vines in some ghostly industrial jungle. We walked across

the echoing, empty building until we came out into the open. We were near Belgorod, which was still in German hands, less than two kilometres away.

We soon stumbled upon two sentries from General Hausser's Second SS Panzer Corps. They were sceptical at first but after they contacted the Fourth Panzer Army Intelligence Officer we were allowed through and our own SS Intelligence arranged for a half-track to collect us and bring us back to Kharkov. It was dawn when we reached the city but it was already bustling. We went straight to the Regimental Office. I left the men to look after the women and the prisoners while I went inside to find Muller. His office door opened and a stranger emerged, with Muller trailing behind him. I saluted and Muller introduced us. "This is the new commanding officer, Standartenfuhrer von Meusebach. Standartenfuhrer, this is Obersturmfuhrer Hoffman."

At first sight von Meusebach did little to inspire me. He was quite short, his hair cropped close to his head. Unlike the Prussian officers whose style he obviously tried to emulate, he was also paunchy and somewhat round-shouldered, evidence of his sedentary occupation, at least until now. He wore thin, gold, wire-rimmed glasses, unusual in a line officer. He stared at me with a neutral expression. His uniform, the field-grey of the Waffen-SS was immaculate, perfectly creased, jackboots gleaming black. I saw him looking at my Iron Cross with an expression that looked almost like envy. Unusually for a senior officer on the Eastern Front, he displayed no decorations.

"You have just returned from a mission across the lines, Obersturmfuhrer?"

"Yes, Sir."

"In that case I will forgive your slovenly appearance, but next time you report to this office make sure you look like an SS officer, not a vagabond Jew."

I must have looked like an idiot. I was so astonished that I couldn't help my jaw drop. Did he think he'd been posted to a peaceful French city to enforce the traffic regulations?

"I'm sorry, Sir. It's the war."

As soon as I spoke I knew that I shouldn't have said it. He glowed bright red with anger.

"The next insubordinate remark you make will result in you being put on a charge, is that clear, Hoffman? I assure you that I am well versed in every aspect of military law."

“Yes, Sir, I’m sure you are.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “Dismissed.”

I saluted and he went back into his office, Muller accompanied us to the Gestapo Office. As we walked across the road we had to wait while a line of Panzers, perhaps twenty of our Panzer IVs clattered along, their tracks ripping up the cobbles as they travelled. They seemed pitifully few compared to the columns of T34s on the other side of the salient.

# Chapter Two

*‘The Eastern front is like a house of cards. If the front is broken through at one point all the rest will collapse’.*
*General Heinz Guderian*

The last of the Panzers disappeared and we crossed over the road. Behind us four Tigers rumbled past, the Panzer VI, huge and daunting with their enormous 88mm gun, but they were still pitifully few to take on the Russians. We walked under the arched entrance and left the men in the courtyard with Irina, Alina and the prisoners. Major Ernst Brandt of Abwehr, army intelligence was talking to two security officers, one in plain clothes the other in the uniform of the Sicherheitsdienst, an SD Obersturmbannfuhrer who clutched a walking cane. When he turned around his face was one I recognised instantly.

“Obersturmfuhrer Hoffman, how pleasant to meet again.”

SD Sturmbannfuhrer Walter von Betternich, with his equally unpleasant Gestapo colleague, Gerd Wiedel. Muller had previously brushed with the two security officers when they put him under a Schutzhaft, the Gestapo’s protective custody order and he was clearly as unhappy as I was to see them. He elected to speak to Brandt, von Manstein’s intelligence officer.

“They brought in two Soviet prisoners, Major, I believe they are both engineering officers.”

“Very well, let’s hope they have plenty to tell us.”

“Hoffman, would you bring them in,” Muller said to me.

I’d taken off their gags when we reached our lines and when I led them into the building one of them spoke angrily.

“Under the Geneva Convention we refuse to divulge any information

other than our names, ranks and numbers."

Brandt looked at him coolly. "Has the Soviet Union now signed the Convention, Major?"

The Russian stared at him stonily, refusing to answer.

"No, I thought not. I've no doubt the Gestapo would like to discuss things further with you. Kriminalkommissar Wiedel, would you care to handle these two officers? You know the kind of information the Feldmarschal wants."

"Of course, Major. They will have plenty to tell us, believe me. Hoffman, would your men kindly escort these prisoners to our cells."

I detailed the men to take the prisoners and Wiedel followed them out. The SD officer, von Betternich, spoke to me. "Hoffman, you've done well, how have you been?"

The last time I'd met the SD Obersturmbannfuhrer, he'd had a girl friend of mine sent to a concentration camp. It was true she had admitted to being a Jew and using a stolen identity card, but any Jew in Nazi Germany would be desperate enough to try anything to avoid the brutal fate that was meted out to them. I gave him a cold nod, refusing to answer him.

He smiled. "It wasn't my fault you know, that Jewess of yours. Besides, I did offer you the chance to join our organisation. Perhaps you could have saved her."

He looked at me for a moment, then shrugged and limped away on his cane. "We'll get together another time, Hoffman," was his parting shot.

I thought that with any luck a Russian sniper would get him first and save me the trouble of meeting him again. Major Brandt, the Abwehr officer, looked up from his notes.

"Hoffman, tell me what you found over the other side."

I explained to him about the defences. "They're formidable, Sir, the Russians are expecting us, there's no doubt about it," I added.

"Many tanks, you say, artillery dug in, mines, did you see many infantrymen?"

"Not many but the salient is hundreds of square kilometres, it would be impossible to see everything, Sir."

"So it may not be as well defended as you think, not across the whole salient?"

"You're wrong, Sir, the Russians are preparing defences everywhere, they're just waiting for us to make a move."

He smiled. “You are an inexperienced officer, Hoffman, so I doubt you would understand everything there is to know about Soviet defences. However, the Gestapo will interrogate your prisoners and perhaps we’ll get some more answers. I’m afraid that you have rather overestimated the Russian preparations, I’ll put it all in my dispatch to von Manstein.”

He smiled and left the office.

“Major Brandt didn’t believe a word of what I said,” I remarked bitterly to Muller.

“He’s under a lot of pressure, Hoffman. Von Manstein is determined to press home this next attack and he doesn’t want to hear about insurmountable Russian obstacles.”

“So they only want the good news, do they, Sir?” I sneered.

“Now you understand it, my friend, it’s all politics. Listen, you need to start packing, we’re moving tomorrow to the railhead at Podvirky, we’ll be guarding the railway depot bringing in the new armour and supplies. It won’t be as comfortable as the city, but hopefully we’ll be away from the snipers.”

I wasn’t sure which part of the city of Kharkov he’d found comfortable, but it certainly wasn’t the part where we were quartered.

My men were waiting for me outside with both women, they’d managed to scrounge coffee from the Gestapo kitchen and the hot liquid refreshed me. Sadly even the Gestapo didn’t have real coffee.

“Were they impressed with what we brought back, Sir?” Mundt asked.

I grimaced. “They didn’t believe me, Willy. Thought I was exaggerating or made it up.”

“So it was all for nothing?”

“I hope not, but I just don’t know.” I finished the last of my coffee and we started the short walk across town to our quarters. “We’re moving out tomorrow, we’re to reinforce the garrison at Podvirky.”

“Damn it,” he scowled. “It’s a shithole out there, just a railway depot and a few greasy peasant houses, what they call Isbas. In Germany we call them hovels. As if Kharkov isn’t bad enough they send us out there.”

We passed a curious sight in the city square, a company of tanks, all bearing the usual German military symbols, the German Cross and the Swastika together with Divisional markings. What was strange was that they were all Russian T34s. A Sturmscharfuhrer, a Sergeant Major, saw me looking at them, he was wearing the usual black German tanker’s uniform but I half expected him to speak Russian.

“Not what you expect to see in our army, Obersturmfuhrer?”

I smiled. “Not really, no, a present from Josef Stalin?”

“We captured these during the battle for the city. There were so many that we’ve formed a T34 company within the Fourth Panzer Army.”

I gazed at the enemy armour. “Are they any good, these things? Our tankers say they cause them a lot of grief.”

He shrugged. “They’re not as good as our own heavy tanks, although they can be useful in a scrap. The problem is spare parts. We have to cannibalise other T34s when repairs are needed, it’s not always easy. Of course, in the T34 the commander has to operate the gun as well as observe and command the tank, it makes life complicated in action.”

“The Red Army seems to do alright with them,” Mundt said, looking with avid interest.

“Sure they do,” the NCO replied. “You send five hundred T34s against a hundred of our own tanks and they’re sure to do wicked damage.”

“They don’t have that kind of numerical advantage, do they?”

Even as I asked the question I thought of the massive Soviet preparations in the Kursk salient, hundreds of tanks in only that one small area, perhaps many thousands across the whole salient.

The tanker stared at us solemnly. “We’d better hope they don’t, hadn’t we? If they do, we’re buggered.”

We nodded and walked on. Irina was holding Alina’s hand, since we’d killed the Cossacks she seemed to be utterly dependent on Irina for support and protection. I asked her what she was planning to do with Alina.

“She will stay with me until I can arrange to get her back to her village. She will be safe.”

“Good. We’re leaving Kharkov in the morning but we won’t be far away. I want to thank you for helping us.”

“It is no problem.”

“I’d like you to have dinner with me this evening, Irina, there must be at least one restaurant in the city that is still functioning.”

She smiled. “That is very kind of you, Jurgen,” before I could go on, she said, “but I have already arranged a dinner date, so it is not possible.”

I felt suddenly deflated. “I see, who with, one of the men?”

“No, it is with Alina.”

I looked down and saw that they were still holding hands tightly. Alina was looking at her with something very close to adoration. So that was the

way it was, I'd certainly misread the signs.

"I hope you enjoy a pleasant meal, then."

"I'm sorry, Jurgen."

I nodded. Irina and Alina left, Irina had her hand around Alina's waist. Mundt grinned. "No chance with either of those two, Sir. Shame."

I looked him directly in the eyes. "Willy, shut up!"

He stared at a point ten centimetres above my head, as regulations demanded when addressing a senior officer, "Yes, Sir," but he was grinning like a circus clown.

"We've got a couple of hours to get cleaned up and rested, we're back on duty this afternoon, we need to prepare to move out tomorrow. You'd better get some rest."

They walked away with broad smiles. Damn, I'd fancied my chances with Irina, what a waste. I walked to our quarters thinking about those T34s. If their performance was inferior to our own tanks, particularly the newer types like the Tiger and Panzer V, why were we using them? Were we so desperate that we had to use second-rate Soviet armour? Then again, I had seen the T34 in action, they weren't as poor as the tanker had suggested, they were quick and powerful, lethal except when faced with our Tigers and perhaps the newer Panthers which could stand off at a distance and pick the T34s off almost at will. There was only one explanation. We were running out of resources. With a front line stretching thousands of kilometres, it was proving impossible to both attack and defend along the entire length. I considered the formidable defences that I'd seen in one small corner of the salient and what it would mean to an attacker. Unless our leaders faced up to what we were up against it was going to be a very costly action indeed. The leadership of course meant Adolf Hitler, head of OKW, Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces. In view of his intransigence with the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, resulting in its encirclement and defeat at the hands of the Red Army, I wasn't optimistic about him having a change of heart about the Kursk salient. Neither was I certain that our armies could withstand another shock defeat like Stalingrad. I could only hope that we could smash through the salient and push on eastwards, but in my head I knew it wouldn't happen, couldn't happen.

We spent the rest of the day preparing our equipment for our move to the railway line. It was a miserable thought, despite the problems of snipers and occasional shelling by the Russians, the night bombing raids and the

sudden partisan attacks, we'd become used to our lice infested quarters in Kharkov. The idea of camping out in a damp muddy field next to a railway yard was not a happy one. During the evening the men passed around bottles of schnapps and we drowned our sorrows. Voss asked me if I had a date tonight, I threw an empty bottle at his head and he ducked to avoid it to roars of laughter. But I slept badly. I couldn't get the past forty-eight hours out of my mind, our mission into enemy territory. In view of the High Command's refusal to accept what I'd reported back it had all been for nothing. My intentions with Irina were just as doomed, this was not a high point in my life.

In the morning I put on a clean uniform as ordered, at least, one that was slightly less ragged and filthy than the previous one I'd worn, we boarded the half-tracks and drove through the mud to Podvirky. We did not need to sleep in tents, we were to be quartered in the railway village, a squalid collection of wooden huts, isbas, most of which had been partially destroyed by the Red Army. When we attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Joseph Stalin had ordered both soldiers and civilians to initiate a policy to deny the invaders basic supplies and shelter as they moved eastward, known as 'scorched earth'. They burned and destroyed everything, houses were dynamited, woodlands and fields burned, the whole countryside denuded of foodstuffs, livestock and crops. Fortunately a few buildings had escaped destruction, Mundt went looking for suitable accommodation for the platoon while I attended the CO's briefing.

Our new HQ was in the only comfortable building in Podvirky. It had formerly belonged to the mayor who probably had intervened to stop its destruction. Von Meusebach had established his new quarters in the upstairs rooms, downstairs was the Regimental offices. Outside, near where his black Mercedes car waited, a group of Hiwis were working to lay a hard bed of broken stone and boiler ash to make a hard stand to keep it out of the mud. Another Hiwi was scrubbing at the mud and filth that coated the Mercedes as well as everything else in this theatre of war. I went into what had been the dining room where a map was pinned to the wall. The other officers were already waiting.

"Ah, Hoffman, you decided to give us the benefit of your presence."

"Sir."

He squinted at my uniform, evidently considering whether to find fault, but as his other officers were no better dressed, in some cases worse, he kept

quiet. He had a long stick that looked like a billiard cue and he used it to point at the large-scale map of the local area.

"Our patrol area is from here to here," he pointed at Podvirky and at the next village along the line, about ten kilometres away. "We will be conducting a patrol each night, Hoffman, your platoon can begin tonight. Remember, I intend to run a tight ship, that means I want you and your men looking like soldiers at all times, on or off duty. A smart regiment is an efficient regiment, understood?"

We all nodded like puppets. He looked at Hauptsturmfuhrer Glasser's boots. They were a pair of brown leather paratrooper's jump boots.

"Those boots, Glasser. They're not regulation, are they? Why are you not wearing regulation SS jackboots?"

"It's the Russian winter, Sir, mine fell to pieces and these are much better than the new ones that are like cardboard, they just fall apart."

"I don't want to hear excuses about our equipment, Glasser. Get yourself regulation boots!"

We all envied Glasser his warm, practical boots. He'd soon notice a difference going back to wearing uncomfortable jackboots. Ours were perpetually wet and failed dismally to keep our feet warm.

"Yes, Sir."

"Hoffman, I want a written report on my desk in the morning."

"A report of what, Sir?"

"Your patrol of course. I want you to account for every hour, what happens, what doesn't happen. By nine o'clock, clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Very well. I shall be dining in Kharkov this evening, if anything requires my attention, you can send a dispatch rider to find me."

Muller coughed discreetly.

"Well, Muller?"

"We don't have a dispatch rider, Sir, he was killed and his motorcycle destroyed by a Russian mortar shell."

Von Meusebach sighed theatrically. "In that case find another motorcycle and detail a man to ride it, deal with it." He checked his watch. "I need to get changed for the evening, dismissed."

We started to walk out. Von Meusebach called out to me. "Hoffman?"

"Sir?"

"When you bring your report in the morning, I'll inspect your platoon.

Make sure they look smart, not like a band of partisans. That's all."

I had to stand outside and take a few deep breaths to contain my anger. He obviously thought he was on the parade ground at Lichterfelde, our SS training barracks in Berlin. He was in for a rude shock when the Soviets attacked. Mundt was waiting for me nearby, he took me to the building they'd found, one of the squalid wooden isbas, the shacks that the peasants lived in all across the Soviet Union. This one was slightly larger than some. Apparently it had once been used as the local inn. It had only one large room for cooking, eating and sleeping, just like our quarters in the city.

"There's no booze left," Mundt smiled, "but otherwise it's not too bad. The roof wasn't badly damaged and it's dry enough for us to sleep in."

"We're due to go out on patrol tonight, Willy, so you'd better tell the men to get some rest. The new CO wants to inspect the platoon too, at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, he's a stickler for smartness."

The men looked at me with expressions of alarm.

"He's deadly serious, you'll need to be clean shaven and best uniforms."

There was a chorus of moans.

"Obersturmfuhrer, we haven't had much sleep for two nights, it's fucking ridiculous," Wesserman snapped. "Why is he doing this to us?"

"It must be the war, Schutze Wesserman, I can't think of any other reason."

The others laughed at his misery.

"I suggest we all try and grab a couple of hours sleep, we've been on duty for a long stretch. If we don't keep alert we'll be easy meat for the partisans."

That sobered them up. They laid out their gear and settled down to get some rest. I tried to do the same, but I didn't sleep, my brain was still racing after our journey into the salient.

Hauptsturmfuhrer Glasser was waiting for us when we reported to begin our patrol. He'd been the second in command until von Meusebach arrived and had hoped to make the position permanent, like Muller he was disappointed at the arrival of the Berlin lawyer.

"You can see the railway line one hundred metres to the north, Hoffman. Take your men and patrol to the west, you should reach Lyubotin, there is a small station there. Make sure the station is clear of the enemy and then get back, it should take you about six hours, I'll expect you back here before dawn."

“Is there much partisan activity in the area?” I asked him.

“You’ve been away on a recon mission so you wouldn’t know, Hoffman. The night before last two platoons of regular infantry were wiped out three kilometres west of here, that’s why we were brought in. Does that answer your question?”

At ten o’clock we marched away and reached the railway line, then we turned to follow it to the west. It was very dark, the moon hidden behind thick clouds.

“Make sure your machine pistols are ready to fire and keep them pointed away from the rest of us, I don’t want any accidents,” Mundt shouted.

“Scharfuhrer, try and keep it a bit quiet, if there are partisans around it might be best if they didn’t hear us coming.”

“Sorry, Sir.”

The men took the hint and we walked on in relative silence. I was thinking about Irina, mourning the fact that I’d missed out on having a pleasant evening with her as well as a tumble in her bed. I smiled inwardly. In view of what I now knew if she had a tumble with anyone it would not be a man. We’d travelled about five kilometres and I must have been on the verge of falling asleep. I flinched, as a hand touched my shoulder, it was Mundt.

“Be quiet, I heard something.”

I was instantly still. The wind was coming from the west, which is why Mundt had heard them before they realised we were in the area. I whispered to the men to get off the line, we’d been walking along the sleepers to make the going easier. We melted into the scrub at the south side of the track and crept forward. It was heavy going, the ground was soaking wet and I could hear my jackboots squelching as I walked. I prayed that whoever was up ahead couldn’t hear the noise. Their voices started to reach us, men murmuring quietly in the unfamiliar cadences of the Russian language. Partisans, it couldn’t be anything else.

“Scharfuhrer, pass the word to the men,” I whispered. “If they use grenades keep them away from the line, we don’t want to do the partisans work for them. As soon as we get nearer we’ll drop to a crawl. No one is to shoot until I do and watch out for sentries, they’re sure to have them posted.”

He passed the word along to the men and we crept nearer, then I motioned with my arm and we dropped down onto the muddy ground. I was

conscious of the wet mud, soaking through my uniform to my underwear. Stupid thought, I told myself, concentrate on the job in hand, these people would be watching for us. It was sheer luck that put the wind in the right direction for us to hear them first. I heard faint noises, someone was digging, a shovel pushing into the ground and throwing the mud to one side. Then I saw the first one, a sentry, he was sitting on the steel line, staring all around him, occasionally he darted a look up the railway line towards us, but failed to see us low on the ground in the darkness. The other men were about ten metres further behind him and were digging, presumably burying a mine under the line. I had no choice as I was at the front. I took out my combat knife and turned to Mundt, who was behind me. He saw the knife and nodded, then I started to crawl forward, nearer and nearer, each time the sentry turned to look away I crept nearer until I was within four metres from him. It seemed incredible that he hadn't seen me, but it would be his last error of judgement. He looked away from me again and I rose swiftly and ran the four steps towards him, he heard me coming and whipped around but I launched myself at him, aiming at his head I clamped one hand around his mouth and with the other, slashed across his windpipe. He struggled for a few moments then slumped. I lowered him gently to the ground and crouched low, waiting for the others to come up. I looked along the line, a short distance away the group was huddled around a hole in the ground, muttering quietly. I started as something touched my leg, but it was Mundt, alerting me that the men had come up. He pointed to his machine pistol and I nodded, feeling on my back for my own MP38 and pulling it to my front. We were ready, I looked at Mundt, and he inclined his head slightly. I jumped up and ran, my men either side of me. We got five metres nearer before they suddenly looked up and grabbed for their weapons. It was too late, I pressed the trigger and sent a stream of bullets into the partisans. I counted ten of them. Only one thing mattered and that was to kill them fast before they had a chance to start shooting back at us. Two men went down and the rest of my platoon opened fire, it was devastating, streams of 9mm bullets pouring into the group, knocking them to the ground. Within seconds they were all down, dead or wounded, but as the shooting died away we distinctly heard the sound of footsteps, someone was running, knocking the grass and scrub aside as he rushed through the night, seeking safety from our murderous gunfire.

"Mundt, Bauer, come with me, the rest of you check the area for any more of them and dismantle their explosives."

I ran in the direction of the footsteps, the other two followed. The route took us onto a path of some kind, drier than the swampy ground that surround the railway line, the going was a lot easier and we hurtled along, trying to close the gap. Fortunately he was making so much noise that it was not difficult to follow the fleeing partisan, then we saw him, the moon appeared from behind a cloud, lighting up the scene. He was about fifty metres in front of us, we surged forward, encouraged by sight of our target. Someone behind me fired a burst from a machine pistol, it missed the partisan but he swerved off the path and started to flounder across the soft ground. It was a fatal mistake, we quickly came parallel to him and the three of us fired on full automatic, he went down in full flight, his body rolled and tumbled to land in a muddy puddle. We went across to inspect it and make sure he was dead, but we were in for a shock, it wasn't a he, it was a she. A young woman of about eighteen years old, attractive too, I reflected that she should have been in school or university, not planting bombs on an obscure Ukrainian railway line in the dead of night.

"Silly bitch," Bauer said. "What a fucking waste, a girl like that."

"She was defending her homeland, Stefan, wouldn't you if Germany was invaded?" I said quietly.

"We all would, Obersturmfuhrer," Mundt said. "But we wouldn't send our wives and girlfriends to do it, neither is our homeland a shithouse like this one."

I shrugged. "They just think differently to us."

One of them muttered, "Fucking barbarians." I thought it was Bauer but it was too dark to tell.

We walked back to where my men were carefully pulling out the explosives from the hole dug by the partisans under the line. We'd been lucky, they were almost finished, another thirty minutes and they'd have completed their work and vanished into the night. The bodies of the partisans were lying like discarded sacks. My men worked as if they didn't exist, they were forgotten already. Voss was pulling out the last of the explosives.

"That's about all of it, they hadn't set the fuse so it was quite an easy job. We'll take the explosives with us?"

I nodded. "We don't want to leave them for the locals to try again."

"I doubt that they're short of supplies," Voss said. "They seem to have plenty of everything."

I thought of the tens of thousands of troops, the hundreds of T34s in that

tiny area of the Kursk salient and mentally compared the image of our hastily thrown together company of captured Soviet tanks. There was a conclusion to be drawn there, but not a comfortable one. The men had no such reservations.

"So how come they seem to have so much equipment and we're always running short?" Wesserman asked plaintively. "Look at their clothes, Christ, they've got padded jackets and trousers, fur caps."

"We haven't seen the Soviets using captured German armour or vehicles against us either," Voss added. "They don't need our captured soldiers to fight for them either, someone said that the Sixth Army at Stalingrad was let down because we had so many second rate Romanians and Italians fighting for us. Some said we even had Russian Hiwis in the front line."

"The Russians have no shortage of manpower, Wesserman, they have a huge population from which they can recruit more soldiers and workers for their factories to make tanks and guns, that's why they always outnumber us."

"So why did we go to war with them, Sir?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I replied, it was a lame answer, but of course, the truth was that the German perception of the Soviet Union was of a severely weakened giant. Adolf Hitler had gone on record as saying about Communist Russia, 'You only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down'. We'd certainly kicked in the door, but the structure was proving to be much stronger than our Fuhrer had anticipated.

We returned to Podvirky and I wrote out my report in our squalid isba. At nine o'clock I handed my report to von Meusebach and he listened intently as I described our brush with the partisans.

"Very well, Hoffman, we are expecting trains day and night along the line so it was lucky that you stumbled on them. I'll have my orderly type up your report and you can sign it, then it will be sent on to Vinnitsa."

I was puzzled at such a complicated procedure for a routine report, but made no comment. He was a lawyer, after all.

"Excuse me, Sir, I think we should consider only running the trains during the day, after dark it's very risky. If they detonate those explosives as one of our trains goes over them the damage could block the line for several days."

"Don't be stupid," he snapped. "The trains have been ordered to run day and night, our army needs the new Tigers and Panzer Vs. You'll just have to lose some sleep and double the patrols, that'll put a stop to the partisans."

We had hundreds of kilometres of railway track running through partisan-held territory, operating trains at night would clearly be an invitation to disaster, but I said nothing. He wasn't the kind of officer to invite suggestions from his junior officers. He glared at me, then snapped, "I'll inspect your platoon now, Hoffman!"

He stalked outside, pulling a face when his gleaming jackboots sunk into the mud. Mundt had the men lined up, they had made some small effort but they still looked a shambles, as did every other soldier on the Eastern Front. Except for von Meusebach.

"You're a disgrace to your uniforms, all of you, you look like pigs! Next time you report for duty, make sure you shave and wear clean uniforms. The SS needs men, not scarecrows, to fight battles. Remember, we have won every battle on every front. The German soldier will always win with a combination of personal pride and discipline. Don't let it happen again!"

I wondered what he called the Sixth Army's huge defeat at Stalingrad. He stalked back into his HQ, I left the men muttering dark threats about what they'd like to do to von Meusebach and went to get some rest. The massive build-up of men, armour and equipment would mean a lot of sleepless nights for those of us already here. The arrival of the CO could only make a bad situation worse. Hopefully he'd have second thoughts when the shooting started.

During the afternoon a train stopped with a line of flat cars, each one held a Tiger tank, the huge, battle winning behemoths slumbering on their steel transporters waiting to be unloaded and sent to the assembly areas. Crews and mechanics swarmed over them. In order to move them over the Soviet railways the wide tracks had to be replaced with narrower transport tracks. Once the tanks were unloaded the tracks had to be changed back to the wider tracks that were necessary for manoeuvre in battle. All afternoon the tanks were unloaded and crews prepared them to move, as they became battle ready they drove away to join their units. When darkness fell the engineers used overhead lights so that the maintenance crews could keep working. We returned to our billet in the semi-ruined isba.

"I wish they'd turn those damned lights out," Mundt said. "We're sitting targets for every Soviet fighter bomber that happens in this direction."

It was normal to have a blackout at night and we were lit up for the whole of the Red Air Force to see, it sometimes seemed to me that our High Command were oblivious to the realities of the front. I slept uneasily that

night, I doubted that anyone got much sleep around the railway yards of Podvirky with so much noise and so many lights blazing, but we were lucky, the Soviets did not attack. No artillery barrage came screaming in to smash the area to rubble, no Soviet fighter bombers came swooping down to destroy us with bombs, cannon and machine gun fire. Even the U-2 biplanes, the night bombers stayed away. The following morning we went out on patrol, but we returned without seeing any more of the partisans. I hadn't expected to, they mostly operated after dark, but of course we had to keep up the patrols regardless, they would be watching for any kind of a gap in our defences. During the evening I managed to find a ration truck that was returning to Kharkov. The driver agreed to give us a lift into the city but wasn't keen on bringing us back out to Podvirky at the end of the evening, until I bribed him with a 'liberated' Nagant M1895 revolver. The Nagant M1895 Revolver was a seven-shot revolver designed and produced by Belgian industrialist Leon Nagant for the Russian Empire. I'd taken it from a Soviet Major who had been captured during our battle to recapture the city of Kharkov. It had become a dead weight in my pack and I was glad to get rid of it, besides, either there'd be plenty more where that one came from or I'd be dead and it wouldn't matter. There was no sign that the Russian war was going to end anytime soon and a night out in the city was beyond price, something that might not be repeatable for some or all of us in the forthcoming days, weeks and months.

We clambered off the truck and I arranged to meet the driver at midnight. I kept the pistol in the pocket of my tunic, I had a suspicion that if I parted with it now he might 'forget' to return later to collect us. The bar we went into was packed with men, Wehrmacht, SS, a few Hiwis, a couple of Luftwaffe infantry. A band was on a low stage at one end of the room, enthusiastically playing traditional Ukrainian songs with a collection of accordions, violins and even a saxophone. Sadly their passion for their music was not matched by their skill, but nobody seemed to mind and the whole room was buzzing with life, a welcome change from the war outside. We downed three glasses of local beer in quick succession and then Mundt suggested we move somewhere else.

"It's much too crowded here, besides, there's nothing to look at."

"You mean women," I smiled.

He nodded. "It would be nice to see one or two pretty faces."

We left and walked along the main street until we spotted a bar in a side

street. It looked a little dark and away from the regular areas patrolled by our Feldgendarmerie, but I agreed to give it a try.

"Are you all carrying side arms?" I asked them.

They nodded and I looked down to check that they did indeed all have holsters on their belts.

We walked down the street and into the bar, it was totally different from the previous establishment, here they had a band that played in tune, passable versions of American New Orleans jazz. And there were women, at least a dozen of them, admittedly most were already with a partner but at least we could look. It was Bauer's turn to get the drinks and we sat at a table while he ordered the beer. A buxom waitress brought a tray of foaming glasses and set them down, we all looked hungrily at her cleavage, artfully displayed inside her low-cut Ukrainian traditional dress. We gratefully drank the beer and looked around the bar, we were the only German soldiers in the room, there was a small dance floor and several couples were attempting to dance some kind of a folk dance to the raucous jazz. Then the music slowed and the men and women held each other close and smooched around the floor. I felt sad, hungry for the physical and emotional connection with a girl. It made me think of Irina and I thought I was having an illusion when suddenly I spotted her face as a crowd of people parted. She saw me at the same time and came across to our table.

"Aren't you going to invite me to dance?" she smiled

She saw the confusion on my face. "It's ok, Jurgen, I haven't got Alina with me."

I got up and went with her to the dance floor. Despite everything, it felt good to hold a soft, warm, female body in my arms.

"How is Alina?"

"Alina? She's fine, I think. She went home this morning so I doubt that she'll be back."

"That's a shame, I thought you were very close."

"I suppose we were," she said, "but I rather fancied you too, I thought you might have contacted me before now."

She must have seen my jaw drop. "What, you thought that I only liked women? In this war, Obersturmfuhrer, you have to take anything you can get."

I didn't reply for a few moments, I had never been so confused in all my life. I was about to answer when there was a commotion at the door. I tried to

clear my mind from the alcohol and the heady confusion of this pretty young woman. A group of civilians had walked in, four of them. Stupidly I wondered why they were armed with Soviet PPSh submachine guns and then it dawned on me. There were partisans, in the bar. A voice rang out in perfect German.

"Everyone stay where you are, you Germans put up your hands!"

I slowly put up my hands and looked across to our table. Two partisans had submachine guns pointed directly at my men. While I watched, one of them relieved them of their pistols, then came over to me and took my Walther automatic. The German-speaking leader, the gaunt young man standing in the middle of the room with his PPSh covering us, looked directly at me.

"You, SS officer. Are there any more of your people in here? Answer me honestly or I'll kill one of those men at the table!"

I shook my head. "No, this is everyone. What do you want?"

He didn't reply. "Andriy, check the front door, make sure there are no soldiers nearby. Pavlo, get everyone to move away from the Fascists."

They herded the crowd of customers away from us and the leader looked warily around the bar. Andriy looked outside and then closed the door. "It's all clear, Petro."

"Good. You, fascists, you will come with us. Andriy, go to the back, we'll go out that way. Pavlo, you and Olek make sure they make no noise. You, fascists, do not make any trouble or you will be killed!"

I had no doubt that we were about to be killed anyway. Mundt looked across at me, but I shook my head, I was out of ideas.

They moved us to a narrow, dark passage that led out of the bar, I knocked against a wooden shelf as we walked through and something snagged in my pocket. The Nagant, the Russian pistol, I still had it in my pocket. It was loaded with six bullets, it wasn't much against four PPSh machine pistols but it was all I had. I turned so that they couldn't see what I was doing and palmed the pistol. I was trying to work out the best time to start shooting when a row erupted in the bar. It was Irina.

"You, Petro, what are you doing with these German soldiers?"

"What is it to you? Why do you want to know?"

"I want revenge on them, I've lost a brother to these people."

The partisan hesitated, but a pretty girl was not easy to say no to.

"Very well, you may accompany us, but keep out of the way."

We walked through the door and they held us at gunpoint in the yard outside. I kept behind Mundt so that my hand holding the pistol was out of sight. “I have a pistol, be ready when I start shooting,” I murmured quietly. I saw his head incline in a tiny nod.

Petro their leader stood to one side of us with Irina next to him. Did I know her well enough to trust her motives for coming out with the partisans? Yes, probably, she had every reason to hate the Soviets, so she must be on our side. I’d have to trust her. The three other partisans were in front of us, barely two metres away. I wondered how accurate the Nagant was while I whispered to Mundt, “When I start shooting, go for Petro, I think Irina will try to spoil his aim.”

Another tiny nod, it was time, I brought up the pistol and shot the first man in the stomach, the other two started bringing up their guns but I shot both of them in quick succession, all three were down and Bauer sprinted forward with his combat knife out. Mundt and Wesserman had rushed over to help Irina with the leader, Petro. As I’d hoped, she’d held his arm, stopping him from aiming the weapon, but with an angry shout he threw her off, brought up his PPSh, and pointed it directly at her to kill her, shouting curses in Ukrainian. I knew it was too late when the noise of a volley of automatic fire split the night, but Petro merely toppled, shredded by the 7.62mm Soviet bullets. Bauer had snatched up one of the weapons from the felled partisans and pulled the trigger, in an instant stopping Petro.

We stood frozen for a few moments with the sudden violence that had come to this backstreet bar, our near brush with death, before we came to life again. Mundt and Bauer checked the bodies of the partisans, one of them had our pistols in his backpack and Bauer retrieved them and handed them back to us. Astonishingly, Petro was still alive. When I stood over him he stared back at me with hate-filled eyes. He tried to say something, but blood was oozing out of his mouth and eventually he gave a loud sigh and his eyes closed forever.

“Irina, thank you for helping us.” I said. “He nearly killed you.”

She was trembling. She must have expected her body to be riddled with bullets from Petro’s gun. She tried to speak but couldn’t get her words out.

“Would you like me to take you home?”

She nodded. Mundt was holstering his pistol, still holding one of the PPShs.

“Scharfuhrer, give me one of those, just in case they have any friends

around the corner. I'll see Irina to her home and try to catch our lift back later. You know where to meet the truck?"

"Midnight, same place as he dropped us off."

"Yes, you'd better give him this."

I handed him the Nagant M1895. "If I don't get back you can tell him it came in useful but it may need reloading."

"You'll be ok?"

"Yes, but cover for me if I'm delayed. We'll go out through the bar, I don't want anyone thinking that a bunch of partisans got the better of the SS."

We walked through the back door and into the bar. The whole place went silent when they saw us carrying the partisans PPShs. The message was obvious, stay away from the Waffen-SS. Our drinks were still on the table, we picked them up and calmly finished them off to make the point.

"We'll stay here for a while, I should think it's safe now," Mundt said, "I'll see you later."

I took Irina's arm to take her home. The band was taking a break and the barman had the radio on listening to the news from Radio Kiev, a Ukrainian station approved by the German occupiers.

"Here is the news on May 13, 1943. The war in North Africa is over. German and Italian forces have surrendered to the Allies in Tunisia, ending the campaign of Rommel's Afrika Corps."

I felt all eyes in the bar on me. Much of the Ukraine was nominally sympathetic to the German cause, having suffered so many years of famine and purges at the hands of Stalin. However, this was the second major defeat of German arms, following so closely the surrender at Stalingrad three months before. Our next major test of arms was about to occur in the Kursk salient, I had seen the massive preparation of both sides. We couldn't afford to lose another big battle. The collapse of morale after Stalingrad was palpable, like a damp fog settling all around us. If we lost here, I doubted the ability of our troops to carry on. It could be the beginning of the end of our efforts to conquer the Soviet Union.

"Let's go, I don't want to hear any more of this," I said to Irina.

She moved closer to me, as if to give me some comfort at such a miserable time. She still hadn't spoken to me, she looked pale and I could feel her body trembling. It was an astonishing change from the girl who had guided us into the Soviet sector so confidently, who then seemed to turn away from the company of men for the voluptuous Ukrainian girl we had

brought back with us. More than anything I pitied her, she should have been dating a boy, or perhaps a girl in a university bar, not dodging bullets and having to see bodies piled on bodies in her own backyard. We threaded though the dark streets, when we reached a junction she pulled me in the direction of her home, but still she didn't speak. We walked along deserted streets, past parked Panzers, waiting silently for the coming battle. Finally we turned into a cul-de-sac on the outskirts of the city, she opened a gate, and we walked up the path to her front door. The house was in darkness, but most houses in Kharkov were without lights, even those that possessed them didn't want to attract the bombers or the artillery shells. I let her arm go and said goodnight, then turned away to go back to my unit. Only then did she speak.

"Jurgen. Please, stay with me tonight."

I considered for half a second at most. Heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, I didn't really care. It was true. In war you took what you could get. Just before we went inside I heard a massive, low rumble, like the sound of engines. We both looked up, but there were no signs of any aircraft. The wind had changed direction to blow from the east, the noise was tank engines warming up, Russian tank engines from inside the salient, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. I looked eastwards, but there was nothing to see, the Russians were probably making the noise at night to unsettle us and lower our morale, they were masters of psychological warfare. Their point was well made, they were there, ready for us, thousands of tanks and guns, mines and traps waiting for us to come to them.

# Chapter Three

*'With amazement and disappointment, we discovered in late October and early November that the beaten Russians seemed quite unaware that as a military force they had almost ceased to exist'.*

*General Blumentritt*

I never found out where her family were, but Irina's house was empty. She led me up to her bedroom and left me for a few moments. When she came back, she was naked. I kissed her, tasting her warm lips, our tongues intertwining while my hands caressed her breasts and felt around her body

and she stiffened as my hand slipped between her legs. She was touching my body, a soft, tantalising touch that I found shockingly arousing, then began to stroke my penis. I was hard and erect, all thoughts of the war had fled and I gently probed between her legs and touched inside her. She was wet, soaking with the wetness of her own arousal, she moaned as I pushed my fingers in further and then lifted her onto the bed, one hand behind her back, the other pushed inside her. She pulled me down onto her and guided me into her, then we made love, not the gentle erotic exploration of two new lovers but the animal need of two of war's victims. It was harsh, rough and incredibly exciting. Soon, she was screaming, or maybe it was both of us and within a few short minutes we both reached an orgasm. We lay together holding each other, saying nothing. For two hours we were silent, there was nothing to say, the night had brought us its quota of blood and death and our sexual union was just a way of blotting out the terrible realities of those four corpses lying bloodied and broken against the wall behind the bar. Still without a word she started to kiss me, then bent down to lick my body until she reached my groin and took me into her mouth, sucking until I became hard again. I reached for her and stroked her, we made love again, but this time we had spent the bitter anger, stress and frustration of the war, and we wanted more, an emotional bonding. We gently gyrated our hips and I pumped in and out of her, perhaps half an hour elapsed before she reached a climax and I had my second orgasm of the night. After holding her to me for another ten minutes I gently removed her arm and got up.

"Irina, I have to get back, otherwise I will be disciplined for desertion. I'm sorry."

"You remind me of Bizet's opera, Carmen," she said with humour in her voice. "You know, when Jose, the corporal, has to leave Carmen to go back on duty. She tries to persuade him to desert, would you like me to try to persuade you too?"

"Did the opera end well?"

"Not really, no, she finds another lover, the toreador and Jose kills her in the final act."

"Perhaps I'd better go back then. Irina, I'd like to look you up again when I get back into the city."

"Are you sure? Tonight was just desperation, Jurgen, two people in each other's warmth."

"I'm sure. How do I contact you?"

“You can get a message to me at that bar we were in, it is called The Dive. They will pass a message.”

“I’ll do that.”

I kissed her and we held each other briefly, then I went down the stairs, out of the house and found my way back to the city centre. I checked my watch, it was nearly four in the morning, and I had time to get back if I could find a lift. I started walking out of the city I was lucky, there was an incredible roaring noise and a clatter of tracks. I turned to see a Tiger tank rumbling towards me along the main street. It stopped alongside me and the commander looked down.

“We’re headed to Podvirky, do you need a lift?”

“That’s marvellous.”

I climbed up onto the hull of the Tiger and clung to the barrel of the machine gun. The commander gave an order into his microphone and the tank started forward again.

“How did you know where I was going?” I asked him, shouting above the roar of the engine.

He laughed. “There are only two destinations in this direction, Podvirky or Germany. I assume you’re not deserting?”

“The only thing I’m deserting is a beautiful girl tucked up in bed!”

He nodded. “I thought that might be the case. What are you doing at the railway, anti-partisan duties?”

“We are yes, at least, until the battle starts. Why are you taking this tank to Podvirky, surely it came from there only recently?”

“It did, yes. The turret mechanism is faulty so they’re sending another one in. It’s due some time today. We’ll just use the railway crane to swing this one off and the new one in place. It’s the easiest way. Damn turrets weigh a lot, they’re not easy to transport.”

“It’s lucky for me you came along, there’s not much traffic on the road at night.”

“It’s the damned partisans, they come out like rats in the darkness. Have you had any brushes with them?”

“Some, yes,” I admitted, but I didn’t want to give him any details, it had been a strange night. A night of warm companionship and then sudden violence, blood and death, followed by sex with a girl who I had thought was a lesbian. Yet strange didn’t seem a word strong enough to describe it. Outlandish possibly. Surreal definitely.

I thanked him and jumped off near our quarters, the half-ruined isba. I managed to get an hour's sleep, then the noise of the camp woke me, men shouting, engines starting up, a railway engine's steam whistle sounding, the crash of ramps as they started to unload the first of the new Tigers that had arrived. I put my head under the cold-water pump in the yard and tried to clear my tired brain. After breakfast I reported to HQ for orders. There was no sign of von Meusebach so I spoke to Muller, once again the second in command. He handed me my typed up report and I was about to sign it when something in his eyes made me look at it again. It had been subtly altered to give the impression that von Meusebach was actually leading the patrol, not tucked up in his bed.

"I can't sign this, it's nonsense."

Muller sighed. "I think you should reconsider, Hoffman, he can make all our lives difficult if we don't carry out his wishes. It's only a damned report, for God's sake."

"It's only a damned lie," I replied quietly, but I knew I had no choice and I scrawled my signature.

"We've got more Tigers and a couple of the new Panzer V tanks due in today, it'll be a bitch getting them unloaded just as we were getting used to rolling the Tigers off and changing their tracks. Now we have a new set of problems, why the hell they don't settle on one good tank design I don't know. The Tiger is a real winner, the finest armour on the whole of the Eastern Front."

His second in command, Glasser, coughed to interrupt him. "Sir, they say that these new Panzers Vs are even better than the Tiger, much better performance, better armour, they're very good, so they say."

Muller grunted. "That's just propaganda, Glasser. I've heard that they're unreliable and don't pack the punch of the Tiger, although they're faster, I grant you. No damned good being fast if you've broken down, is it?"

"I'm sure they'll sort out the problems, Obersturmbannfuhrer."

"They need to, that's for sure. Why are they delaying the attack, Glasser? The ground is drying up, we should be attacking now, not sitting here on our backsides tangling with partisans."

"We may not attack at all if we don't find out who is passing information to the enemy, Muller."

We all looked up as two men walked through the door, two men I recognised. SD Obersturmbannfuhrer Walter von Betternich and Gestapo

Kriminalkommissar Gerd Wiedel.

"What do you mean?" Muller asked.

"It's quite simple, we believe that someone is passing information on our entire order of battle, unit dispositions, in fact we believe that the entire Operation Zitadelle could be at risk if we can't plug the leak."

I was mystified. "Operation Zitadelle?"

"Yes, Zitadelle," Muller said irritably. "I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't know, it is the name of the operation to eliminate the bulge in the lines between Orel and Kharkov, the Kursk salient, so that we can shorten the front line. Once we have taken Kursk we can continue the drive to Moscow."

Von Betternich nodded. "Yes, Model's 9th Army will attack southwards from Orel whilst Hoth's 4th Panzer Army and Army Group Kempf will attack northwards from here at Kharkov. The two armies will meet near Kursk but if the offensive goes well, the armies would have permission to continue eastward on their own initiative. With luck we can establish a new line at the Don River, much nearer to Moscow."

He looked at us. "The problem is that if we can't find the traitor, we may have to delay the offensive indefinitely. I need hardly tell you that the Fuhrer is unhappy, most unhappy. He's threatened to send every last member of the Intelligence units to the front armed with only a shovel."

"Are you sure that someone is passing information to the Russians?" Muller asked.

"We've intercepted the signals, there can be no doubt. We can still retrieve the situation, there's much that the Russians don't know, but first we have to find the traitor. Muller, I will be needing an escort, can you release Hoffman and some men of his platoon again?"

"You'll need to clear it with the new CO. We're struggling to cope with the partisan attacks, they're a real threat, not some mythical traitor that may or may not exist."

"Von Meusebach will not object, I have an direct order from the Reichsfuhrer SS. Hoffman, I trust you have no objections?"

I hesitated. If there was anyone I'd like to hunt down and shoot it was von Betternich himself, but I was trapped by SS discipline, and by the oath I'd taken to the Fuhrer when I was commissioned.

"No, Sir."

The SD officer was smiling broadly, I'd worked with him before and

discovered that he had an uncanny ability to virtually read minds, probably because of his long experience as a Berlin policeman. He stared at me silently for a few moments until I began to feel uncomfortable.

"You blame me for that Jewess, don't you, Hoffman?"

"Do I, Sir?"

"You know damn well you do, man. Listen, even if she was the sister of the Fuhrer, God forbid, once she was found out to be a Jewess using false papers stolen from an Aryan German there was only one possible way it could end. Were you in love with her?"

"That's none of your business," I muttered.

"In the case of an SS officer enjoying a relationship with a Jewess it is emphatically my business, but I'll take that as a yes. I'm afraid you must put that behind you, my friend, we have important work to do, far more important than any Jewess, in fact more important than anything else on this front. This spy is forwarding our communications and plans to Stalin almost as quickly as our own commanders are informed. Have you heard of the name 'Lucy'?"

I shook my head.

"That is the name by which this group of people are known, we have no idea why. Perhaps it is a woman named Lucy who controls the group or perhaps it is something else. Last year we arrested a number of people involved in a spy ring called 'Die Rote Kapelle', the Red Orchestra. We were lucky, in July the Gestapo uncovered a radio operator named Johann Wenzel and it all started to unravel from there. That was when we first heard of this Lucy spy ring, but we have made little progress in identifying them. Until now, that is, when we made the connection between Army Group South and the plans for Zitadelle. As soon as the message was passed to von Manstein's Headquarters the Russians began reinforcing key areas in the Kursk salient, areas that exactly match the points we planned to attack. It is too great a coincidence, they must have been told our exact intentions."

"Does that mean the attack may be cancelled?"

Wiedel the Gestapo man, pointed at one of the maps on the wall. "Look at this, Hoffman. The salient more than doubles the length of our front line and we don't have enough troops and tanks to defend it all, let alone restart our offensive on Moscow. Cancelling the attack is out of the question, but it is not too late to modify the plans, provided we can stop this Lucy spy ring. If they find out we have changed our plans they will just re-site their defences

and we'll fall into the trap. We have to find the traitor!"

"You must put aside your anger at what happened to your girlfriend and put all of your efforts into catching this spy," von Betternich continued. "It is more important than any of us, Hoffman."

"What do you want me to do?"

If the Russians knew in advance where we were to attack the result would be unthinkable, tens of thousands of men wiped out unnecessarily. I'd put the business with Heide out of my mind, there would be a time and place later when I would settle accounts.

"We have a funkwagen, a radio detection truck in Kharkov. We know that the transmissions are made after dark, between the hours of nine and ten o'clock, so that's when we shall concentrate our efforts. To begin with, I want you and three of your men to follow the van at a discreet distance and be ready to go in and make the arrest if they detect any transmissions. You can use a Kubelwagen to get into the city. I'll give you the requisition before you go. We will need to visit Army Group South Headquarters at Vinnitsa too. There are some enquiries that I need to make there."

I was surprised. "Surely security at Army Group South is locked up tight, I can't imagine that the leak could come from there."

He smiled. "Security is so tight that only five weeks ago there was a plot to assassinate the Fuhrer at Feldmarschal von Kluge's Army Group Centre in Smolensk. We understand that it was only luck that prevented the bomb from going off. "

"The Fuhrer? That's unbelievable! Did you arrest the people responsible? Was it a Soviet spy?"

"It was no Soviet, it was a group of our own officers, they planted a bomb in a case of champagne, when the bomb failed to explode they managed to retrieve the bomb, so we have no direct evidence. We haven't arrested them yet, we are still making enquiries."

I was about to question him more, it was very, very odd that an assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler would not be investigated and concluded immediately. There was only one answer, the answer that bedevilled every aspect of German life, politics. It meant that for some reason they did not want to look too closely. Did someone want the Fuhrer dead? No, that would be too incredible.

"You are surprised that our own officers would make an attempt on the Fuhrer's life, are you not?" von Betternich continued.

I nodded.

“There have been at least thirty attempts on the life of the Fuhrer in the past ten years, almost all from his own people. However, that is not your concern. This Lucy spy ring takes priority over everything else. Is that clear?”

I nodded.

He handed me an official SD document. “This is a requisition for the vehicle. Report to the Gestapo office in Kharkov with three of your men at eight thirty, in time to accompany the radio truck. That’s all.”

I found the platoon and gave them the good news. Most of them groaned.

“Do we still have to mount the anti-partisan patrols,” Mundt asked.

I nodded. “I’m afraid so, yes, I doubt that von Meusebach will relieve us of that duty. I need three volunteers to come with me tonight.”

As expected, Willy Mundt put up his hand. Bauer and Wesserman volunteered too, but that left a problem. Who would be in charge of my platoon in the absence of myself, and my sergeant, Scharfuhrer Mundt? The best junior NCO was Beidenberg and he’d performed well lately.

“Sturmann Beidenberg, you will take over the platoon while we’re away, I’m promoting you to Unterscharfuhrer as from this moment. I’ll need to get it confirmed, but in the meantime, congratulations.”

He broke out in a broad grin and the men patted him on the back, there were no sour faces so I thought I’d probably made the right decision.

“Willy, here’s the requisition for the Kubi, would you collect it after lunch and get it checked over, make sure the tank is full of petrol and so on. If they detect this damn spy I don’t want to find that the engine won’t start when they ask us to go in and arrest him.”

He took the document. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Good. We’re due back at the railway siding, they’re bringing in more armour today, there’s also an ammunition train due in. Muller wants tight security when it turns up, if the partisans hit the ammunition it’ll blow up half the town.”

Someone murmured ‘and good riddance’ but I ignored it. We walked over to the railway line, it was empty but already tank crews and mechanics were assembling. In the distance a plume of smoke gave advance warning of the arrival of the train. It gave the Soviets ample warning too, as the train came into view a flight of Sturmoviks came roaring overhead, they’d crossed the lines at low level and followed the railway track. Abruptly the peaceful

countryside marshalling yard descended into chaos.

The anti-aircraft guns were the first to respond, streams of tracer bullets and cannon fire arced up towards the aircraft. The first Sturmovik reached the train and two bombs detached from under the wings and straddled two Tigers sitting impotently on the flatcars, still several hundred metres from the unloading point. The bombs sent up showers of earth and stones but appeared to do little damage. There were four Sturmoviks, the second fared no better than the first but the third scored a direct hit on the train, the flat car lurched off the track and the Tiger slid down to one side. The fourth Sturmovik dropped its bombs nearer the engine, obviously intending to strand the train so that a further raid would finish it off. The bombs dropped almost next to the train, one missed completely, the other smashed into the coal tender and started a fire in the combined coal and oil tanks. Muller shouted at us.

"Get that tender disconnected so they can move the train clear! The rest of you start unloading those Panzers. Hurry, before the next attack comes in!"

We started forward, but Mundt stopped me. "They'll need oxy-acetylene to cut the tender away from the engine, there's a set in the mechanic's workshop."

"What are we waiting for, Willy? Let's go."

He led the way and I followed the men into the old barn that served as a workshop. Next to the bench were two tall, heavy steel cylinders and a set of long, rubber pipes, ending with a heavy brass nozzle. They were mounted on a trolley, Mundt shouted orders and the men half rolled, half carried the equipment across the rough ground. The stricken tender was blazing, tethered at each end to both the engine and the long train behind, locked by a tangle of steel couplings. The anti-aircraft guns started firing again and I looked up, the Sturmoviks were coming back to strafe the area, they'd offloaded their bombs, now they wanted to deliver the coup-de-grace.

"Take cover, the Sturmoviks are back," I shouted.

The men threw themselves to the ground but some were too slow as the Russians machine-gunned the area remorselessly. They were armed with two fixed forward-firing 23mm cannons, two 7.62mm machine guns and a 12.7mm machine gun in the rear cockpit. It was enough to cause massive death and destruction, bullets and cannon fire swept across the railway yard like a tornado, men flung bloodied and broken to the ground, buildings and vehicles riddled with bullets and torn apart by cannon fire. The anti-aircraft guns scored a hit, one of the Ilyushin IL-2s went down in flames to the four-

barrelled 2cm Flakvierling 38. Mounted on one of the flatcars it was a fearsome anti-aircraft weapon, sending streams of heavy calibre shells up at enemy aircraft. As the Russian dived into the ground the others turned away to head back east. The Flakvierling switched targets and managed to score a hit on another Sturmovik, but the aircraft was heavily armoured and was able to make its escape, trailing smoke. I stood up to survey the damage. The biggest problem was the tender. It was burning fiercely, threatening to overwhelm the engine.

"Willy, get that cutting equipment over there fast, the rest of you, grab the fire extinguishers, we haven't got much time!"

It was hard dragging the heavy gas cylinders over the rough ground but we made it at the same time as the men ran up with the extinguishers. They sprayed water and foam over the area of the coupling while Mundt got the cutting equipment started. He waded through water, smoke and flames until he was at the coupling. While he burned through the heavy steel, we kept the extinguishers playing over Mundt and the area he was working in, but it was obvious that we didn't have enough capacity to keep going for long, already one of the extinguishers had run out. I looked up seeking inspiration and noticed the trickle of steam coming from the engine. Of course, steam, water, they went together, didn't these huge steam engines carry water tanks?

I leapt up onto the engine, the heat intense even though it was several metres from the fire. The engineers looked startled.

"We need water on the coupling to protect the man trying to cut the engine free, do you have a hose connected to your water tank?"

They looked at each other. One of them shrugged, "Sure, we've got the drain hose." He nodded to the other man. "Hans, hook it up and spray water on the flames. We can't use too much of our water, Obersturmfuhrer, otherwise we won't have enough to get up steam."

I sighed with exasperation. They'd stood watching the flames threatening their engine and done nothing while they had a tank full of cold water and a hose.

"If we won't get that fucking tender uncoupled you won't have any need to get up steam," I shouted at them. "We need to get that fire put out!"

Hans connected a long piece of rubber hose to a nozzle and the engineer turned a steel valve. Water poured out and he started to spray the tender.

"Cover the coupling with water, that's where my Scharfuhrer is working to cut you free," I shouted. He redirected the hose and steam rose in the air as

the water hit the hot metal, but it was enough, I jumped down and saw that Mundt had nearly cut through the steel. It only took another four minutes and the steel coupling dropped free. I shouted up to the locomotive and told the crew to move their engine away from the train. There was a hiss of steam and the great locomotive started forward, picking up speed until it was away from the immediate danger zone. Once they got to Kharkov there would be more anti-aircraft fire to protect them. Some of the other soldiers had started to form a bucket chain, together with some Hiwis they passed buckets of water along the line and poured them onto the burning coal tender.

"Willy, leave it to them, they've got the fire under control, we need to help unload the armour, we're not safe yet, the Reds may be back."

We started on the first of the flatcars with the tank perched helplessly its length, impotent until they were unloaded and on the ground. Even with the special narrow tracks for rail transport they were vast, steel giants of the battlefield with the immense 88mm gun pointing rearwards. The crews were waiting for us, they had taken shelter inside the tank and battened down the hatches when the air attack started but now they came out to help us unload.

"Willy, we need the unloading ramps in the yard, can you take some men and bring them," I said to Mundt. "You'll probably need more men to help." He nodded.

I didn't envy them their work, the ramps were huge lengths of steel, massively heavy that they positioned for the tanks to roll off the flatcars. While he went to bring the ramps we continued preparing the Tiger. With a roar, the engine started and as we released the last of the security chains, the driver slewed the giant vehicle around, locking one track and driving around with the other until it pointed at ninety degrees to the side of the flatcar, as Mundt came up with the ramps. There were ten men to each of the long lengths of steel. They positioned them under the Tiger tracks, hooking them over the lip of the flatcar. Mundt waved to the tank commander and we jumped clear as the driver engaged the gears and gently drove his Panzer onto the ground. He waved a thank you as he went past and I looked at Mundt who had come up beside me. One side of his scalp was almost bald where the fire had burned away his hair and his uniform was charred and ripped.

"That was damned fine work, Willy, we could have lost the engine."

He shrugged. "It was nothing, someone had to do it, Sir."

"But the someone was you, Willy, I'm putting you in for a medal, you could have burned to death."

“Put someone else in for a medal, Sir, I’m not interested in all of that fuss,” he said, but I could see that he was both embarrassed and proud of the praise for his courage. We looked around as the yard supervisor came running up to us, a tubby, bald German railway worker who had undoubtedly been promoted several times above his abilities just because he was a civilian who had volunteered for service in Russia. He may have been brave, but his management skills were not in evidence.

“What are you men doing standing there idling? The rest of the Panzers need to be unloaded, you soldiers are all the same, lazy swines! Hurry up!”

The only sign that he had been involved was the sheen of sweat on his forehead and baldpate. Other than that his uniform was unmarked. I couldn’t help it, I swung at him and connected with his jaw, a punch that sent him sprawling to the ground. Mundt and I bent down to pick him back up and I put my face next to his.

“Listen to me you little piece of shit, while you were hiding from the air attack my men were fighting the fire and risking their lives to release the locomotive and begin unloading the tanks. You talk to another of my men like that and I’ll have you drafted into the SS and sent to the front.”

He tried to get away, I could feel him trembling, but we had a firm hold of him.

“Do you hear me, answer me?” I shouted.

“Yes, yes, my apologies.”

“Go away and do your job then.”

We released him and I gave him a push that almost sent him sprawling again. He regained his balance and walked hurriedly away.

“I’m not sure you should have done that, Sir,” Mundt said, but he was smiling.

“Nasty little bureaucrat, skulking in the rear areas is one thing but insulting the soldiers that do the fighting is another, it’s unacceptable. But I’m afraid he’s right in one respect, we do need to make better progress on unloading these tanks.”

We called the men to move the ramps to the next flatcar and continued with the heavy, backbreaking work of unloading the armour. At one stage we had a scare when we heard the roar of aero engines, but this time it was the Luftwaffe. I heard someone shout, “It’s about damned time. We never see them these days!”

The commander of a Tiger we were unloading leaned down. “It’s not

always their fault, they're short of everything. Pilots, aircraft, ammunition, everything! Petrol is the worst, we only have enough to drive these tanks fifty kilometres."

"You can't be serious? You'll barely get to the front with that amount of fuel, surely they're refuelling you before you deploy?"

He shrugged. "We hope so, but if not they'll have to drain the tanks of the more obsolete tanks to fill our own, it's getting critical."

"What are they doing with the petrol, I thought we had plenty of fuel?"

"We've never had plenty it's always been a problem for tanks and aircraft because we burn so much. We failed to take the Caucasus oilfields and apart from that small oilfield at Maikop we haven't had the success we needed in finding oil. They've even tried making synthetic fuel from coal, but it's not entirely successful, most of our shortfall is brought in from Romania. Even the Romanians are not so free with their supplies these days, they still blame the Fuhrer for leaving their troops in the lurch at Stalingrad."

"How will you cope in the coming offensive?"

"They'll bring in supplies from somewhere, I expect, they always do, but it will mean taking it from somewhere else where it's not needed as much."

Mundt grimaced. "What a way to fight a war. They can always use the Tigers as fixed artillery if they get desperate."

"If that becomes necessary, we ought to use the new Panther V tanks in that role," the commander laughed. "They've had problem after problem, they still haven't worked out how to stop the engines catching fire."

Mundt and I exchanged glances. The tanker was describing an army in chaos with massive shortages, unreliable armour and even now the Luftwaffe failed to defend the vital railhead. We worked on until the last of the Tigers was unloaded and finally went back to our HQ to find food in the cookhouse. There was silence while we ate, the combination of exhaustion after the efforts together with the terrible picture painted by the Tiger commander left us all dispirited. None of us wanted to say the unthinkable, that the war was at risk of being lost, here, in the smoking pyre of the Eastern Front. We'd seen massively increased numbers of Soviet aircraft overhead and more frequent absences of the Luftwaffe. We'd suffered from artillery barrages as the Russians moved nearer to our positions and our guns seemed incapable of sufficiently accurate counter battery fire to deal with them, and we'd seen the massive reinforcements of tanks and men that the Soviets were bringing into

the Kursk salient. Russia had rapidly become the most inhospitable, unwelcoming place on earth for us German soldiers, almost a graveyard. They could keep their Lebensraum, the living space that Adolf Hitler had espoused since the days of his book, Mein Kampf. They could keep their fields of wheat in the Ukraine, their oilfields and their massive mineral resources. We were coming to an end and a new mood of pessimism was sweeping through the German military. Even in our elite Waffen SS formations there were few who still believed that victory was possible. We could win an overwhelming victory in the Kursk salient, but if we didn't have enough petrol to drive on to Moscow, it would be a hollow victory indeed. But for most of us, the prospect of that victory was receding fast, it seemed that the best we could hope for was to minimise our losses. And what then? At that moment, I didn't believe many of us wanted to think the unthinkable.

I checked my watch, I had half an hour before we needed to drive to Kharkov for the first of our evening patrols with the funkwagen. I needed a clean uniform, we all stank of smoke, soot, coal and exhaust fumes. It would be uncomfortable spending the rest of the night like this, yet I'd used my only spare after von Meusebach's order to clean up. I'd have to manage with what I was wearing. We had no hot water so I stood naked in the yard at the back of the inn while Bauer played a cold stream of water on me from a hosepipe. I went back in feeling refreshed, although when I dressed in my dirty uniform I felt grimy again. At seven-thirty I joined Mundt, Bauer and Wesserman and we drove into Kharkov in the Kubelwagen with Bauer at the wheel. The city seemed ever more grey and dismal, even the bright spring evening couldn't add any lustre to the bomb damaged streets and buildings. There were soldiers everywhere, evidence of the build-up for the coming battle. We passed tanks, dozens of them, Tigers, Panthers and smaller, more obsolete models, most parked along the main streets as if their crews had driven them into the city for a shopping trip. We drove to the Gestapo Office and went around to the enclosed courtyard. The funkwagen was parked inside.

It was an Opel Blitz, normally used for transporting infantry and supplies, but this one had been converted to have a square, boxy cabin built on the back. On top of the cabin roof was a strange looking device, like a network of rods that had been assembled to make a giant frame. I knew the principle of how these things worked, the operator inside the cabin rotated the array on the roof, the stronger the radio signal the louder the tone heard inside the operator earphones. In this way he could guide the truck to the source of

the radio signal. There was no sign of von Betternich, but when I went back around the front of the building Wiedel was waiting in the foyer.

"Hoffman, excellent, are you all ready?"

"What do you want us to do, Wiedel?"

His rank of Kriminalkommissar was the Gestapo equivalent of my SS rank, Obersturmfuhrer, the correct mode of address to an officer of the same rank was to use the surname.

"Follow the truck, don't let it out of your sight but try to be a little discreet. If there is a chance to catch these bastards in the act, I'd like to take it. Listen, if you do manage to grab anyone I want them taken alive, do you understand? There are many questions that we would like to put to this traitor who is sending our secrets to the enemy."

"I'll do my best."

We went back around the building and into the courtyard. The crew of the funkwagen, the radio truck, were warming up their equipment, the engine was running and someone inside was doing something with the radio, periodically the aerial array rotated and we could hear strange crackling and squealing noises. The operator finally peered out of the door and looked at Wiedel.

"It's all functioning, Sir, if he transmits we'll get him."

"Very well, it's almost time, you may as well proceed."

We followed the radio truck in the Kubelwagen. It was a boring hour spent slowly following the lumbering truck as it attempted to sniff out the radio signals of an enemy spy. At the end of the hour we seemed to have seen every dingy back street in the city, every burnt out building, as well as numerous prostitutes lounging on the street corners waiting for trade. The funkwagen eventually drove back to Gestapo HQ and we parked nearby. The Kriminalassistent in charge of the radio came across to us.

"Not a whisper tonight, I'm afraid. We'll try again tomorrow, maybe we'll have better luck."

I nodded and wished him a good night. We climbed into the Kubelwagen and started out of the city back to Podvirky. We almost ran into a young woman who was stumbling along the road, Bauer halted the vehicle. At the last moment I had recognised Irina.

"Jurgen, thank God, I need you to help me!"

She was dishevelled, her face streaked with dirt and tears, her clothes obviously thrown on quickly as her coat wrongly buttoned.

“Irina, what’s wrong, why on earth are you running along the road at this time of night?”

“It’s my parents,” she said, “they have been arrested!”

“You mean the police?”

“No, it was an SS police unit, they called themselves Einsatzgruppe C.”

I felt a sense of foreboding. Most of us knew of the Einsatzgruppen and what we knew was nothing good. They were the very dark side of the SS and most of us in the Waffen SS wished that they wore a different uniform. This group was based in an old school close to Gestapo HQ, Kharkov.

“Irina, there’s nothing I can do tonight, you must get home. I’ll find out what is happening tomorrow and let you know. Please, go home now. We’ll give you a lift, you shouldn’t be out on your own on a dark country road.”

She nodded her agreement, climbed in and squeezed next to me. She held my hand tightly all the way back to her house, as she got out she looked at me with huge, damp eyes.

“Jurgen, please do what you can to get them out, they haven’t done anything wrong.”

I kissed her and promised to do my best, but as we drove back to Podvirky I had a feeling that it may not be enough.

On the way back we passed more lines of Panzers, assault guns and hundreds of support vehicles, limbers for the field guns, half-tracks, armoured reconnaissance vehicles, trucks and motorcycles. It seemed that every tracked and wheeled vehicle on the Eastern Front was here, waiting. I had no doubt that inside the Kursk salient the mechanised forces of the Red Army would be similarly prepared, together with their colossal reserves of infantry, minefields and tank traps that they were strengthening and extending every day. The men looked at them silently as we rolled past, the question on their minds the same as the question on the mind of every German soldier in this sector. When would we attack and why were we waiting when every day we waited was a gift to the Soviets?

# Chapter Four

*‘The enemy holds every trump card, covering all areas with long-range air patrols and using location methods against which we still have no warning. The enemy knows all our secrets and we know none of his’.*

I'd split the platoon for the night patrols so that we would at least get sleep on alternate nights whilst we were doubling up with escort duty for the Gestapo funkwagen. Mundt took the men out and got back in the early hours without incident. In the morning I found an excuse to go back into Kharkov, Bauer drove the Kubelwagen and I went to the Einsatzgruppe C building. When I walked in there was no sentry, not even anyone walking around the corridors. I heard voices coming from behind a closed door, knocked, and walked in. The Sturmbannfuhrer who sat behind the desk looked up, surprised to see a visitor. Two other soldiers were in the office, an Obersturmfuhrer and an NCO, a Scharfuhrer. I saluted.

"Sir, I've come to enquire about the parents of a friend of mine. Mr and Mrs Rakevsky, you arrested them yesterday."

He picked up a clipboard from his desk and looked through several sheets of paper. "Yes, that's correct, they were picked up in an anti-partisan sweep. What do you want to know?"

"It's a mistake. Their daughter has acted as a guide for my Waffen SS unit, taking us into enemy territory. The whole family are friends of the Third Reich, they are definitely not partisans."

He shrugged. "So? What do you expect me to do about it?"

The two other men both laughed, when I looked at them closer I could see they were very scruffy, unshaven and flabby, more like concentration camp guards than front line troops.

"What I'd like is for you to release them to my custody, Sir. I'll have a word with them, but as I say, they are not partisans."

He stood up, hands on hips, looking angry. "Look, Obersturmfuhrer, I don't know what kind of war you are fighting here, but our job is to deal ruthlessly with partisans. That means making arrests and carrying out sentences straight away. It's a hard, dirty, dangerous business and we don't mess around. As soon as we knock down one partisan unit, there's another one to be dealt with around the corner, so we have to move fast."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." There was something in his voice, the way he spoke, a kind of subtext, a hidden meaning.

"Then I'll make it clear to you. We arrested them for treason and sabotage. They were both shot an hour later. Was there anything else you wanted?"

“Shot? Are you sure?”

He sneered. “We always shoot traitors immediately, my friend. Why would we waste time on them?”

I walked out of their building in a daze. It was wrong, terribly wrong, but what could I do about it? I was close to Gestapo HQ, on an impulse I went inside. They showed me through to Kriminalkommissar Wiedel.

“Ah, Hoffman, no luck on the wireless detection?”

“Not yet, no. I’ve come to see you about Einsatzgruppe C.”

He looked up warily. “They’re not the best people to tangle with. What have they done now?”

I explained about Irina’s parents. “She helped us, guided my platoon across enemy lines, now this.”

“Hoffman, it’s way above my jurisdiction. The Einsatzgruppen were created under the direction of SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhardt Heydrich and they’re separate from the Gestapo, a different department. Since Heydrich's death, RSHA has kept tight control of them. Their principal task as you know is to deal with the Jews, gypsies, partisans and Soviet political commissars. The important thing for you to bear in mind is that they are Reichsfuhrer Himmler’s pet project. Nobody interferes with the Einsatzgruppen, nobody, they are almost a law unto themselves. Take my advice, leave this alone and get back to your unit.”

“But surely there is something...”

“You haven’t heard me,” he interrupted, “they cannot be controlled. Even the Gestapo or the SD can’t intervene, I’m afraid you just have to accept it, otherwise you’ll find yourself under arrest and put in a camp, or worse. Look, they’re both dead so forget it, go back to Podvirky.”

I got up and stormed out of his office. It wasn’t his fault. It was the fault of the whole, rotten Nazi system that I was fighting for.

We Germans were an advanced civilisation. We had music, philosophy, science and a world of culture behind us. Why were we allowing these murderers and thugs to blaze a trail of wanton death and destruction amongst the civilian population? Wasn’t it enough that we were fighting at the front, where at least it was soldiers fighting other soldiers? Did we have to go into innocent people’s homes, drag them out, and murder them? For one mad moment I thought about making a formal complaint to Reichsfuhrer Himmler, but I recalled the fate of others who had criticised the Reich. The concentration camps were full of them. Instead, I asked Bauer to drive to

Irina's house. She was at her home, still tearful and very pale.

"Jurgen, did you find anything out about my parents?"

I shook my head. "I did, yes, but it's not good, I'm so sorry!"

"You mean they have been sent to a camp?"

"No. No. They were shot."

She screamed with terrible anguish. Then she started beating me on the chest, punching me, she slapped me around the face. "You fucking Germans, you come here and invade my country, even when we try to help you all you can think to do is murder us. That is your culture, is it?"

"No, it is not, Irina, you should understand that..."

I didn't get any further.

"Get out, I never want to see you again! Don't come here! Don't ask for my help! Just go away. I hope the Russians come back and shoot you all. Go on, get out, now!"

Miserably I walked away, back to our Kubelwagen. Bauer gave me a sympathetic glance.

"Not good, Sir?"

"The worst it could possibly be, Stefan. Let's get back."

We returned to Podvirky and I spent the rest of the day numbly supervising the men as they helped unload more armour from the flatcars, as we unloaded crates of armour-piercing ammunition. A funkwagen lumbered up and Wiedel climbed out.

"Hoffman, I'm glad I caught you, this is our new truck, we're working with two vehicles tonight, can you bring your men in straight away, we've got a lot of work to do."

"Sorry, Wiedel, I can't do that. We're too busy here. Why not ask your friends in the Einsatzgruppe to help you?"

He smiled. "Still bitter, eh? You know there's nothing we could have done about it. But I need you in the city, here is the order from von Betternich." He handed me a document. "You will see that it gives him total authority over you and your platoon, you can show it to the CO if you wish, but make it quick."

He drove off. The men were watching me carefully.

"I wouldn't push the Gestapo too far, Sir," Mundt said. "They can be touchy bastards at times."

"I don't care, Scharfuhrer, they can do their worst as far as I'm concerned, they're all a bunch of crooked thugs."

“No doubt they are and I’m sure you don’t care. But we all have to be careful. Go easy on them.”

I found von Meusebach in his HQ building. Outside, a trooper was busy polishing his black Mercedes. He was inspecting the map on the wall. He nodded as I saluted.

“Well?”

I handed him the order that Wiedel had given me. “They want my platoon in the city now, Sir.”

He gave me a sharp look. “I can’t spare one of my platoons just on the Gestapo’s say so, Hoffman. Denied.” He tossed the letter aside.

“I believe it’s the Reichsfuhrer’s say so,” I replied, deadpan.

He looked at me suspiciously, snatched the letter up and reread it.

“I see. You’d better hurry then.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I gave him a perfect salute and walked out of the building. I was still angry at the way he’d altered my report to suggest that he had been in action. It was by no means unknown, senior officers taking credit for the actions of their juniors, but it was regarded with distaste by all ranks. I had other problems on my mind, though, Mundt was right. Whatever difficulty I had with the Gestapo, the SD or the Einsatzgruppen, I should be careful not to push them too far, they made dangerous enemies, much more so than the Soviets. We drove past the street where Irina lived and I felt even more miserable, but it was too late to do anything about it, they were dead and she hated me for it. When we reached Gestapo HQ both funkwagens were in the courtyard, both had their engines idling quietly. Von Betternich was talking to Wiedel, the two men walked over and I saluted.

“Hoffman, one of the funkwagens is going out north of the city, the other to the south, each will be stationed about ten kilometres away. Both trucks are in direct radio contact so if we do get a fix on a transmission we can pin the location down in seconds. Wiedel is in the northbound truck, can you send two of your men with him, we’ll go south and you can follow with your men.”

I detailed Mundt and Wesserman to go with Wiedel, they climbed into the back of the truck. I would go with Voss and Bauer in the Kubelwagen. We left the courtyard in convoy, when we reached the main crossing point next to Kharkov Central Square Wiedel’s truck peeled off and went north, we turned south. We drove out of the city and into the suburbs and then stopped

on top of a low hill. Von Betternich climbed out of the truck and I joined him.

"We need to triangulate his position from here, as soon as he starts to transmit we'll get our first fix and then start to drive into the city. Wiedel will be working on his own fix and will radio us when he has it, we mark it on the map and we have him."

I nodded and was about to join Bauer when he said, "Hoffman, I heard about the Einsatzgruppe, it was outside of our control, that problem with the girl's parents."

"It always is, I'm beginning to wonder who the real enemy is, Sir."

He stared at me coldly. "I suggest you keep that kind of thing to yourself." He looked up. "Ah, my radio operator is signalling, I think we may have some custom tonight."

He limped away and I went back to our Kubi. "Better get started, Stefan. They've got something coming in."

Von Betternich was waving and shouting at me and I went back over to the truck.

"Get in here, Hoffman, Wiedel has run into problems."

The operator passed me the headphones. I heard Wiedel's voice.

"We've run into the whole fucking Red Army, we're completely surrounded. Our truck crashed and overturned, I have two casualties, Scharfuhrer Mundt may have broken an ankle and my radio operator has broken legs and other injuries, neither is able to walk. We're at coordinates 50, 34, 66, please advise."

I looked at the large-scale map on the planning table. Von Betternich was already checking.

"I've found it here, a place called Velikyy Berlun," he said, pointing to spot on the map.

"But, that's behind Russian lines, they can't be there."

We checked the coordinates twice more, but it was inescapable. They were approximately five kilometres behind the Soviet front lines.

"Do you have any suggestions?" von Betternich asked me. For all of his police experience, he was out of his depth where front line operations were concerned.

"As far as I know, that area is occupied by Malinovski's 50th Army, there's something like twenty thousand men surrounding them. Perhaps surrender would be worthwhile considering."

“Surrender? An SS NCO and a Gestapo officer, you know what they’ll do to them?”

The Russians shot most Gestapo and SS captives on sight, just as we did with their commissars and partisans.

“You’re right, we’ll have to help them. I can take a team in to try and bring them out, but it won’t be easy.”

I was calculating how we’d manage to get two wounded men across the lines, men who were unable to walk, when von Betternich spoke again.

“Make the arrangements. Hoffman. I imagine using a Kubelwagen is out of the question, it’s going to be hard to get those injured men back?”

I smiled at him. “We wouldn’t even get past the front line in any kind of a vehicle. What is really needed, and we don’t have them, is horses. They can cross muddy ground at speed where nothing else can. Besides, if the Russians saw a cavalry unit moving they would assume it was their own Cossacks. However, in the absence of horses we’ll just have to manage, I’d better go and inform Standartenfuhrer von Meusebach that we’ll be crossing the line again.” I started to walk back to our Kubelwagen but he called out and stopped me.

“We do have horses, Hoffman. A company of Cossacks surrendered to us during the battle for Kharkov. We have their horses and equipment in a stable near here.”

I cursed myself for even mentioning horses. I’d intended it as an example of how the Soviets could move around in these awful conditions when we were usually stopped by soft, muddy ground. Even the Panzers bogged down on occasion.

“Well, Obersturmfuhrer, can you do it or not?”

“Let me see the horses. Bauer, Voss, you’d both better come with us.”

We drove back into the city. We walked along a lane behind the Gestapo building and across a small, shabby square. An old fountain, long dried up, stood in the centre. Two ancient Ukrainian women enjoying the sunny evening sat outside a small house in one corner of the square, watching us carefully. Von Betternich limped forward and led us to a narrow track between a shuttered, half-ruined hardware and agricultural shop and a government office, its windows now shattered and broken office furniture littering the ground outside. Ten metres down the track there was the unmistakeable odour of horse dung. He opened a side door and strode in. A startled Unterscharfuhrer leapt up and stood to attention.

“Relax, Wegener, we’re only here to look at the horses. Take us through, would you.”

Wegener took us down a narrow corridor and through a door into the stable, which was surprisingly large and clean, better than our quarters, I thought ruefully.

“The local communist party elite used this place to stable their horses before we arrived, so it’s got the best of everything. Plenty of room for the horses, the only roof in Russia that doesn’t leak and it has good drainage. What did you want, Sir?”

Von Betternich ignored him and we looked at the lines of animals. A Hiwi stood quietly grooming a magnificent chestnut brown Panje, it looked at me with mournful eyes. There were at least fifty horses in the stable, all were obviously well looked after and I wondered what they were used for. As if to read my mind the Unterscharfuhrer said, “They’ve been here for several weeks, they’re kept here for the Brass to use, you know, the Prussian officer types who miss riding around their country estates.”

“Well, what do you think?” von Betternich asked.

“They’re certainly fine looking animals. I don’t know, Voss, Bauer, either of you know anything about horses?”

I’d ridden horses when I was younger, many of us did, but what was being proposed now was something very different. Voss looked at me excitedly.

“I’ve done a fair bit of riding, Sir. They look like they’ll do the job.”

“Bauer, are you up to it?”

He nodded. “I’ve ridden a few horses, yes. There’s one problem, Sir, we haven’t a Russian speaker between us, it could make it difficult.”

“I speak Russian,” a voice said from behind us, we looked around. It was the Hiwi, a big, brawny man of about thirty-five. He had unkempt, wavy dark hair and a long, straggly beard that reminded me somewhat of the pictures of Rasputin. Grigori Rasputin was the Russian mystic who was perceived as having influenced the Emperor Nicholas II as well as his wife Alexandra and their only son Alexei. Rasputin had often been called the ‘Mad Monk’, while others considered him a ‘strannik’, a religious pilgrim as well as a psychic and faith healer. Maybe we could have done with the real Rasputin, we were definitely going to need some help to make a success of this foray behind the lines.

“Who are you?” I asked him. “A Russian?”

“My name is Felix Gusava, yes, I am Russian. I was conscripted into the Red Army, but I managed to escape and desert to your German army.”

“So you’ve no liking for Stalin’s regime, then, for Communism?”

He laughed. “For Stalin? I used to have a wife and two children. My wife tried to protest at the way some of her relations were treated. They were better-off peasants, you know, the Kulaks. They killed her.”

I nodded. According to the political theory of Marx, the Kulaks were class enemies of the poorer peasants and were described by Lenin as bloodsuckers, vampires, plunderers of the people and profiteers, who fatten on famine. Marxism dictated a revolution that would liberate poor peasants and farm labourers alongside the industrial workers. It meant that the planned economy of Soviet Bolshevism required the collectivisation of farms and land to allow industrialisation of large-scale agricultural production, farms owned by the Kulaks. Stalin had a simple way to remove any obstacle to his Communist revolution. Mass murder.

“What about your children?”

“Taken by the local Communist Party bosses, they sent them away and I was never able to find out where. All I am left with is my hate.”

I looked at Wegener. “Would you mind if I take your Hiwi, Unterscharfuhrer?”

“Not at all. Felix knows everything there is to know about horses, he will be valuable to you.”

“Well, can you do it, Hoffman?” von Betternich said. “I’d like to get my men out.”

“Yes, I’d like to get my own men out too. I’ll give it a go, but time is wasting, we need to get started straight away. There’ll be four of us and four men to bring out, Wiedel, Mundt, Wesserman and your radio operator.”

“His name is Heinrich Foch, he is one of the most skilful radio men on the Eastern Front, possibly in Germany. He is very valuable.”

“I’ll do my best. We’ll take ten horses, that’ll give us two spares if one or two goes lame, or gets shot. Felix, would you saddle up your ten best, quickest mounts.”

He nodded and went amongst the horses to start preparing them.

“We’ll need to let the Regiment know, Sturmbannfuhrer Muller, of course.”

“I’ll handle that when you’ve gone,” von Betternich said. “What else do you need?”

“Extra ammunition for our machine pistols, hand grenades, that’s about it. If we get into a running fight, we’re finished anyway. You’ll need to give Felix a sidearm, I notice he doesn’t have one.”

“Our policy is not to arm the Hiwis, Hoffman.”

“I don’t care. If he’s going to risk his life, he’ll need to be armed. He’ll also need a machine pistol.”

He nodded. “Anything else?”

“They’ll have first aid supplies with them on the truck?”

“Yes, they will.”

“In that case, we’ll take rations for two days, that’s about it. We need to get moving.”

Twenty minutes later we were saddled up and the horses were loaded with supplies, even a Cossack sabre was strapped to the side of one of the saddles. Felix Gusava, now armed with a Walther PP pistol and an MP40 machine pistol, had chosen well. We had ten horses in prime condition, their coats gleaming, whatever else failed us on the mission it would not be the horses. Felix had contrived to ride the horse with the sabre strapped to the saddle. Maybe he had some Cossack blood in him? Or perhaps he just wanted use it to hack a way through the Soviets. I’d need to watch him.

“I’ve requisitioned a motorcycle and sidecar to accompany you to the front, Hoffman. I’ll be coming that far, I’ve brought your documentation. I don’t want someone shooting at you before you even start.”

I grinned at the thought of the SD man riding a motorcycle, but when the BMW R75 drew up he took the offered waterproof coat from the rider, buttoned himself into it, donned his steel helmet, and sat in the sidecar behind the machine gun. He looked at me and I nodded. He shouted to the motorcycle rider, “Let’s go.”

It was a hectic journey out through the suburbs of Kharkov and through the darkened countryside until we reached the front, the motorcycle kept the speed down but we still needed to canter the horses to keep up. A sentry stopped us and von Betternich showed him our papers. He waved us through and we found ourselves in a muddy farmyard. Two Wehrmacht officers came out of the farmhouse to meet us.

“We’re from the Two Hundred and Fifty Fifth Infantry Division, this is Leutnant Moer and I’m Major Klement. We’re scouting the area to look for potential attack routes for the Panzers. As far as we know there are no significant troop formations nearby.”

We shook hands. “What about insignificant troop formations?” I asked them.

He smiled. “None, as far as we know.”

“Very well, we’ll go straight across. We’d better lead the horses on foot for the first stage, we can feel our way over and avoid any obvious problems.”

“Good luck, Hoffman,” von Betternich shook my hand.

I nodded. “We’ll do our best.”

I let Gusava lead the way. I’d forbidden them from wearing their helmets, or even carrying them, so as not to immediately give us away. Even so, a sentry that failed to recognise who we were would have to be blind, but it would perhaps give us a few seconds edge while they made up their minds. The horses snorted occasionally that could easily have alerted a Soviet sentry, but we hit no problems and no one challenged us. Once I judged we were well behind the lines we mounted the horses and rode towards our objective, the crashed funkwagen. We rode along a muddy track, the mud was about twenty centimetres deep and our horses were perfect for traversing its entire length, about three kilometres. At the end of the track we saw lights ahead, obviously an encampment and we dismounted and led the horses quietly in a wide circle away from the tents. Even had they heard us, it would be as I’d said, they would assume that it was one of their own patrolling Cossack units. We stayed off the track now, besides, there looked to be a whole army camped nearby. We could see hundred of tents, lines and lines of tanks, scores of trucks, obviously it was a combined arms unit which the Soviets used increasingly in this campaign. Instead of as our Panzer Grenadiers, some of their units relied on tank riders, troops who held on to purpose-built handholds on the T34s to ride into battle. I wasn’t sure about the soundness of their philosophy, apart from becoming a target for enemy anti-tank fire, the T34s carried drums of diesel fuel on the tops of their hulls. When one of our shells hit the fuel the men were instantly transformed into flaming pyres, often the tank was destroyed too. Still, the Soviets seemed to have unlimited replacements and little regard for the lives of their soldiers, so they could get away with it. As well as the T34s and their tank riders, they combined motorised infantry to keep pace with the armour and units of anti-tank guns and artillery, all designed to fight and move as one unit.

I checked my bearings with the compass I carried and risked the torch to take a quick look at the map in my saddlebag. We were going in the right

direction, the crash site about a kilometre away. We remounted the horses and trotted away along a smooth path of hard packed mud, the going was much easier until a sentry stepped out into our path and shouted something, presumably in Russian. I was about to give an order to take him when Gusava spurred forward calling out something in his language. The sentry answered but as he spoke, Felix ripped out the sabre and in one huge, wide slash brought it down across the sentry's neck, almost decapitating him. He didn't stop, just slowed his horse slightly as he kicked the dead man into the long grass at the side of the path. I said nothing. It was quick, neat and brutal. Five minutes later we arrived at the map coordinates, at first we saw nothing. A little further on the funkwagen lay upside down at the bottom of a shallow ravine. I signalled them to dismount.

"Felix, you'd better take care of the horses, the rest of you, make sure your weapons are ready in case it's a Soviet trap."

I cocked the bolt of my MP38 and led the way to the edge of the ravine. At first there was no sign of any life. Had the Reds captured them? Was a machine gun about to open fire and spray us with machine gun bullets?"

"Hoffman?" a voice whispered.

I recognised Wiedel's voice as he walked up to us.

"Are you all ok?"

"So far, yes, we've had a few near misses but no one has seen us yet. Am I seeing things or have you come on horseback?"

"We've formed a Cossack unit of the SS, Wiedel. We've got horses for all of you, we need to get you in the saddle and start moving back to our own lines."

"We'll need a hand with Mundt and Foch, they're sheltering in a small farmhouse behind those trees. I didn't want to leave them with the truck in case the Soviets found it, they'd hack them to pieces."

I thought of Felix Gusava hacking the sentry out of his path. "Yes, they probably would."

I sent Bauer and Voss to help, made certain that Gusava was keeping a good watch and then we followed them to look at the injured men.

We went around the edge of the ravine, pushed along a narrow path through a small wood and there stood a farmhouse. Its roof missing, we walked through the open door space. A man in the uniform of the SD lay on the ground, his legs tied between pieces of wood, Voss and Wesserman were trying to help him get to his feet. Mundt lay there, his ankle swathed in torn

rags that someone had torn up to bind his ankle. A girl was bending over him, giving him a drink of water. When she stood up I saw that she was quite short, petite and pretty, what people would describe as gamine. Unlike many Russian women I'd seen who tended to be taller, stouter and tougher, perhaps to survive their terrible winters. I looked at Wiedel with raised eyebrows.

"It's ok, Hoffman, she's helping us."

"Is she Russian?"

"She is, yes, but she's definitely not a Red."

"How can you be sure?"

He smiled. "Her name is Nadia Vlasov, she was trapped here when the Red Army arrived. Is the name familiar?"

I shook my head.

"Her uncle is Andriy Vlasov. Lieutenant-General Andriy Vlasov. After his army was surrounded in July last year, Stalin insisted that he should escape by aeroplane. The General refused and hid in German-occupied territory, but a local farmer betrayed him to our troops. General Georg Lindemann interrogated him and then had Vlasov imprisoned in Vinnitsa, but Vlasov claimed that he was totally opposed to the Bolsheviks and believed that Stalin was the greatest enemy of the Russian people, so they let him go. You can imagine how that went down!"

"Jesus Christ, they must have gone crazy in Moscow."

"They did all of that. We're talking to Vlasov about forming a Free Russian Army, although I don't know if anything will come of it. But if they get their hands on his niece it won't be very pretty."

"Yes, they'll execute her, it's the way the Communists punish traitors, by murdering the relatives."

I didn't add that our own Nazi leaders operated a similar policy.

I left him and looked at Mundt, he seemed cheerful enough.

"Did I hear something about horses, Sir?" he asked me.

I nodded. "The mud is still pretty bad, horses are about the only thing that can move with any freedom."

"For invalids with broken ankles and legs, you mean."

I smiled. "That's true, but they saved us a long walk to come and get you."

"Getting out may not be so easy, Sir."

"They don't know we're here, so provided we move fast, we can be out before they realise."

I stood up and looked at Wiedel.

“What do you plan to do about the girl?”

“She comes with us, of course. If we leave her for the Russians, they’ll kill her, or use her as a bargaining chip. Besides, Vlasov would never forgive us if he found out we’d left her. Have you brought spare horses?”

I nodded. “We brought two extras, so no problems there. We need to get moving, we haven’t much time.”

I got up and asked Bauer to bring the horses around to the farmhouse. Ten minutes later he was back with our mounts. We got Mundt onto one of the horses and Foch to another, his broken legs would be useless with stirrups so we fastened him down with straps and told him to hang on. If he fell off he risked a compound fracture, but if we didn’t get him out of here he risked rather more, a Soviet bullet and a shallow grave at best. The rest of us mounted up and headed back towards the German lines.

Perhaps it was the noise of our horses hooves that prevented us from hearing them, but halfway back we ran into the worst possible foe, a genuine Cossack squadron. They came on us suddenly out of the darkness, one moment we were alone on the desolate plain that led west. At first they didn’t recognise us and one of the leading horsemen shouted to Gusava , who replied in Russian. The Cossack acknowledged and they were about to go past when one of them looked closer, recognised our uniforms and opened his mouth to shout. We were lucky as they had their rifles slung, not expecting trouble. We had our machine pistols ready, I pulled the trigger and the first two horsemen were thrown off their horses in the hail of 9mm bullets. There were fourteen others, if they’d turned tail and ran they would have survived and brought reinforcements, but they were Cossacks. One of them shouted a single word of command, as one man they whipped out their long, wicked sabres and charged us. It was slaughter as we were armed with semi-automatic weapons. Despite the speed and ferocity of their assault we hammered at them with our six machine pistols, a hail of lead that plucked them from their saddles and hurled them to the ground. Only two were left unscathed, they had been at the rear of the charge but were almost on us, my MP38 was empty but I drew my Walther PPK and fired, emptying the clip at the two Russians, Gusava fired too. One of them fell, the other flinched, wounded, but rode on towards us. I tugged at the reins to move my horse out of his path but abruptly I was shoved aside as another horse charged forward, Felix Gusava, sabre drawn and raised to parry the Cossack’s blade. The

sabres struck with a clang and a shower of sparks, the two riders circled each other, swords whirling and clashing together as each tried to gain the advantage. I reloaded and heard the clicks as the rest of the men put fresh clips into their weapons, but strangely we sat on our horses and watched the epic struggle.

It was like being transported back to the last century, to the time when Napoleon's elite cavalry swept all before them on the battlefields of Europe before the English Duke of Wellington and our own Prussian Marshal Blucher finished the French Emperor's dreams for the last time. On the field of Waterloo sabre fought with sabre, and so it was on this dark, miserable Ukrainian field. Gusava was clearly outclassed, fighting more with savage ferocity and hate than any real skill. The Cossack was a disciplined and trained swordsman, but his horse suddenly stumbled, probably in a rut created by a tank track, and in order to regain his balance he dropped his guard for less than a second. It was enough, as he was bringing his sabre up again to slash as Gusava struck, using the point to skewer him low in the guts, just above his groin. The man screamed in agony, and then slowly toppled from his horse. Gusava leapt off and stood over him, then hacked down on his neck finishing him. Voss clapped ironically.

"A good kill, Russian, but couldn't you just have shot him?"

"It was a Cossack that killed my wife with a sabre, I wanted to give him a taste of what she had."

"That's enough," I said to them urgently, "We've made a hell of a lot of noise, they'll be around here shortly to check it out. Let's move, and fast!"

I forced the pace hard, taking the lead away from Gusava. If we ran into any Russians now, it was too late for talking. We hurtled across the Soviet-held countryside. Perhaps the only thing that saved us was that no one would believe that anyone other than a Cossack unit would be on horseback in this area. At one stage, as we were crossing a patch of open terrain and moving into a small forest, someone shouted. I twisted to the side and saw that we were riding adjacent to the edge of a Soviet encampment, but no shots were fired. It was impossible to tell when we crossed the lines but suddenly we were clattering into the farmyard, von Betternich stood next to the BMW motorcycle and sidecar and watching us come in. The motorcyclist was standing next to him and both had their pistols out, as if they would have been of any use had we been a real Cossack raiding party. Behind them were two of our military ambulances. Von Betternich had obviously been busy.

We dismounted and shook hands. While the men were helping the two casualties down from the horses he greeted Wiedel, then looked questioningly at Nadia Vlasov. The Gestapo man explained her presence and he nodded his agreement.

"But how the hell did you wind up in Soviet territory, Wiedel?"

"It was my fault," he said with a grimace. "Our driver felt ill and I said I'd drive, but I took a wrong turning. Before I realised what was happening, we were already behind the lines and a Soviet unit had manoeuvred in behind us. I just drove on hoping to circle around and get back. Then we ran into that damned ravine. Fortunately Miss Vlasov was there to help us, and of course our radio was undamaged so we were able to call for help."

We watched one of the ambulances drive away with the casualties.

"This doesn't help us find the Lucy spy ring, Wiedel. Now we're short of a truck. Do you have any ideas?"

He shook his head.

"Damnit, we're back to square one," von Betternich sighed.

"Look, Sir, I don't understand this," I said to him. "The Russians are waiting for us in strength, probably in far greater numbers than we can ever hope to have. Isn't it folly to continue with the attack? I know about the military advantages of taking the salient, but it seems to me that they must be outweighed by the massive numerical superiority that the Russians have got over us."

He smiled. "There may be something in what you say, Hoffman. But you see, the Fuhrer does not think so. Look on the bright side, if we can find the spy it will mean that we can change our deployments and hit them where they least expect it, that way we could defeat several Soviet armies if we can only surprise them. It's still possible."

He seemed to be thinking about something else, his mind obviously far away.

"Yes, perhaps we can do this in a different way. We need to find accommodation for Miss Vlasov. Wiedel, put her up in the Hotel October."

He nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"That radio code that the Soviets were able to break, do you still use it to spread false information?"

"We do, yes."

"Good. We'll send a message from von Manstein's headquarters, advising that Miss Vlasov has been accommodated in the Hotel October, use

that code so that we know they will hear it. Perhaps that will lure them to us."

They both smiled, two arch-conspirators satisfied with their dark scheme.

"Wiedel, when get back to Kharkov set up the ambush at the hotel, if we're lucky they'll fall into our laps. Make sure you capture them alive when they come to kill her. We might just get a lead from them to Lucy if we can find out how they get the information passed to them."

I couldn't help but overhear. "You're using an unarmed civilian as bait, what about Nadia Vlasov, she could be killed?"

The SD man shrugged. "What about it? When Vlasov finds out that the Soviets have murdered his niece he'll have even more of an incentive to fight for us."

I went to the second ambulance and told the driver to follow us back to the city, then ordered Voss and Wesserman to go with him. Gusava led the horses away and I climbed into the back seat of the Kubelwagen with Nadia. Bauer got in the front with Wiedel beside him and drove off, the ambulance pulled away behind us.

"You heard that you are to be billeted in the Hotel October?" I asked Nadia quietly.

"I heard it all, Obersturmfuhrer. I hope they catch the people they are looking for."

I was quiet for a few moments. Then I leaned nearer and said, "They'll do their best to protect you, I'm sure. I'm sorry, it wasn't my idea."

She smiled tiredly. "You know, when they came to our town, the Communists, they arrested many of our people, most of them Kulaks. I was young then, but my father was in command of a company of the Red Army. Our neighbours were arrested and marched towards the station to get on a train bound for Siberia. You know what that means, the Gulags?"

I nodded.

"They saw my father, his company were also at the railway station, they were there to prevent any trouble, any riots or demonstrations. Our neighbours saw him and the wife ran across to speak to him, she begged him to help, at least to spare their children, there were four of them, the youngest was only four years old. Do you know what he replied?"

I shook my head.

"He said, 'I'm sorry, it wasn't my idea'. You reminded me of him, please, spare me your false sympathy and spare me your help. I will protect

myself. ”

I looked at her in surprise. “Are you armed, Miss Vlasov?”

“Yes, I have a pistol hidden in my jacket. Is that a problem for you?” she asked fiercely.

“No, it’s no problem.”

She’d obviously been through a lot and was undoubtedly a survivor. Perhaps she would best the Russians if they did come to kill her, maybe she didn’t need protection. But I looked at her again, a small, almost childish figure of a young woman, if Russian partisans or Special Forces attacked she’d stand no chance. It was a bitter pill and I found it very, very hard to swallow.

As we drove back the Panzers, the assault guns, the trucks and field guns were in the same places and still hadn’t moved. Troops were all around, casually doing routine maintenance tasks, there was no urgency. I’d noticed in the salient that the whole of the ground was cut up with the distinctive marks of tank tracks and wheel ruts, it was obvious that the Red Army was not taking the same relaxed attitude to the coming offensive. I felt that I wanted to drag out the commanders and shout at them, tell them what they faced the other side and how it was getting worse with every day that they delayed. But of course, without the order from von Manstein they were going nowhere. And the Feldmarschal couldn’t give the order until he himself received the order from the Fuhrer. And Hitler would not give the order, certain in his superior knowledge of strategy and tactics, knowledge that seemingly he alone possessed, or believed he did. It was as if the Soviets did not exist, that our armies were positioned here like some ancient mariner, fearful of crossing into uncharted waters where all that was marked on his map was ‘There be monsters’. It was an apt analogy. There certainly were monsters only a few kilometres away, monsters that grew bigger and more powerful with every day that passed.

# Chapter Five

*'The officers of a panzer division must learn to think and act independently within the framework of the general plan and not wait until they receive orders'.*

*Erwin Rommel*

“Damnit, Hoffman, I’m not happy about you wandering off without permission!”

I was standing in von Meusebach’s office, he was distinctly unhappy. Muller stood behind him, fixing me with a sympathetic glare.

“I’m sorry, Sir.”

This was the SS, excuses were worthless, obey orders and win battles, that was all that mattered. Except that we hadn’t won the battle yet, the battle that would be fought around Kursk. Von Meusebach had the order from Himmler, however, and he couldn’t go too far with his criticism for fear that it may be construed as criticism of the Reichsfuhrer. He suddenly looked thoughtful.

“Hoffman, I understand you did a good job for the Gestapo and of course you rescued the men that their stupidity had put them behind the lines. Perhaps you would like to transfer to the Gestapo if you prefer working for them, I could sign a recommendation?”

He was clever, he could achieve more with a stroke of his pen than my platoon could achieve with their machine pistols.

“No, Sir, I don’t wish to transfer.”

“Very well, in future keep me advised of every move you make.” He’d evidently decided he’d pushed me hard enough. After all, the order from Himmler was not to be taken too lightly. “Look, Hoffman, you’ve had a difficult time. You should catch up with some sleep, report to Muller later, dismissed.”

I saluted and left the office. Bloody SD, bloody Gestapo, bloody von Meusebach, and their silly games! I did as he suggested and went to my quarters. Fully dressed I tried to get some sleep, but it was impossible, the noise from tanks being offloaded, troops marching, orders being shouted and the thousand and one other sounds that are part of an army preparing to go into battle were everywhere. I dozed for two hours and then got up and put my head under the cold-water pump outside our isba. I was thinking about Nadia Vlasov, the beautiful, enigmatic Russian girl that was being offered by the Gestapo as a sacrifice. When I went back inside I found Voss and Wesserman had woken up and were brewing coffee, apparently they’d been unable to sleep much either.

“Are we on radio truck duty tonight?” Voss asked.

I realised that I’d no idea what they had planned for us. They still had one intact funkwagen after all.

“We’d better go into the city and find out, Oberschutze.”

It would be a good excuse to get away from the squalor and misery of the stinking, noisy railway yard. We still had the Kubelwagen parked outside and Podvirky was getting on our nerves. There was nothing here except grime, noise and von Meusebach. Kharkov, for all its war damage, shabby populace and dirty streets at least offered something more than this stinking backwater. We drove into the city and parked outside Gestapo HQ. I left the men with the vehicle, there was no sign of von Betternich but Wiedel was in his office. He looked up in surprise when I walked in.

“I was going to send a messenger for you later. You’ve only been back a few hours, couldn’t you sleep?”

“Not next door to a railway marshalling yard unloading Tiger tanks, no. Are we needed tonight for the funkwagen?”

“No, we have something different planned. Von Betternich has driven to Vinnitsa, the headquarters of Army Group South. He is sending the message about Miss Vlasov’s whereabouts, so if they make a move on her, we’ll be ready for them. How many soldiers can you muster in your platoon?”

With Mundt injured I was down to eleven men. He was surprised. “So few? I thought platoon strength would be much higher.”

I grimaced. “Not since they’ve been pulling men out of regular units to form the new divisions, we’re all desperately short of men.”

He nodded. “In that case, we’ll have to manage. Do you need an order for your CO?”

I smiled. “I think the Standartenfuhrer would appreciate that, Wiedel.”

He wrote out the Gestapo form, handed me the order. “Hoffman, it’s important that we catch these people alive.”

“If they come,” I replied.

“We think they will. Stalin is reported to be incandescent about Vlasov’s treachery, whoever manages to kill or kidnap his niece will certainly get into his favour, they’ll jump at the chance. Remember, we’re not worried about the girl. It’s the Russians we want. We can interrogate them and find out where their orders came from and it should lead us to the spy.”

“I’ll remember.”

I walked out of his office, determined that whatever happened, I’d do my utmost to protect the girl.

I decided to stay in the city so I sent Voss and Wesserman back to Podvirky with the order for von Meusebach.

“I want the platoon back here by five o’clock,” I told Voss. “If you can’t find transport, they’ll have to march here. Just be at Gestapo HQ for five.”

They drove off in the Kubi, I had only one destination in mind. I walked into the centre of the city and got directions for the Hotel October. When I walked through the entrance, the clerk looked up and glanced at me with disdain. I caught sight of my reflection in a mirror behind the desk. I looked like a gypsy.

“I’m sorry, we’re full.”

“I’m looking for Miss Vlasov, she is a guest here I believe.”

“Miss Vlasov, yes, she checked in this morning. I have a request not to disturb her until two o’clock. She is in room 412.”

“I’ll call back.”

I left and found a bar opposite the hotel where I was able to sit at the counter and get coffee and a bowl of thin soup. I was starving hungry, as I hadn’t eaten much in what seemed like days. Four Wehrmacht officers came in, sat down at a table and started drinking heavily. Before long they were making jokes about the SS, ‘Himmler’s toy soldiers, where were they when they were needed at Stalingrad?’ One of them came up to the bar and leered at me, I just ignored him and carried on eating my stew.

“Are you lot going to disappear again when the Reds come to attack Kharkov?” he snarled.

I looked at him in amazement, wasn’t he aware that it was the SS that had retaken the city and not the Wehrmacht?

“Sergeant, just take your drink and go back to your table before you get into trouble.”

He didn’t move. His face was only ten centimetres from mine now.

“Are you going to make me, SS man?”

He smiled broadly and put a hand on my chest as if to push be backwards off my stool. There was no choice, I punched him hard on the chin and he spun to the floor. His friends jumped up and ran to help him up.

“Are you ok, Werner?”

“I will be when we knock this SS bastard’s head off. Let’s get the swine.”

All four of them jumped me and although I struck out in all directions with my fists and boots, I went down under a hail of blows. As a boot kicked me in the head I took hold of it and twisted it, sending the soldier sprawling to the floor. He landed next to me and I punched him in the face for good

measure, but there were still three of them doing their best to beat me to a pulp. I kept lashing out, but it was a losing battle and I felt my consciousness starting to fade. I was desperate to find some way out of this bar room brawl but my strength was draining fast. I had given up all hope of getting out of it in one piece when a shot rang out and the boots kicking me abruptly ceased. I shook my head to clear it and tried to look up, but my vision still blurred.

"Gestapo, what's going on here?"

I recognised the voice. Wiedel. My vision finally cleared and I could see him standing there, leather coat, trilby hat, Walther PPK in one hand, his metal Gestapo identification disc in the other. The NCOs started to protest that I'd set on them. Wiedel looked at them coldly. "Get out and don't come back. You're lucky I don't have you all arrested. This bar is now off limits to all of you. Now go!"

The one I'd hit, Werner, started to protest but Wiedel held up his hand. "If you wish to discuss it, come down to Gestapo Headquarters and you can file a complaint."

He looked at his friends, they were obviously keen to avoid the Gestapo and he took the hint and left.

"How the hell did you find me?"

"The clerk at the Hotel October saw you come in here. We need to set up this ambush for later, where is your platoon?"

I told him that they had been ordered to report to Gestapo HQ in the afternoon.

"Very well, we'll go over to the hotel and speak to Miss Vlasov. How are you, by the way, did they do any permanent damage?"

I smiled. "Nothing I can't live with. By the way, I tried to visit Miss Vlasov earlier, she's not to be disturbed by anyone until two o'clock."

"This is Gestapo business, she'll see me."

We walked across to the hotel where the receptionist was still behind the counter in the dingy lobby. Wiedel stared at him. "I want a room opposite Miss Vlasov's room."

The man held out his hands in an exasperated expression. "We're full up, the room opposite it occupied."

The Gestapo man stared at him for a few moments. When he spoke his voice was as icy as the Russian winter. "I'm not interested in who is in the room, get them out and give me the key, you have twenty minutes! Move!"

The receptionist looked shocked, but Wiedel reached across the counter,

took him by the jacket and dragged him towards him. “If I see you still standing there in five seconds I’ll put you in a Gestapo cell.”

The man ran towards the stairs, we followed him and climbed up four flights, the lift was not working as usual, Wiedel banged on Nadia’s door. It took five minutes of heavy knocking, but she came to the door looking dishevelled and frightened. He pushed past her. “We need to check the security in this room, are there any other entrances?”

“Of course not, only the window.”

“Hoffman, check outside the window, make sure there are no convenient fire escapes or drainpipes they can use.”

I opened the window and looked out, it would need a ladder to climb up the sheer side of the building. There was a knock at the door and I drew my Walther and opened it, but it was only the clerk with the key to the room opposite.

Six hours later I was ready with the rest of my platoon. Von Betternich had returned in the afternoon, he told us that the message had been sent and he confidently expected the Russians to take the bait.

“This damned Lucy ring is so fast that they often get messages out to Moscow even before our own local commanders receive them. The fake signal states that she will be here for one night only and then we are sending her back to the Reich to join her uncle, General Vlasov. If they’re going to try anything, it will have to be tonight.”

The platoon arrived during the late afternoon and I assigned them to their positions. Six of them were in the room opposite, under the command of Unterscharfuhrer Beidenberg. They were the arrest squad. Two were dressed in hotel uniforms and played the role of porters and bellhops. The other three were in the room with me and Nadia Vlasov, Voss, Bauer and Wesserman. Nadia sat in the corner of the room looking bored and miserable. I kept peering through cracks in the curtains, but there was no sign of enemy activity. The door knocked and someone shouted ‘room service’, the men hurriedly picked up their machine pistols but I told them to relax, I’d recognised Schutze Vellermann’s voice. I opened the door warily.

“I thought you might like some refreshments,” he said cheerily. He was pushing a trolley loaded with an urn of coffee and a huge plate of sandwiches.

“Bring them in, Schutze, you’re a lifesaver.”

We sat contentedly eating our unexpected meal, I asked Nadia to join us

but she declined, just sitting quietly in the corner. Was she afraid of what was to happen? She was clutching her bag to her stomach and her pistol would certainly be inside it. Hopefully she wouldn't have to use it. The evening wore on and the night was pitch black, with no moonlight to give us a good view of anyone approaching the hotel. By midnight we were all starting to feel very tired and bored, it was difficult to stay awake. The hotel was utterly silent which is why I was able to hear the faint squeak of a loose floorboard.

"They're here," I whispered.

They held their weapons ready, pointed at the door.

"Only shoot if it's unavoidable, remember, we want them alive. Nadia, get behind the bed."

She ignored me and pulled her pistol out of her bag, cocked it and waited. I shrugged, if that's the way she wanted to play it she could carry on, it was her they'd come to kill. We heard the door opposite fly open and Beidenberg's voice shouting at them to surrender, and then there was an explosion and a burst of automatic fire. Men screamed. I couldn't tell who they were and then another explosion shattered the night.

"They're using grenades, our men opposite are probably outgunned. It's time we joined in. Bauer, guard Miss Vlasov, you other two be ready when I open the door. If you have to shoot, aim low, we want prisoners."

Voss and Wesserman pointed their MP38s at the door of the room. I looked at them and they nodded. Then I ripped the door open in one savage motion.

Two Russians stood in the corridor, each holding a PPSh machine pistol. The third was kneeling down, about to attach some kind of charge to the door of our room. The first two men raised their weapons as soon as they saw us, but Voss and Wesserman were ready. They totally ignored my instruction to aim low and both of the enemy went down in a hail of bullets. They were obviously finished, the third man had his weapon on the floor while he was working at the door, he whirled to pick it up and I launched myself at him, knocking him over and away from the PPSh. He punched me in the stomach, a hard blow that knocked the wind out of me but I brought my legs up and kneed him hard in the crotch. He screamed in agony and I took the opportunity to punch him hard on the nose, there was a crack as his nose broke and blood streamed out, but he wasn't beaten, he rolled to one side, grasping for his pistol in its holster on his belt. I'd dropped my machine pistol when I dived for him, my own pistol was in its holster and there was no

time to get it out before he opened fire. It was as if in slow motion, I saw him whip up the pistol, even saw his finger tightening on the trigger, then Beidenberg rushed out of the room and knocked his hand to one side, sending the shot into the wall. The Unterscharfuhrer gripped the man's arm and twisted it behind him, up to his shoulder blade and even further until with a loud crack it dislocated. The man screamed again, Voss and Wesserman rushed out and held him and I got up, retrieved my machine pistol and looked around at the carnage. The first two Russians were dead. Inside the opposite hotel room two of my troopers had been killed, caught in the grenade blasts. A third man was lying on the floor, bleeding from a stomach wound, I bent down to look closely but it did not appear to be deep. I took out a field addressing and applied it to the wound to stop him bleeding to death.

"That'll do you for now, I'll get the medics up here quickly, you'll be ok," I said to him soothingly.

He nodded his thanks and I went back out to look around. Schutze Vellermann was walking warily towards me, his weapon pointed ready to fire.

"I was in the stair well, one floor up when I heard the shooting, Sir. I can't see any more of them."

"Very well, go to the end of the corridor and make sure no one else gets past, unless they're ours, if anyone tries it. Shoot them! Before you do anything else, call for a medic, we've got some men down in here."

He nodded and walked quickly away. I checked out our prisoner, he looked like a partisan in shabby civilian clothes, dungarees and a torn jacket, but underneath he gave me the impression of being hard and fit.

"Bring him into the room, let's see what he has to say before the Gestapo gets here. You'd better search him for documents and weapons."

He carried no papers other than an old, expired Russian pass bearing the name of Vasily Chernenko. He looked annoyed when they found the piece of paper in an inside pocket of his coat, he obviously hadn't meant to have it on his person.

"So, Vasily, do you speak German?"

His eyes flicked in recognition of what I'd said and I assumed he understood well enough.

"Who told you that Miss Vlasov would be here?"

He didn't answer. But when Nadia stood up his eyes widened with hatred.

“Vasily,” she shouted. “You came to kill me?”

“As I kill all traitors to the motherland.”

“You know him?” I asked her.

“Yes, he was one of my uncle’s sergeants, I thought he was loyal. Vasily, you know that it was not me that joined with the Nazis.”

“That is not the way I heard it,” he said viciously. “The NKVD has evidence that you were complicit in an attempt to persuade more of our troops to desert.”

“That’s nonsense,” she cried. “Those bastards, they twist everything!”

I took hold of his wounded arm and he winced as it moved slightly against the torn shoulder joint.

“Tell us how you got the message, Vasily. We know about the radio.”

He looked away abruptly, avoiding eye contact.

“Where do the messages come from?” I persisted.

He refused to look back at me, even when I twisted his arm and saw beads of sweat running down the side of his face. But I couldn’t do any more to him, torture was the Gestapo’s province, not mine.

Almost as if they’d heard my thought, Wiedel appeared at the end of the corridor. Von Betternich was behind him, limping painfully along after the climb up four flights of stairs. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction when they saw the prisoner.

“Excellent, Hoffman, well done. Is he the only one to survive?”

I nodded.

“He’ll do, bring him along to Gestapo Headquarters. We’ll have a talk to him there.”

“Sir, Miss Vlasov is unhurt.”

He looked puzzled. “Really? So we could use her again, that’s interesting.”

He looked around at the battle damage for a few more moments and then turned away limping back to the stairs, Wiedel followed him. I detailed two men to take the Russian with them. A group of medics appeared with stretchers and our casualties were carried away.

“Voss, Bauer, you’d better station yourselves outside the room for the rest of the night. I’ll take the men back to Podvirky, I think the excitement is over for the night. I’ll send transport for you in the morning. I went to walk away but Nadia Vlasov walked over and put her hand on my arm.

“Obersturmfuhrer, thank you for protecting me. Can you not stay for the

rest of the night? I fear there could be a further attack."

"I need to get the men back to their post in Podvirky, you'll be fine with these two men to guard you."

She looked disappointed. "I see, again, thank you."

On an impulse, I said, "I'll come sometime tomorrow and make sure you are safe."

She flashed me a small smile. "I would like that."

I glared at Voss and Bauer who were grinning like imbeciles. "Shouldn't you two be in the corridor, setting up a guard post?"

"Yes, at once, Obersturmfuhrer."

They sauntered through the door.

I assembled the rest of the men and took my depleted platoon outside the hotel to walk back to Gestapo HQ to collect the Kubelwagen. The night was still black and very quiet, all I could hear was the tramp of our jackboots on the cobbles, but something caught my eye, just a flash of movement, possibly innocent but it was as if we'd appeared unexpectedly and someone had responded in a panic. More partisans?

"Beidenberg, Wesserman, I think I saw something, that cottage over there."

I pointed to a small house set back from the main street. They nodded and we rushed over to the front door, giving each other cover as we went forward. The windows were shuttered, I wasn't certain what I'd seen, perhaps someone leaving in a hurry. Wesserman and I covered the door with our weapons, Beidenberg kicked it in and we rushed inside. It was a stinking, dirty peasant dwelling, there was a smell of something in the air, I sniffed and said, "It's lamp oil. Someone light a match and see where the lamp is."

There was the scratch of a match striking, dimly illuminating the room. Wesserman saw the lamp immediately lit it. The whole room was alight now, a filthy hovel with a bundle of straw in the corner for a bed and an old wooden crate as some sort of rough table. But what was on the table was of more interest, a radio transmitter, fitted in a brown canvas backpack. A wire aerial was strung from the radio and hung out of a back window, or rather a hole in the wall covered with a loose piece of oilcloth. Wesserman kept watch on the radio while we searched the surrounding area, but whoever had been in the room had heard us coming and was long gone.

"You'd better bring the radio back, we'll take it to Wiedel, maybe he can use it to help find the traitor," I said. "There's no chance of catching

anyone here, they're long gone, we'd better get back."

Wiedel was ecstatic at our haul. He woke up his radio technician and told him to inspect it for clues. I took the opportunity to make our escape from the Gestapo and catch a lift back to Podvirky on a supplies truck heading to the railway yard. When I got into my bed I had no trouble sleeping that night. The next morning my platoon were all together, Voss and Bauer from guarding Nadia Vlasov and Mundt discharged himself from the sick bay, although he still walked with a decided limp.

"I can't stand those doctors, I'd sooner take on the Russians," he said grimly.

We spent the next two weeks struggling with every other available man to free Panzers and STuGIII assault guns from the mud. The Sturmgeschutz III assault gun was a powerful mobile gun, built on the chassis of the Panzer III. Initially intended as an armoured light gun for infantry support, we widely employed the STuGIII as a tank destroyer. Our self-propelled assault guns had proved invaluable. We often deployed them by night, hiding them behind camouflage or in specially dug pits or even in the thousands of narrow ravines that littered the steppe. Their fast, accurate fire had proved devastating and decisive in battle after battle and they were considered as vital as any of the Panzers. We were going to need every one we could get when the battle began. The pace was quickening everywhere as the High Command built up their forces for the coming battle. It was the middle of May and the spring rains and consequent mud were ending. We knew that it would be vital to attack before the Russians built their defences into overwhelming strength and were eagerly waiting for the order to deploy into the forward positions.

We returned to our shabby billets in Podvirky at the end of one particularly hard day. While attempting to lay a roadway of logs to prize a Panzer IV out of the wet clay that gripped it, we were suddenly attacked by low flying Soviet fighters. Fortunately they hadn't carried bombs, but after the flight of four aircraft had finished shooting up the area with machine gun and cannon fire dozens of our men lay dead in the brown, Ukrainian earth, never to see their homeland ever again. The constant fear of attack, the delays in setting a date for our own assault on the salient and the constant filth, grime and shortages of the Eastern Front was taking its toll. The air attack seemed to knock the stuffing out of all of us. Why can't we just attack the bastards? That was the question on everyone's lips. When we got back, von

Meusebach was waiting for us together with another SS officer.

"Men, this is the commanding officer of our Second SS Division Das Reich. Gruppenfuhrer Walter Kruger has a few words to say to us."

Kruger stood to address us. He was lean and hard, every inch the fighting soldier, his Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords a testament to his bravery.

"You have all worked hard to prepare for this attack and there is no doubt that we shall unleash a storm that will drive the Soviets back to Moscow and beyond, a storm they will never forget!"

A few men cheered, but most of us had heard it all before.

"The attack has been postponed for several weeks."

He was drowned out by a series of shouts, groans and catcalls. He held up his hand.

"This is by order of the Fuhrer. I know you are disappointed, but we are awaiting deliveries of the new Panzer V. When these new tanks are deployed we will be smash through the Soviets, we'll beat them and drive on to Moscow!"

He paused, waiting for applause for his fighting rhetoric. There was silence. He had effectively told us that the High Command was giving the Russians more time to prepare their massive defences. I hoped that the Panzer Vs would be as effective as they hoped, and that they would be able to cope with the hundreds more T34s that we were giving the Russians time to produce and deploy on the battlefield. Kruger carried on talking for a few minutes more and then quickly ended his talk.

I was weary of the constant battle to wrestle the armour off the flatcars and then to be called to wrestle them out of the mud that seemed to trap the unwary driver at every opportunity. I decided enough was enough. I was going into the city for the evening. I put my head under the cold pump and enjoyed my usual cold shower, Mundt cranked the handle for me so that I could crouch down and let the ice cold water pour over my head. I put on my uniform, brushed it off, wiped a rag over my jackboots and went outside. Mundt was waiting in the Kubelwagen with Bauer and Voss.

"We need to drive into the city to collect the mail, Sir, I thought you might like a lift."

"I thought the mail came yesterday?"

He kept a straight face. "I'm sure that more will have arrived today."

I couldn't help but smile, it was the flimsiest of excuses, but it would

have to do. I climbed in and we roared off.

“We need to return before midnight, Willy, otherwise we could all be posted AWOL.”

“I know that. We’ll collect you at eleven, shall we say outside the Hotel October?”

I nodded. The Scharfuhrer could be a mind reader sometimes.

The reception clerk in the hotel confirmed that Nadia Vlasov was still staying at the hotel, they'd moved her to room 417 while they repaired the damage done to room 412. I thanked him and ran up the stairs, I didn’t even bother with the lift, even if they’d got it working it would probably break down. Nadia answered the door when I knocked, her eyes widened with surprise.

“Jurgen, you took your time getting back.”

“It’s the war, Miss Vlasov.”

“Call me Nadia.” She reached forward and pulled me into the room, her mouth clamped on mine. “I’ve been expecting you.”

We undressed each other with shaking hands. I showered her with kisses and stroked her beautiful, perfect but tiny body. Then we made love, a warm journey of pleasure and exploration as we each discovered the other’s body. Afterwards, I lay on my back and she put her head on my chest.

“Can’t you move into Kharkov, Jurgen? We could see each other more often, I’ve been lonely here on my own.”

I looked down at her face, I only wished I could. Our dirty little hovel in Podvirky was hard to bear, but I explained to her that we didn’t have much of a choice where we were posted.

“Why not join the Gestapo, then? Those two men, Wiedel and the one with the limp have been here talking to me.”

“That’s von Betternich, he’s SD, not Gestapo.”

“What’s the difference?” she asked.

“It’s slightly complicated, but here goes,” I grinned, enjoying our conversation. She was perceptive enough to know how much I loved talking and explaining things to her. “The RSHA, the Reich Main Security Office known as the Reichssicherheitshauptamt is an organisation subordinate to Reichsfuhrer Himmler in his dual capacities as the Chief of German Police, Chef der Deutschen Polizei and Reichsfuhrer-SS. The duty of the RSHA is to fight enemies of the Reich both inside and outside the borders of Germany. The organisation is divided into seven main offices, or Amts. Amt IV,

Geheime Staatspolizei is the Gestapo, headed by SS-Gruppenfuhrer Heinrich Muller. Amt VI, the SD, is led by SS-Brigadefuhrer Walter Schellenberg. It is the foreign intelligence service of the SS."

I smiled, it sounded long-winded. "But I guess they do much the same job, they don't usually tell me much of what they're up to."

She put her hand up and stroked my hair. I wished we could stay like this always, that there would be no war raging outside this room.

"They seem to know a lot about you, Jurgen, they've mentioned you several times."

I was about to ask her what they'd said when there was a hammering on the door. I put a towel around my waist and jumped up to answer it, Mundt stood there. "It's a general alert, the Soviets have counterattacked at Belgorod. We're needed." He smiled at my semi-naked body.

"I'll be down in one minute, Willy."

I raced to throw my uniform on. "I don't know when I'll see you again, Nadia. If the Soviets break through, get out of the city fast."

She nodded. "I'll do that, try not to get yourself killed, Jurgen."

"I only wish the Russians would listen."

I pulled on my jackboots, grabbed my weapons and helmet and rushed down the stairs and outside. They were waiting in the Kubi with the engine running, I leapt in and we roared off. The journey back to Podvirky was chaotic, armour and infantry trucks driving at high speed towards Belgorod. We bounced and slewed all over the road, trying to avoid the worst of the potholes, but the mud had mainly tried. Why hadn't our Intelligence units alerted us before that an attack was now possible? We screeched to a halt, left the Kubi in the vehicle park and ran to the assembly point outside HQ. Von Meusebach was shouting streams of orders to men who ran in what seemed like random directions. He saw me and shouted.

"Hoffman, where have you been?"

"Gestapo business, Sir."

He nodded. "Very well, get your platoon into your half track, you're just in time, we leave in five minutes."

Mundt was already herding the men together, we ran for the half-track and climbed in, Bauer started the engine and we were ready to leave. The men were still putting on their kit, webbing belts, helmets and gas mask containers, although most of those contained other things, the threat from gas didn't seem likely to materialise. Von Meusebach stepped carefully through

the mud and boarded his armoured reconnaissance vehicle, the SD 232 Six wheeler. Armed with a two-centimetre gun in the turret and additional MG34 machine gun, the vehicle carried a large radio aerial array over the turret that would enable the commander to keep control of his forces by radio. The CO's head stuck out of the turret, he presented a very heroic figure with his cap set at a jaunty angle, evidently deciding to forego the security of a steel helmet for the time being. We were all waiting lined up outside the Regimental HQ without engines running, waiting to leave when two men dashed out with cameras, they were SS-Kriegsberichter, war correspondents and photographers. They spent several minutes taking pictures of the head of the column, especially von Meusebach, they then waved and disappeared back into the building. The CO removed his cap, donned his steel helmet and dropped down into the turret, closing the hatch with a clang. The armoured car drove away and we followed, none of the men said a word about delaying the column for the photographs, but a very definite picture of von Meusebach was emerging.

We reached the outskirts of Belgorod and stopped, we were parked in a large, open area with several squadrons of Panzer IVs and Tigers and two StuGIII assault guns. The CO popped open his hatch and climbed down to speak with the tankers and then came over to us.

"The Red Army is trying to break through on a five kilometre southern flank of the city, our task is to support the Panzers while they drive them back. Keep a tight formation on my vehicle. I want half of the regiment in front of me and half behind. I will keep control from the centre. Form up, we'll follow the Panzers in."

We boarded our half-tracks and waited, but not for long. The Panzers' engines roared and they surged away along a narrow lane that skirted the southern part of the city. We travelled for three kilometres without incident when abruptly we ran into the Soviets, a column of T34s complete with tank riders heading straight for us. Our units went straight into action, the STuGIIIs deployed one to each of the flanks, the Tigers formed a diamond formation and the Panzer IVs tucked in behind the security of the Tigers' heavier armour. They were already firing, shells landed amongst the Russians and the T34s started hitting back. Bauer pulled the wheel over and we steered for the shelter of a nearby ravine, a shallow dried up riverbed that would offer us some protection from the worst of the Russian fire. I jumped down to look for Soviet anti-tank guns or infantry carrying man-portable anti-tank rifles.

The tank riders were already jumping down off their tanks, disappearing into shallow dips and holes in the ground. It was our turn to take action, our Tigers and Panzer IVs would be decimated if they organised their anti-tank fire.

Then it happened, the Soviet infantry started to push the distinctive long barrels of their PTRDs out of the foxholes ready to engage our armour. The PTRD-41 Soviet Anti Tank Rifle was a single-shot weapon which fired a 14.5mm round. It was too light to penetrate the frontal armour of our tanks but it could penetrate the thinner sides of our smaller, more lightly armoured tanks and self-propelled guns.

I pointed to a nearby Russian position, Bauer swerved the half-track out of the ravine and we charged towards the enemy. Too late, they were concentrating on one of our Panzers and we were on them before they realised we were there. Mundt and Voss poured fire down onto them from our front and rear mounted MG34s, then a hail of bullets slashed at us from another foxhole that was only ten metres from us. We ducked down as the Soviet gunner emptied his clip and us, fortunately they hade a Degtyarev light machine gun, the one we nicknamed the record player. It was lethal in use, but when the 47 round pancake magazine ran out it was very slow to load. The gunner was inexperienced and his burst went wide of us, I peeped over the top of the half-track and saw him start to reload. I pointed to Beidenberg, “Bring three of the men, let’s get them now!”

I didn’t wait for him to acknowledge, we only had seconds to act. I leapt over the top of the half-track and started to run, within seconds I was almost on them, the gunner was still reloading but there were three other infantrymen in the hole. I pointed my MP38 and pulled the trigger, but in the heat of the action I’d forgotten the cardinal rule with Hugo Schmeisser’s iconic design. The long clip of ammunition that extended under the weapon was not a good fit and the slightest movement meant that bullets would not feed into the chamber. I’d gripped the gun by the clip and when I pulled the trigger nothing happened. It was like a moment frozen in time, I stood there stupidly holding my useless machine pistol, the Russian machine gunner frantically rammed the new pancake clip onto his gun, his three companions brought up their cumbersome Moisin Nagant rifles ready to shoot. I dived to the side just as the first of the bullets whizzed through the air past my ear. The other two riflemen stood up to aim at me as I rolled away, but Beidenberg and the other troopers rushed up and fired repeatedly at the

Soviets. The four of them were hurled to the floor of the foxhole, Josef helped me up and we ran back to the relative safety of the half-track.

Two more of our STuGIII self-propelled guns had arrived and were picking off the T34s one by one as the Tigers and Panzer IVs roamed the battlefield like game beaters, pushing them out of concealed pockets, breaking up their formations and blasting them with highly accurate bursts of the Tiger's powerful 88mm gun. We didn't have it all our own way, the Soviets set up a battery of heavy anti-tank artillery on a distant ridge and started to pour fire on our armour, a Tiger and two Panzer IVs exploded before the STuGIIIs turned their fire on the ridge and started to punish the Russians. The T34s started to retreat, it had been a scrappy affair and they had never looked like breaking through our armour, at least not in our small sector of the Soviet attack. As I looked anxiously around the battlefield for any signs of Soviet survivors, I saw the CO, von Meusebach, or at least I saw his armoured car, sheltering in a deep ravine, the hatches battened down so that they would have found it impossible to take any active part in the battle. It seemed that our new CO was not particularly keen to risk taking any enemy fire, or indeed on firing on the enemy himself. Apart from his caution, we had inflicted casualties on Russian men and armour, for their part they no doubt succeeded in what they were looking to achieve, an estimate of our fighting strength and abilities with which to judge their tactics for the coming battle.

We pulled away slowly, careful to watch for possible Soviet trickery, they were adept at throwing men and machines into pointless attacks so that they could draw out attention away from their real objective. I half expected another part of our front to be under attack, Kharkov or even the important railhead at Podvirky, but when we returned it was all quiet. The Tigers dispersed around the village for both camouflage and to defend the railhead, the crews had set up a barrel of beer that they'd 'liberated' from some local bar. They invited us to join them for a drink and we stood swilling down the local brew, it was alcoholic but there was nothing else to commend it.

I chatted to a Tiger commander from one of our SS Panzer battalions, a Sturmscharfuhrer August Just, both of us pulling faces at the appalling flavour of the Ukrainian beer.

"I think we all got a good taste of what is to come."

He grimaced. "If it ever comes, the talk now is of postponing it until July."

I nearly choked on my beer as a gulp went down my windpipe. It was astonishing news.

“Which bloody idiot made that decision? We’re almost giving it to the Soviets on a plate. Don’t they know what’s going on over there in the salient?”

“I believe his name if Adolf Hitler,” the tanker replied drily.

I looked around, but no one seemed to be listening to our conversation. “So he still insists on waiting for the deliveries of these Panzer Vs, he won’t budge?”

He shook his head. “No chance. Every commander in this theatre of war has tried to persuade him to move, von Manstein even. Paul Hausser flew to Berlin to make the case, but Hitler still insists that we must have the Panzer Vs before we move.”

“Look, August, I’ve been over the other side on reconnaissance missions, they’re building defences up like you wouldn’t believe. Now that the muddy season is ending they’ll be redoubling their efforts, it’ll be sheer hell when we go over there.”

“I know that, we all know that, but we’re stuck here until we get the order to go.”

He looked me in the eye and I knew exactly what he meant. The waiting would result in massively higher casualties. Neither of us really expected to survive the coming battle against the massed might of the Soviet mechanised hordes.

# Chapter Six

*‘The battle is going very heavily against us. We're being crushed by the enemy weight...We are facing very difficult days, perhaps the most difficult that a man can undergo’.*

*Erwin Rommel*

The tracks had hardened as the rainy season completely ended and the warmer weather dried out both the armies and the terrain. We had spent the past weeks alternately patrolling the railway line and in fruitless chases around Kharkov for the supposed traitor, the ‘Lucy’ spy ring that was like a festering sore to our intelligence people. It was already the twenty ninth of

June and many of us doubted that the offensive would ever begin. Soon we would be into July. Even so, the preparations continued, more and more equipment was offloaded day after day and even the much-vaunted Panzer Vs arrived to everyone's relief. Except that when their crews took them out on local manoeuvres they repeatedly broke down and had to be towed back or repaired on the spot. The worst problem was engine fires, probably in the depths of winter it wouldn't have been a problem but as the temperature increased the engines overheated and fires broke out, immobilising the vehicle and threatening to explode the fuel tanks. Von Meusebach spent little time with his regiment, seeming always to find that he was needed elsewhere, usually somewhere cleaner and smarter where there was the chance of a good dinner and high-ranking company. It was almost a relief when I got a message from von Betternich and went into the city to meet him.

"We're going to Vinnitsa, to Army Group South, I need your men to escort me and Wiedel there to talk to the local SD and Gestapo people. Obviously we can't do this on the communications network, we have no idea who is listening in, but we think we've narrowed the leak down to certain Abwehr officers both in Berlin and here in the Ukraine. I want you back here at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, you'll need a half-track and six of your troopers, that should be enough."

"Sir, what if the offensive starts, surely it must come soon? My men will be needed here, we're Panzer-Grenadiers, not bodyguards."

He smiled gently. "I can assure you my friend that Zitadelle will not start for at least a week and we shall be back in three days. It is essential that we catch these treacherous scum before we start the attack, otherwise the Russians will know our every move."

As I drove back to Podvirky I reflected on what he'd said, 'At least a week'. That meant that the pincer attack on the salient would begin within days, after the weeks and months of waiting. At least the long period of idleness would be over, except that I was confident that the Russians had not been idle at all. It was not going to be an easy fight by any means. Most of us were convinced that all of our Eastern Front operations were hanging on the outcome of Kursk.

Von Meusebach was as scathing as usual as he looked at my documents, including a telex from Himmler's RSHA in Berlin.

"So while we're working day and night you'll be swanning off with the Gestapo to von Manstein's HQ, is that correct?"

“Essentially, yes, Sir.” I hadn’t actually ever seen our CO working very much at all, but it would hardly be tactful to remind him of that fact.

“Make sure you get back as fast as possible, don’t waste any time on the local night life, we have a war to fight here.”

I saluted and left, it would be interesting to see how he coped with the smoke and horror of a major battle, what I’d seen so far was not very encouraging. I doubt I was the only one hoping a Soviet tank gunner would range in on von Meusebach’s vehicle. We packed ammunition and supplies for five days, just in case, then spent the evening drinking the local vodka and speculating about what we would face in the salient.

“It’s not just the tanks,” Mundt said. “I remember the drive on Moscow, when they counter attacked in that first winter. Wave after wave of the bastards, it was like the First War in the trenches. They came at us, lines of them, tens of thousands, we machine-gunned them, shelled them, we used mortars, hand grenades when they got near and still they kept coming. I can even remember their officer mounted on a horse, charging towards us in the middle of his men.”

He paused to take a heavy draught of vodka. We were listening enthralled to the veteran of those first heady weeks and months when it seemed as if we were unstoppable.

“We shot him, of course, he was one of the first to go, but they kept coming. A vast army in those long brown coats, I remember the fur hats most, though. Whenever we could we would strip them off the bodies and wear them to keep out the cold, I remember going home on leave and some civilians mistook me for a Soviet.”

“Did you beat them back?” Bauer prompted him.

“Eventually, yes, but they were like rabid animals. We afterwards found out that half of them weren’t carrying rifles. Their orders were to pick up weapons from those who fell. We couldn’t believe it, but their capacity to obey the most murderous orders was amazing. When we’d killed most of the first wave the second one came in, then the third and the fourth. We killed them all,” he finished soberly. There was sadness in his voice as he recalled so much death.

“Didn’t they have commissars driving them on, Willy?” I asked him.

“They did, yes, but it wasn’t just that. These people seem to have an infinite capacity to take orders, even when it means marching onto our machine guns and minefields. I tell you they’re not like ordinary human

beings. You've seen the way they live in the Soviet Union. They're treated worse than dogs, yet they'll defend their crappy patch of beaten mud as if it was a royal palace. It beats any normal understanding, and their wounded, we'd never seen anything like it."

He paused again and drank more vodka, as if the disturbing recollections were painful enough to need a drink to talk about them.

"The wounded, too, you wouldn't believe it, they never made a sound. They just lay there, suffering in silence. You could see it in their eyes, the pain of men who lay there with limbs blown off, guts hanging out through wounds in the stomach, just lying on the ground as if they'd lost the capacity for making any kind of noise. It's uncanny, I tell you. These people are not like us."

"You make them sound like supermen, Willy," I joked. "Brave, tough and capable of taking infinite punishment and yet still attacking when they know everything is lost, what are they, rabid dogs?"

They laughed nervously. I wished I hadn't spoken as Willy looked at me and said quietly, "Yes, that's a fair description."

I finished off the last of my vodka and lay down to try and sleep. In my nightmares I was surrounded by hordes of savage Russian soldiers, I was on my own and they attacked with rifles fitted with bayonets, all aimed at my belly. When they got near, they had faces covered in fur like wild animals and I woke up abruptly drenched in sweat. Damn those old soldier's tales. I'd have to take Willy to one side and ask him to desist, even if they were true.

At dawn we loaded the half-track and set out for Kharkov, von Betternich and Wiedel were waiting and we gave them the safest and most comfortable seats in the centre of the vehicle. The journey to Vinnitsa was long, hard and tiring. The track that took us there was well beaten and we were able to make good time, although it was bumpy and uneven, like most roads in the Soviet Union it was unpaved. But the flies and mosquitoes attacked us all the way through the thick forest that we had to cross, it was nerve wracking enough being constantly alert for partisan attacks and we kept both MG34s constantly manned. When we came out of the forest we were bitten all over and exhausted from watching every second for the partisan attacks. Fortunately the rest of the track to Vinnitsa was through open ground and we were able to relax. Until we drove into the city and realised that we'd come across a hornet's nest, something was clearly up. Every street was guarded with troops, tanks patrolled up and down and above us the Luftwaffe

kept up constant over flights. There were checkpoints too, as we got nearer to headquarters of Army Group South they were manned by grim faced SS Leibstandarte and Feldgendarmerie, accompanied by Gestapo officers in long leather coats. I itched to ask them what was going on, were they expecting an imminent attack, but I resisted the impulse. The two security officers sat calmly in the middle of the vehicle ignoring everything, giving me the impression that they knew in advance that the city would be heavily guarded. Finally we reached von Manstein's HQ, established in a former barracks in a lightly wooded area on the outskirts of the city. We showed our documents to the final guard post, drove into the vehicle park and helped our passengers down from the half-track.

Von Betternich was smiling contentedly. "You know what all this is for, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"The Fuhrer is visiting Vinnitsa, Hoffman. His aircraft is due to land shortly. Perhaps you will meet him, who knows."

At least that explained it. We weren't about to be attacked by the armoured legions of the Red Army. He limped into the building and we waited outside, enjoying the chance of relaxing after the long, jolting journey. We still had to beat off the flies, but their numbers were thankfully less than in the depths of the dark forests that we'd crossed.

"He must be coming to finalise plans for the salient," Mundt said. "At least we'll know where we stand."

"If we don't find this traitor, Willy, the Russians will know too, which would be a disaster."

We managed to find a signals unit making coffee and we shared out some black bread and cheese and washed it down with the hot brew. Wiedel came out and found us.

"We are invited to the airfield to watch the Fuhrer's aircraft land, Hoffman, it's quite an honour. Von Betternich will be with us in a few moments."

I didn't reply, I had my own view of the honour our Fuhrer was doing us. My opinion of him had deteriorated massively since we'd sat outside the Kursk salient allowing the Russians to build up their massive defences. The SD man came out five minutes later and we drove to the airfield. It was under even heavier guard and above us Messerschmitt 109s flew constant patrols, on the ground at least a hundred soldiers of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler

waited patiently.

We all turned and looked as a long, black Mercedes staff car came through the checkpoint and into the airfield. When it stopped an adjutant leapt out and opened the door. Feldmarschal Erich von Manstein climbed wearily out, followed by the more nimble figure of Feldmarschal Walter Model, commander of the Ninth Army, part of Army Group Centre. We watched the sky avidly, waiting for the first sign of the Fuhrer's aircraft. Then a tension seemed to set into all of us, a slight noise in the distance that grew and grew until in the distance we were able to make out a small group of aircraft. As they came nearer they resolved into a Focke Wulf Fw200 Condor, the Fuhrer's personal aircraft codenamed Immelmann III, surrounded by a squadron of Me109s. The Focke Wulf dropped lower and lower until it swept over the runway and dropped gently to a feather touch landing. As it taxied to a stop troopers rushed up pushing a stairway and they locked it into position. A squad of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler rushed forward and took up their positions either side of the foot of the stairs and von Manstein and Model walked over to stand nearby. The aircraft door opened cautiously, first a few centimetres and then it was pulled fully aside and the Fuhrer stepped out to stand motionless at the head of the stairs as we all saluted. He waited a few moments more and delivered his familiar casual salute, then carefully climbed down the stairs. Behind him was another man in uniform that I didn't recognise, which was strange. The Nazi bigwigs were always in the news, and well known to every German citizen.

Reichsleiter Martin Bormann," whispered von Betternich, "he's the Fuhrer's private secretary."

Unlike Hitler, Bormann was quite pudgy and overweight. I guessed that as a secretary his work would largely be sedentary, with little opportunity for exercise. Then they descended the stairs and the Feldmarschals shook hands with their Supreme Leader, ushered him into the black Mercedes and they drove off. In front and behind the car were half-tracks laden with heavily armed Leibstandarte troopers. Finally we relaxed, he had landed and nothing had gone wrong.

"We can follow them back to HQ now," von Betternich said. "I need to speak to our people there and see if we can't track this 'Lucy' traitor. Just think, if we could uncover them while the Fuhrer is here, that would be something."

I climbed into the half-track and ignored him. I knew what he meant,

praise from Hitler, pats on the back, promotions, medals, sometimes it seemed as if the whole of the Reich was dedicated to pleasing one man, hardly a healthy way to run such a huge empire. We drove back to Headquarters and left the security men to meet their counterparts while we found the army kitchen and got on with the more important business of getting something to eat. We were enjoying the early evening sunshine when a corporal came up to me and saluted.

"Compliments of Obersturmbannfuhrer von Betternich, Sir, you are invited to an informal reception for the Fuhrer this evening, it is due to start at ten o'clock in the main hall."

He turned about and left, I was stunned. I looked down at my stained, ragged uniform and automatically tried to brush off some of the dust. The men were grinning, probably thinking of their ragged scarecrow of a platoon leader rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty of the Third Reich. As usual, Willy took matters in hand.

"Don't worry, we'll help you get cleaned up, Sir. We may even be able to sew up the rip in the shoulder of your tunic, it happened when you went after those Russians in the foxhole."

I hadn't even noticed, I took off my tunic and my God, there was indeed a rent about fifteen centimetres long at the back of the shoulder. Willy took a needle and thread out of his pack and patiently sewed it up, another man had a sharpened razor and I did my best to scrape off my stubble. I finished off with a wash in a sink of cold water, wet down my hair and smoothed it back, put on my tunic and cap and stood in front of my men for 'inspection'.

"Those boots will never do, one moment," Willy said.

He reached under the axle of our half-track and came out with his hand covered in glossy black grease. He smeared it over my jackboots and rubbed them off with a piece of dirty rag, sure enough they looked clean and shiny.

Mundt nodded. "It'll do, we're not in Berlin so they can't expect any more."

I thanked them and left. The Leibstandarte guards checked my documents carefully, relieved me of my pistol and allowed me to go inside. The hall was packed with about a hundred officers, the Fuhrer was at the furthest end away from me which suited me fine, the last thing I needed was to be caught up in the machinations of the Nazi hierarchy.

I was quietly drinking a glass of fine Mosel when I heard a familiar voice.

“You’re not enjoying it, are you?”

It was Wiedel, the Gestapo. I nodded to him.

“Not really, no. Politics never did to anything for me and I’ve seen too many blunders on this front to be overly impressed with this gathering.”

He smiled. “Military strategy comes from only one source, Hoffman, it sounds suspiciously like you are criticizing the Fuhrer.”

But he smiled as he spoke. It was some kind of black Gestapo humour.

The buzz of conversation got louder and I looked up to see that Hitler had moved nearer to us, he was standing talking to Feldmarschal Model.

“These troops of yours don’t impress me,” I heard him saying. “The men of 1943 are not of the same calibre as those of 1941.”

He was referring to our massive armies that had invaded the Soviet Union, storming through Poland and the Ukraine to the gates of Moscow. But Model went bright red with anger at his Supreme Leader, formerly a corporal in the Great War.

“Of course they are not, my Fuhrer, the men of 1941 are dead, scattered in graves all over Russia.”

There was a deathly silence, Hitler went pale with anger, then snorted and turned away to speak to von Manstein. Wiedel and I looked at each other. No comment was necessary. To agree with Hitler would be cowardly, to agree with Model could mean arrest. Neither of us had Feldmarschal rank to support us. I wanted to leave and go outside to smoke and chat with the men, smoking in the same room as the Fuhrer was forbidden, but leaving the reception before him was equally impossible. Von Betternich joined us and he was smiling.

“You wouldn’t believe the gossip I’ve picked up in this room, Wiedel, I could have half the General Staff arrested tomorrow morning.”

“In that event who would fight the war, Obersturmbannfuhrer?” I asked him.

His smile broadened even more. “That’s a valid point, my friend. Do you have any suggestions for us, or should we ask the Fuhrer?”

“Ask him when we can attack the salient, that would be more useful.”

“Ah, yes, Kursk. Just wait, there is to be an announcement shortly.”

I wondered how he seemed to be so well informed, until I saw him exchange glances with Bormann, the secretary. Of course, it was politics, quite simply the shifting balance of power and allegiance that was so all pervasive inside our Nazi-led administration. Like many SS officers I had

never joined the Nazi party, I had little interest in or enthusiasm for politics. The more I saw of it, the more I found it corrosive and damaging to the heady ideals of the Third Reich before the war, when I had made my decision to become a professional soldier.

"Achtung!" Someone shouted across the room and there was instant silence. The Fuhrer stood on a low dais that had been placed in the middle of the hall and look coldly at his assembled officers.

"You have been waiting for many weeks to be given the order to attack the Kursk salient. I can now tell you that I will convene a meeting of my generals at the Wolfschanze on the First of July. At that meeting I will announce the date of the offensive. Decisions have been made that will affect the whole course of this war. Decisions that will see our armies once more sweep victorious to Moscow and beyond. Our new Panzers are now in place and will spearhead the advance. All of your questions will be answered and your fears laid to rest in the next few days. The world will shake to the mighty roar of our armies and our Panzers will once more begin our crusade to the east. You have my word that you are on the eve of a great and resounding victory!"

The room erupted to Nazi salutes and shouts of 'Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!'. It was heady stuff and I almost got caught up in it until I looked at von Manstein and Model, both wore expressions that were anything but enthusiastic, sour would be a more accurate description. And von Betternich was smiling openly, clearly enjoying the show. I had the uneasy feeling that this whole affair was being stage-managed. Politics!

The Fuhrer stalked out of the room with Bormann close behind him. Most of the officers stayed to enjoy the food and drink but I'd had enough, I left to go back to my platoon. I'd only been back for half an hour when Wiedel came to find me.

"We need you now, all of you, we've detected a transmission. This could be what we've been looking for. Come with me."

We followed him to the headquarters radio room. A furious looking Abwehr major was standing outside the door, protesting that he'd been thrown out of his own office. Wiedel ignored him and we went inside, there were banks of radio equipment with operators sitting in attendance with headphones clamped around their ears. We walked through to an office where an operator in plain clothes, obviously Gestapo, was adjusting a suitcase-sized radio. Von Betternich was watching him carefully.

“We’ve got a similar set at Kharkov so that with any luck we can triangulate between the two points, Wiedel explained. “How are you doing?”

The operator looked up. “I think it’s him, I’ve been in touch with Kharkov by telegraph and they say the same, it’s almost certainly our man.”

“Excellent, where is he, do you have a location?”

The man looked confused, embarrassed. “Well, yes, that’s the strange thing.”

“Strange? Where is he, what do you mean?”

“Here.”

“What do you mean here? In Vinnitsa?”

“I mean here, Sir, in this headquarters.”

The enormity of his statement struck us all at once. If the traitor was here, in this headquarters compound, it was entirely possible that it could be a high-ranking officer, or at least a senior officer of some kind to have the means to access secret information and to have the freedom of action to hide a transmitter and quietly transmit in the middle of Army Group South’s Headquarters. Once again, politics was a threat to our hunt for the traitor. Supposing it was a General officer, even a Feldmarschal? God help us all.

“Right, assemble your men, Hoffman, we’ll look around and see if we can’t catch this person.”

I looked at him doubtfully. “It could be difficult with the Fuhrer here and all of these senior officers.”

“In that case if any of them object the Fuhrer can simply order them to cooperate. We’re wasting time, we need to get moving if we’re to have any chance of catching the bastard.”

I ran out, alarming the Leibstandarte sentries, and told the men to form up. We split into two parties. I went with Wiedel and two of the troopers. Mundt took the other three and went with von Betternich. We went from door to door of the accommodation block, checking bedrooms, dining rooms, offices and storerooms. We drew a blank and began to search outside the main buildings, the stores, ammunition dumps, kitchens and motor vehicle workshops. We were emerging from a spare parts store when I heard a shout from near the perimeter fence. It was Mundt.

We ran over to him.

“Someone went through the fence, look!”

There was a narrow gap, low to the ground, just large enough to enable one person to pass through. Bauer crouched down squeezing through and the

rest of us followed, except for von Betternich who stood inside the fence with an unfathomable look on his face, his walking cane clutched in one hand. I had this uncomfortable feeling that he was he was already several steps ahead of us? If so, what those steps were was anyone's guess. I focussed my attention on the job in hand. Whoever had passed through had left a simple trail, footmarks in the soft, damp forest floor. Bauer kept the lead, I followed him and the rest were close behind me. We made good time and soon we were coming up on our quarry, we could hear him making heavy going through the forest. Suddenly his heavy footsteps stopped, he'd gone to ground and I suspected that he had twisted an ankle. We slowed down and cocked our machine pistols.

"Remember, we want him alive," Wiedel said quietly.

I nodded and passed it on to the men. We pushed carefully forward but there was no sign of him, then some sixth sense made me look behind. He had just got to his feet and was standing unsteadily, bringing up a huge pistol, I recognised it instantly, a Mauser.

The Mauser C96 was a semi-automatic pistol, originally produced by our own arms manufacturer Mauser from 1896. Several countries had manufactured unlicensed copies and Russia was no exception. It was instantly identifiable by the integral box magazine in front of the trigger, the long barrel, the wooden shoulder stock that could double as a holster or carrying case, and a grip shaped like the handle of a broom, so that some people nicknamed it 'the broomstick'.

I heard Wiedel shouting, "Don't shoot, we want him alive," then one of the men fired a long, low burst that took him in the legs and he collapsed to the ground. I ran up and kicked the Mauser out of his hands, then looked at him closely. He was a partisan, possibly Ukrainian, but more probably Russian. His cap was adorned with a red star and when I went through his clothes he had a packet of documents in his pocket together with a map.

"Who are you?" Wiedel shouted at him, lifting him up by the shoulders. "Who is your contact inside our headquarters?"

Although in obvious pain, he managed to hawk and spit at the Gestapo man. Wiedel smashed his hand across the man's face, threw him to the ground and put his boot on one of the wounds on his legs. The Russians may have possessed legendary courage in the face of pain but I think we all winced as the animal scream came out of his throat.

"Who are you, who is your contact? Quickly, tell me man and I'll get

treatment for your legs!”

He shook his head, his bearded face screwed up in agony.

Wiedel took out his pistol and screwed it into his mouth, causing him to gag and choke.

“For the last time, your name!”

The man’s eyes were watering with the pain of the boot on his leg and the gun in his mouth. He started to mumble and Wiedel took out the pistol.

“Colonel Mikhail Romanenko, NKVD on assignment to the partisans, that is all I will tell you.”

The NKVD, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, we’d scored a high-ranking prisoner. Wiedel pressed him further, asking him the name of his contact and putting his boot on the wound again when he refused to answer, but the man passed out with the pain. I heard the sound of footsteps coming from the HQ, when they appeared through the trees it was von Betternich limping along but in front of him was Reichsleiter Martin Bormann. I could hardly contain my surprise. We stood to attention and Bormann spoke first to Wiedel.

“Explain!”

Wiedel told him how we had chased him and shot him in the legs, he told him the name that the man had given us. Bormann took out his pistol, a Luger, and knelt down beside the Russian.

“Who is your contact inside this headquarters? Answer me!”

He pushed the barrel of his pistol against the man’s head. “It’s no use pretending to be unconscious. If you wish to live, answer me. I will count to five!”

He started counting, one, two, three, suddenly the man’s eyes flicked open, he saw Bormann kneeling over him with the pistol and his eyes flared suddenly, it was as if he recognised him, but that was ridiculous. Four, five, ‘crack’, the sound of the shot whipped around the forest. The Russian fell over, dead with a Luger bullet in his brain. I was so shocked. The second, or third, most powerful man in the Third Reich had just executed a prisoner before our eyes.

“Search him thoroughly and then leave his body for the wolves,” Bormann said contemptuously. Then he began walking back alone to Headquarters. Von Betternich had a neutral look on his face. Once more I had the impression that he knew long in advance what was to happen.

“Wiedel, come, we must accompany the Reichsleiter. Hoffman, search

him and leave him as ordered. When you're done you'd better make a sweep of the area to make sure there are no other partisans near here."

They walked away and we still stood, frozen with incredulity.

"That was interesting, Sir," Mundt said.

I nodded. "An understatement Willy, something is happening here that we do not understand."

"Did anyone else think that the Russian partisan knew Reichleiter Bormann?" Wesserman asked.

I fixed him with a hard stare. "Schutze Wesserman, don't even think anything like that unless you wish to become a guest of the Gestapo."

He shook his head. "Understood, Sir. But I still don't understand it all."

"Keep it that way, Gerd, you'll find it's by far the safest way."

We returned to the headquarters and an orderly found us beds for the night. In the morning, von Betternich told us that we were returning to Kharkov that day. Our business was at an end.

I wasn't sure if he'd achieved what he wanted or not, I didn't even ask. Between the reported army officers plotting to kill the Fuhrer, Martin Bormann's involvement with von Betternich, which meant the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler as well as the identity of the traitor giving our secrets to the Russians, there was a nightmare of possibilities. Like an infinite maze that I had absolutely no wish to penetrate. Then of course there were the Russians. There was no question now that we would shortly join battle with them inside the Kursk salient, probably within days. As we drew nearer to Kharkov the signs were everywhere, companies of heavy and medium armour parked alongside the road just inside the trees for camouflage, crews working frantically to bring them to readiness. Infantry everywhere, Panzer Grenadiers, artillery parks under huge camouflage nets, stacks of ammunition crates awaiting transport to their units, it was as if the Fuhrer's message last night had spread like wildfire to the somnambulant armies. The drums of the Gods of War were beating. Soon their armoured legions would be unleashed to bring down a torrent of fire and hell on the enemy.

# Chapter Seven

*'The Russian Colossus has been underestimated by us. Whenever a dozen divisions are destroyed the Russians replace them with another dozen'.*

*Chief of Staff Franz Halder von Armin*

After the excitement of seeing the army top brass and even the Fuhrer face to face, the grimy railway yard at Podvirky was a severe dose of reality. It was dark when we got back and I went to report to Muller, there was no sign of von Meusebach. I told him about seeing the Fuhrer. He only had one question.

"Did he have any news about Zitadelle?"

"They're meeting at the Wolfschanze on the first of July, Hitler is giving them the date then. It should only be days away, Sir."

"I hope so, this waiting is getting us all down as is this miserable village of Podvirky. Anything would be better than this."

"Are there any orders for my platoon?" I asked him.

He considered for a few moments. "We've got the anti-partisan patrols covered, so you may as well get some sleep. The CO is in the city at present, he's entertaining some friends in a hotel there."

He must have seen my look. "I know, I know, I'm sure he'll be back shortly."

"But Sir, we're about to mount a major attack, shouldn't he be here?"

He shrugged helplessly, as if to say 'it's out of my hands'. "Report to me in the morning, Hoffman, I'll have a better idea then of what needs to be done."

I saluted and left.

I strolled around the darkened village. The stench of coal dust, oil and excrement was pervasive. Few soldiers moved around, it was as if the whole place was holding its breath waiting. Waiting for the next Russian air attack, waiting for the partisans to carry out one of their lightning raids, storming in and causing massive destruction and death, only to disappear as quickly into the vast steppes. Waiting for one man, the master of all Western Europe, to give them the final order that would fling them into the salient and into the maw of the Russian guns.

It made me think of the legendary English 'Charge of the Light Brigade', that doomed cavalry charge in the Crimea. In October 1854 Lord Cardigan led 673 cavalrymen straight into the valley between the Fedyukhin Heights and the Causeway Heights, named the 'Valley of Death' by the poet Tennyson. The opposing Russian forces comprised twenty battalions of infantry supported by over fifty artillery pieces. These forces were deployed

on both sides and at the opposite end of the valley. Astonishingly, despite intense fire from three sides that devastated the charging cavalry, the Light Brigade was able to reach the Russians at the end of the valley and force them back from their guns, but they suffered massive casualties and were forced to retreat with more than half the brigade lost. Was Kursk to be our own doomed charge, racing to do battle with the descendants of those Russians in the Crimea, with a similar expectation of utter defeat? I was gazing directly at four Tiger tanks, the Panzer VI, massively armoured and mounting the huge, 88mm gun that could dominate the modern battlefield. It would not be another Crimea, we were too heavily armed and equipped to suffer such a rout, but winning was another matter. We were all suffering from low morale, the last few months had brought us all to the point of despair, if we couldn't shake it off we would be handing the Russians victory almost before a shot had been fired.

In the morning a messenger came to tell me to report to von Meusebach. He was as elegantly turned out as usual, although his face looked rather more haggard than I'd remembered, perhaps he was suffering from too much good food, heavy drinking and too many willing women during his frequent stays in the Kharkov hotel. He studied me with bleary eyes.

"So you met the Fuhrer in Vinnitsa?"

I told him I'd been in the same room, which was not quite the same thing and that he would be making his announcement shortly. He grunted. "About time, we all want to give Ivan a beating and go back to the Reich with a chest full of medals, don't we, Hoffman?"

Was that what he intended? For most of us all we wanted was for the war to be over so that we could go home. I remembered his behaviour at the skirmish outside Belgorod. Perhaps someone should inform him that to give Ivan a good beating you first had to face him and swap blows. But that someone would not be me!

"Yes, Sir."

"Good man. I've got another job for you, report to General Hoth in Kharkov, he has asked for an experienced reconnaissance platoon, so I immediately thought of you." He gave me a twisted smile. It was almost a sneer. "While you're there, I've left a briefcase in a hotel room, the Hotel October, you can collect it for me. Room 324, they're expecting someone to collect it, be careful, the contents are top secret."

The Hotel October was where Nadia had been staying, as far as I knew

she was still there. It would be a chance for me to see her, even if it was a brief visit, it would be better than nothing.

An hour later we were clanking along the track that led to Kharkov in our Hanomag 251 half-track.

"Any ideas what this reconnaissance business is, Sir?" Mundt asked me.

I shook my head. "It won't be anything good, Willy. Other than that I've no idea. We'd better go and collect this briefcase first, we may not get a chance once we've seen Hoth, he may send us straight out."

We pulled up outside the hotel.

"Give me about twenty minutes, I need make a brief visit while I'm here, Willy."

He smiled. "Give her my regards."

Kharkov was coming alive, as if the word had spread already that we would soon be moving, the street was bustling with people and vehicles, most of them military. Soon they would all be heading east towards Kursk. I went inside and the desk clerk gave me the key for room 324, I ran up the stairs and put the key in the door. Before I could open it someone snatched it open and I was staring at Nadia. Her face wore a smile that faded into surprise when she saw me and everything clicked into place. So this was where von Meusebach had been spending his nights away in Kharkov. Not that I had any reason to object to Nadia sleeping with who she wished, but him, that flabby, oily lawyer who was doing his best to turn a fighting regiment into a laughing stock.

"I've come to collect your boyfriend's briefcase."

Her face fell at my icy tone.

"Jurgen, it's not what you think, really, but you weren't here."

I knew that I was acting stupidly, but if it had been anyone else I wouldn't have been so angry.

"Would you give me the briefcase, I don't have time to talk, I need to get to Headquarters."

She passed me a brown leather case. Her eyes were on me, soulful and sad.

"Would you come and see me when you get back?"

I realised that I was acting like a love struck schoolboy cheated out of his date by the playground bully.

"I'll do my best."

She smiled when she saw that I had softened a little. "Until then,

Jurgen."

Mundt was surprised when I climbed into the vehicle. "You were quick, is everything ok?"

"It could be better, Willy." Damnit, of all people, fucking von Meusebach, it was like a knife in the guts. "Let's go and see what the good General wants of us."

Generaloberst Hermann Hoth, commander of the Ninth Army, was in a mobile command centre festooned with radio aerials on the outskirts of the city, touring the troops that were about to join battle with the Soviets. I waited outside while officers came and went, messengers ran in and out and occasionally I could hear his voice shouting orders to his staff. Eventually an officer came and beckoned me in. There were four steps leading up to the command cabin at the rear of the truck. Inside was chaos, radio operators, staff officers and harassed orderlies taking notes and making marks on a map on the wall. Hoth was at the other end of the cabin, abruptly, he turned and saw me waiting.

Hermann Hoth was fifty-eight, a Colonel-General in the Wehrmacht with a courageous record in the Great War, during which he was awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class. After leading his troops to victory in France he'd become one of the most successful Panzer commanders on the Eastern Front. He commanded the Fourth Panzer Army and was regarded as one of the linchpins of the forthcoming offensive. The Fourth Panzer Army under his command was the largest tank formation ever assembled. He beckoned me forward.

"So you're the SS officer who brought back those two Soviet engineers from inside the salient?"

I nodded. "Yes, Sir."

I felt him sizing me up with his sharp, ice blue eyes. He was a fit, trim and muscular man despite his age, his steel grey hair was cut close to the scalp and he looked to be a man who should not be underestimated. His past victories served to underline that fact and I had no doubt that Russians had put his celebrated war record under a strong microscope.

"I need to know what my tankers will be going into, Obersturmfuhrer Hoffman." I noticed him struggling with the unfamiliar SS rank. "Take a look at this map."

He led me over to the large map on the wall, the salient stood out like a cancerous growth, an evil physical entity that pierced our front like a bulge in

a worn rubber tyre. He pointed to the city at the rear of the bulge, roughly midway from north to south.

"As you know, this is our main objective, we attack from both sides in the classic encirclement tactic, the troops caught inside will be cut off from supplies and reinforcements and we finish them off at our leisure. Apart from destroying the Soviet armies inside the salient, it is vital that we take the city of Kursk because of its strategic importance."

He moved his hand down. "This is our first main objective, the village of Prokhorovka, there is a small railway station there, not much else. We will be supporting II SS Panzer Corps, which I believe includes your own division, Das Reich."

I nodded. "That is correct, yes, Sir."

"I need to know what the Ivans have waiting for us, Hoffman. You've done well supplying us with those two Soviet engineer officers, but that was some time ago and I have to know what they have prepared in the meantime. You know we'll be going in within days, that means that anything you can find our about the Soviet defences will be worth its weight in gold, the Soviets won't have time to change things around even if they realise that we have uncovered the layout of their defences. So that's your mission, get in there using the routes that you've had success with in the past and find out what lies between here and Prokhorovka. With any luck they won't even know you were ever there. Good luck, Hoffman, report back to me inside of forty-eight hours. We haven't much time left, you know."

"How should we travel into the salient, General?"

He spread his hands. "You're an officer of the SS, man. I've been told that you people are big on using your initiative."

He smiled to take the sarcasm out of his words, but I couldn't help but rise to the bait.

"Then you have been correctly informed, Sir. I'll report back within forty-eight hours."

"Good. Take whatever resources you need, you have my full authority. If anyone gets in your way, tell them I'll have them arrested! I want that intelligence, Hoffman, whatever it takes!"

I looked away as someone called urgently for his attention. I was forgotten. I saluted and left, the men were less than impressed when I got back to our half-track.

"They must be crazy," Voss said bitterly. "How the hell can we get in

and out of the salient again without being caught by the Russians? They're not complete idiots, they'll be waiting for us to try something like this, especially after the last time."

"Horses," Mundt said emphatically.

There was a chorus of groans.

"No, look. It worked last time. It's the last thing they'd expect. If we go in and out at night and they hear us, we know they'll assume it's only their own Cossacks. Why not horses?"

"It's a fair point. Besides, on foot we'd never cover enough ground and there's no way we can use the half-track, the Scharfuhrer is right. Bauer, you know where the stable is, take us there now and we'll see if we can get them to cooperate again."

He started the engine and we clattered through the city streets, turned into the lane and stopped outside the stables. The NCO in charge, Wegener, looked out as we arrived.

"What is it this time?" he asked suspiciously.

"Horses, Wegener. We need to borrow some of your mounts for a couple of days."

Another soldier came out of the stable block, an infantry colonel. We saluted and waited for him to acknowledge. He looked at us with a haughty expression.

"What are you men doing here? These horses are for the use of army officers, not any old ragtag SS platoon looking to have some Saturday night fun."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I have to borrow some of them, don't worry, we'll look after them."

He was a pompous ass, immaculate in his riding breeches, polished boots and pressed uniform. I should have told him straight away that this was military business, but like our own CO von Meusebach, he was the kind of officer that irritated me on sight.

"Absolutely not, I forbid it. Look at you, man, you're not even fit to borrow a bicycle!" He glared at me for a few moments. "What are you waiting for? Get out of here!"

"Yes, Sir. I'm sorry, but I'm acting under General Hoth's orders, he said I am to arrest anyone who obstructs this mission." I turned to my platoon. "Men, put this officer under arrest and take him to Fourth Panzer Army headquarters."

They stepped forward and took him by the arms. The officer paled. “Hoth? I see, very well, you’d better take what you need.”

I waited a few moments for effect and then nodded at the men. “Let him go.”

The officer straightened his uniform and strode off. Wegener watched him go with a broad smile. “A good thing you brought that stuffed shirt down a peg, he thinks he’s God’s gift to the Wehrmacht.”

“What does he do?” I asked him.

“He’s the catering supplies officer for the Fifty-Seventh Infantry. A total prat, all his men hate him, even the other officers.”

He looked over the platoon. “So you all want horses, do you?”

I nodded. “General Hoth’s orders. It’s an in and out reconnaissance mission, we need fast, reliable mounts.”

“Very well. Come in and you can choose the best of the bunch, if you’re going behind the lines you don’t want a horse that can’t keep up with the Cossacks.”

I looked at the horses standing in the stables, some were nuzzling at feed in iron troughs set into the stable walls. They were the familiar Panjes, the Russian horses whose endurance was epic, bred for the extremes of heat and cold and rough terrain of the Tsarist Empire and latterly the Soviet Union. I admired a beautiful chestnut mare, shaggy haired like the others but slightly larger and she looked sleeker, even proud. He saw me looking.

“Yes, she’s a beauty, that Colonel you spoke to regards her as his personal mount, so it’ll stick in his throat if someone else uses her.”

“I’ll take her then.”

We selected nine horses. Mundt was puzzled, “There are only eight of us, why nine horses?”

“I’ve got an idea, I think we may be able to recruit someone to help us get in and out, Willy.”

He looked sceptical. “You mean Irina? No way, she’d sell us out to the Russians if we gave her half a chance.”

“I’ve got to try, if she says no there’s nothing lost, but if we can bring her along it could make the difference between success or failure.”

Bauer started the engine and I directed him to Irina’s house. A group of local people watched us draw up with surly expressions. When I knocked she answered the door immediately.

“What do you want?”

“Irina, I’m sorry, but I need your help.”

“Go away, Jurgen, I made it clear last time that I’m finished helping you Germans.”

“We’re not all as bad, you know. Just because there are some wicked people in the military doesn’t mean that the rest of us are the same. And think about the Soviets, if we’re forced out of the Ukraine they’ll be back. You know that Stalin has declared everyone that remained behind a traitor? You know what they do to traitors?”

She nodded. “I know. I also know what your troops did to my parents.”

“Irina, that was a rogue outfit, you know that most of us are not like that. You also know that if the Soviets come back, most of them are like that. How many Ukrainians have they killed? Hundred of thousands, millions, think of the Kulaks starving and freezing to death in Siberia, it will all happen again. This coming battle could make all the difference, I’m asking you to put your anger aside for now. Afterwards, if we Germans win, at least you can ask the local administration to enquire into your parents death, the Soviets would put you in the Gulag just for asking.”

“And if the Soviets win?” she said bitterly. “What then?”

“In that case, we are all dead,” I said tiredly. I walked back to the half-track, I’d done my best.

“Jurgen, wait.”

I looked around.

“Give me ten minutes and I will come with you.”

Bauer drove us back to the stables and we began to make the horses ready for the crossing that evening. I sent him back with von Meusebach’s briefcase and a message telling him that we were acting under Hoth’s orders, orders that included a blanket arrest warrant for anyone refusing support. He also carried a chit to draw rations and ammunition for all of us. While we waited for him to return, we exercised the horses and tried to familiarise ourselves with them. Irina chose a small blue-roan gelding. Perhaps there was an unconscious message there for me, perhaps not. Wegener made sure that we had the best of everything, every strap, every buckle, every stirrup was checked and checked again, there were no convenient stables where we were going that would happily fix anything that broke. Bauer came back in the Hanomag, we took out boxes of food and ammunition and transferred them to our packs.

“How did von Meusebach take it?” I asked him.

Bauer grinned. “He refused at first, but when he got Hoth’s HQ on the field phone and they told him that the General’s threat of arrest was real, he couldn’t have been more helpful. Mind you, there’s something about him, he’s definitely got it in for you, Sir.”

“Stefan, every day here could be our last, I’ll worry about the CO when the time comes. Let’s concentrate on getting this job done first.”

Wegener let us park the Hanomag in the stable yard and we mounted the horses and rode out in a long line, heads turned as people heard us riding through the city, expecting to see a Soviet Cossack unit about to attack. There was considerable relief when they saw our German uniforms and distinctive steel helmets. In fact, we did have regular cavalry in certain theatres, including a few Cossacks on the Eastern Front. Beginning in the summer of 1942, as a part of our policy of employing ex-Soviet personnel, prisoners of war and deserters, a number of independent Cossack cavalry squadrons and troops were formed under the First Panzer Army in southern Russia. Under German commanders, these units successfully performed long-range reconnaissance and staged raids behind enemy lines in the steppes beyond the lower Don and in the northern Caucasus. Subsequently, the 1st Cossack Division had just been formed in May.

We reached a fork in the road and I asked Irina which way she suggested. She was still cool, helping us against her better judgment. All I’d persuaded her of was that as bad as we were, the Russians were much worse, it didn’t make me feel especially proud.

“Where are you heading for?”

“Prokhorovka.”

She flinched. “That’s open country, it’s not an easy place to get to undetected. Lots of open steppes with little chance of concealment, just a few low hills, that’s about it. Very well, we’ll take the left fork here, there is a place I know about six kilometres away that is a good crossing point.”

“Is it another railway tunnel?”

“No.”

We carried on in silence. I could live with that, if she got us into the salient undetected. And out again, of course. It took us an hour to reach the point she was aiming for, a massively overgrown balka, so overgrown in fact that even in daylight it would have been almost impossible to see it even when you were staring straight at it. It was now almost dark and we couldn’t see it at all. Irina found it because of a ruined stonewall that marked the

entrance.

"We will need to lead our horses through on foot," she said. "The undergrowth is too thick otherwise, besides, it is shallow in parts and the Russians may spot us. The balka stretches for almost two kilometres, when we reach the end we will be well inside the Soviet lines."

I detailed Bauer to take the point. He walked quietly up the ravine, pushing the tangled vines and branches to one side to make headway, his horse was sent to the rear for Wesserman, our back marker. Then we pushed through the darkness of the Ukrainian balka, stumbling, whispering muttered curses as we continually lost our footing on roots and branches that made the going very difficult. The horses seemed to have some sixth sense about the obstacles and daintily high stepped over the worst of them. It took an hour to cover the two kilometres to the end and by the time we stumbled out we were exhausted. I gave them five minutes to rest, but we had a lot of ground to cover to arrive at our destination and be under cover before daylight.

We rode in single file. Irina was back in the lead, taking us along an ancient route probably used by smugglers and criminals for many centuries. We led our horses along more balkas, rode cautiously through the ancient woods that had probably been here for a thousand years. She seemed to have an instinct for where the Soviet armies had made their encampments and more importantly, where they had not.

"It's not too difficult," she said once when I asked her about it. "These routes are almost inaccessible except on foot or horseback, why would the Russian armies come this way?"

Except for the infantry and the Cossacks, I could have replied. But the Soviets tended to use combined arms organisations called 'Fronts' that comprised armour, artillery, infantry and even aircraft, so perhaps she was correct that they would avoid this kind of area. Unless of course a wandering Cossack patrol happened along, we'd have to deal with that if it happened. It was still dark when we reached the outskirts of a small village marked on my map as Belenikhino.

"There's a series of low hills outside the village and a disused and overgrown quarry where we can shelter the horses. If you climb out of the quarry on foot to the hill above you will be able to see the whole area around Prokhorovka. We will have to keep very quiet, there will probably be troops quartered in the village."

I nodded and told her to lead us to the quarry. We reached there while it

was still dark and we had to wait until the first lightening of the sky announced the coming dawn. The quarry had almost completely returned to nature, there were no buildings or anything man-made in evidence, only a deep white gash in the ground that soared to a cliff above us. We were in a deep bowl choked with small trees that were ample to give us cover for the horses and ourselves. We dismounted and allowed them to feed and water in a nearby stream, but we left the saddles on, the possibility of having to make a hasty exit was very real.

Gradually the sky lightened and yet everything was silent. I heard the distant buzz of an aircraft, then another, it faded into silence. For a moment I wondered if we were in the right place when suddenly the Soviet tanks began to start their engines to warm them up for the start of the day. I left Beidenberg in charge and climbed to the top of the hill with Mundt and Irina. The sight that greeted us was extraordinary. Within two kilometres was what looked like at least an entire Soviet army complete with almost a city of tents. Armour stretched into the distance, line after line of T34 tanks, like iron centipedes that wound as far to the east as the eye could see. I heard Mundt mutter, “Mother of God, there are millions of them,” as he unconsciously crossed himself, I remembered that Willy was a Catholic. Artillery parks were scattered across the steppe, tens of thousands of soldiers were stirring and beginning to form up for the coming day.

“Willy, what’s your estimate of the armour?”

He shook his head. “They’re out of sight on the steppe, I wouldn’t like to hazard a guess.”

“Try.”

“Maybe five hundred in this sector alone, mostly T34s. If I was to extrapolate that across the whole of the salient, I’m guessing five thousands tanks, perhaps even more.”

“So we’re going to be outnumbered?”

“It’s not just the armour, look at the artillery parks, they must have thousands of guns. Infantry, I’m guessing over a million, maybe two million across the whole of the salient. And minefields, my God, I remember the campaign in 1941, the Russians are the past masters at minefields, they’ve almost certainly planted everything they’ve got.”

I wrote everything we’d seen in my notebook. It wasn’t anything new, I’d reported before on the massive Soviet build-up that I had seen, but this time we were on the eve of the attack. The task we were faced with was

daunting, but not insurmountable. Provided of course that we attacked taking into account the enemy that faced us. So far all I had seen was a blind disinclination to believe anything that may be unfavourable to conventional military wisdom, maybe it was the Fuhrer's military wisdom. All I could do was report what I saw and how I interpreted the Russian deployments, the rest was in the hands of our military masters.

"Scharfuhrer, I think we've seen enough already, we'll keep a watch up here for the rest of the day, as soon as it gets dark we'll make our way back."

"I'll take first watch if you wish, Sir."

"Good, I'll make sure you're relieved in two hours."

I climbed carefully back down to the quarry and told them what I had seen. We settled down to wait out the day sensing that a dark gloom had descended over us. The reason was obvious, we were about to go into a battle in which we would need to use every ounce of intelligence, planning and military skill to achieve victory. Even then, at best it may only be a Pyrrhic victory. I recalled my history, after defeating the Romans at the battle of Asculum, King Pyrrhus had lost so many of his troops that he said, 'One more such victory would utterly undo me'. The Russians could lose armour and troops at a rate of three or four times what our own armies suffered and avoid defeat by making certain that we couldn't win.

Irina was concerned at the black mood that had descended on our group. "Don't you think you can beat the Russians, Jurgen?"

"No, not at all. Of course we can beat them, but most battles are decided by on who makes the least mistakes and they have such vast resources that we can't afford to make any. Our soldiers, armour and equipment is the finest in Europe, but we cannot afford to lose too many of them, what we need are commanders, leaders and generals who fight skilfully, not throw their divisions into battles they cannot win and then refuse to withdraw them to fight another day when things are not going well."

"Isn't that what your leader, Adolf Hitler is reputed to do? Throw whole armies away uselessly on battles that are already lost."

I smiled. "You didn't hear that from me."

I sensed that she was thawing, I could hardly blame her for feeling such bitterness towards Germany but I had personally done nothing except try to help her. When we got back to Kharkov I decided I'd try to break down the barriers and restore something of a relationship. We spent the rest of the day dozing, keeping under the cover of the trees. When it started to get dark we

began to pack our gear ready to return. Bauer slid down to join us, he was the to keep watch at the top of the hill.

"Anything new, Stefan?"

"I'm not sure, Sir. There is a squadron of Cossacks roaming around, they're not anywhere near us, I hope they've disappeared somewhere else."

"Very well, let's go."

We mounted up and rode away, this time Beidenberg took the lead a hundred metres in front of us. We retraced our route in and managed to get to the balka that would take us across the lines. Beidenberg came back on foot, leading his horse. He signalled us urgently to dismount.

"They've blocked the ravine with a tank, a sodding great T34 parked right across it."

"I suppose it was inevitable," Mundt said. "They're putting much of their armour in defilade ready for our attack, the balka was too good for them to ignore."

"That's all very well, but we need to get past it. Irina, do you have any suggestions?"

"I'm sorry, I've no idea at all. The only possibility, and it's a maybe, is that we could cross open ground and get back into the balka just before the front line."

"It's a hell of a risk, they've got troops every where patrolling this close to the German lines."

"We haven't got any choice," Mundt said. "It's either that or we're stuck here for the duration, Sir."

I weighed up the odds. Whichever way we handled it, the risks were severe.

"Very well, we'll do it. I suggest we retrace our steps for half a kilometre and we'll give that tank a wide berth."

We turned the horses around and went back over the dark ground until Irina said that we could push through some natural cover that would skirt the tank. It was a group of small trees, low mounds that were scarcely large enough to be classed as hills and between them the darkness of the shallow valleys that would keep us away from Russian eyes. I was tired, so very tired. I hadn't slept very much in days. I may have fallen into a waking sleep, where the mind goes on autopilot, but I suddenly felt uneasy. We were still mounted, walking the horses so as not to make too much noise or risk them tripping on unseen cracks and holes in the ground. The familiar jingle of the

harness was soothing and gentle in the background, I realised that someone was talking and was about to warn them to be quiet when I recognised the language. It was Russian.

I strained my eyes to see and listened hard, as well as my platoon ahead and behind me, there was another line of horse moving in the same direction, perhaps three metres to my left. It was incredible, we'd run into a squadron of Cossacks and neither of us had noticed the other, we were just troops mounted on horseback. Mundt was behind me, I slowed my horse until he caught up and then pointed to the left, putting my finger on my lips for absolute quiet. His eyes went wide as he realised the danger. There were about ten of them, I put up ten fingers and showed him and he inclined his head in agreement. We edged slightly further away from them and I whispered to him, "Can you get everyone to make sure they're ready, when we get near the lines we'll give them a burst from the MP38s and then make a run for it."

He eased his horse back to our line and went up and down the right side, away from the Cossacks, making them aware of the danger. I could dimly see them gripping their machine pistols, I already had mine held ready. It was the best we could do, we rode on, each step taking us nearer to the front line. I thought we were going to make it, we were less than half a kilometre away and the Cossacks started to wheel away to their left, away from us. Then one of them turned and called out a question in Russian. He repeated it when he got no answer, then moved his horse nearer. He called out for a third time, then the night was ripped apart to the sound of automatic fire as Bauer opened up on him, hurling him from his saddle. The muzzle flashes lit up the night and we could momentarily see the Cossacks against the sky. The rest of us opened fire, a deafening tornado of gunfire that tore into the Russian riders, some were hit and went sprawling on the ground, two or three survived and rode of rapidly into the darkness.

"That's it, we need to hurry before they come back with reinforcements!"

I spurred my horse into a gallop and surged forward, the others were recovering from the shock and encouraging their horses on. We all galloped forward, a mad dash that swept us past a pair of startled Soviet sentries, one of my people fired a quick burst that made them jump back into cover, then we were through, crossing the last four hundred metres of open steppe until we circled around a ruined stone wall.

“Wer ist da?” The familiar sound of German, 'who is there'?

“We’re German, a reconnaissance party, don’t shoot!” I shouted. “Everyone, get off your horses and identify yourselves to the sentries!”

We were surrounded by sentries who were suspicious and pointing their machine pistols at us. In the darkness I made out a tank, one of our older Panzer IVs, the commander was in the turret manning the mounted MG34. Slowly, we got off the horses and I went over to show my documents.

“If you can contact General Hoth’s headquarters he will vouch for us.”

The Oberleutant in the turret said, “Don’t worry, my friend, I’ll be doing that right now. In the meantime, keep your hands where we can see them!”

It took him ten long minutes to make contact using the radio in his tank patched through to Hoth’s communications centre, but eventually he told us we could lower our hands, we were home. An hour later we reached Hoth’s mobile command truck, the General was awake and waiting for us. I made our report and we were dismissed.

We rode slowly back to the stables in Kharkov and roused Wegener out of bed to deal with the horses. Bauer and Beidenberg came over to speak to me.

“What did they General think, Sir, will they act on what we saw? Maybe they could send in the Luftwaffe to hammer the Russian tanks, like we did in 1941.”

“I’m not sure what he thought, my friends. And this is not 1941. The Soviets have hundreds of fighters that are as good as anything we can put up in the air. If we send in slow moving bombers or tank destroyers, like the Stukas retro fitted with a 37mm anti-tank cannon under each wing, they’ll just send up several squadrons of fighters to shoot them down.”

“We’ve got our own fighters, haven’t we, Messerschmitt 109s and Focke-Wulf 190s?”

“We have, yes, but not enough, Bauer. We’re short of everything, aircraft, fuel, armour, spare parts, everything.”

“Does that mean we’re beaten before we even start, Sir?” asked Beidenberg.

I’d gone too far, allowing my own misgivings to affect the morale of my unit. I smiled to take the edge off my pessimism. “It doesn’t mean that at all. Remember, we’re the best army in Europe, if not the world. No one can beat us when we make up our minds to fight hard. We’ll smash them all the way back to Moscow, there is no way the Red Army can stand against us!”

They nodded gratefully and we looked across to the next street as a loud roaring noise and clanking of tracks announced a line of tanks manoeuvring towards the front. We counted them, there were perhaps twenty but they were all Panzer IIIs, which we'd all understood were obsolete, too lightly armoured and mounting a gun that was not powerful enough to fight the T34s. Like so many of our resources, we were so short that we were throwing everything into the battle, even these outgunned Panzers. Bauer caught my eye.

"So is that what we're going to use to smash those T34s we saw all the way back to Moscow?"

# Chapter Eight

*'The Red Army and the whole Soviet people must fight for every inch of Soviet soil, fight to the last drop of blood for our towns and villages...onward, to victory!'*

*Stalin*

It was still dark, the morning of the fifth of July 1943. The mass of armour waiting all around us was astonishing, more than any of us had ever seen in four years of war. Hundreds of tanks of all descriptions, from the humble Panzer IIIs that had entered service in the 1930s to the newest Tigers, the Panzer VI with its enormous 88mm main gun and the newer Panzer Vs that so many hopes were pinned on. Along our front artillery were deployed, the crews manning their guns with stacks of ammunition and the gun tractors ready to limber up and follow the advance as it progressed into the salient. We had dozens of STuGIIIs, the Self Propelled Assault Guns built on the Panzer IV chassis that had proved to be more effective than most when repelling and attacking Soviet Armour. At intervals in the line were the fearsome new Panzerjager Tigers, nicknamed the Elefants. With their massive 200mm armour and 88mm gun, they were expected to perform well and clear the T34s from our path, although they carried no auxiliary machine gun and were almost without protection from close infantry attack. We also had many Panzer IIIs and Panzer IVs, too outdated and lightly armoured to tangle with the heavier Soviet armour, but still effective against more lightly armoured Soviet mechanised forces. We waited in our Hanomag SD251 half-

track, one of hundreds of Panzer-Grenadier companies lined up to provide support and covering fire to the Panzers that were so vulnerable to infantry armed with anti-tank weapons. We were towing a Pak 36 anti-tank gun, an obsolete weapon that had earned the nickname the ‘doorknocker’ because against the frontal armour of the T34 it was all it could achieve, to give it a sharp knock without penetrating. The geniuses in Germany had produced a shaped charge called a Stielgranate, it meant that the Pak 36 could penetrate any armour, but only at a range of less than three hundred metres. Unfortunately, the shell needed to be loaded from the muzzle rather than the breech behind the shield, which made the job of the loader highly dangerous on the battlefield when storms of bullets and shell fragments flew in every direction.

I had mixed feelings about the intelligence I’d brought back from our reconnaissance mission to Prokhorovka. General Hoth and his staff had listened attentively as I read our observations from my notebook.

“A good job, Obersturmfuhrer, my thanks. We will take everything you have said into consideration,” he said warmly, turning away in dismissal. I felt that he hadn’t listened to a word I’d said.

“General, none of what I’ve told you is imagined, it’s all real, they’re well dug in behind layers of defences, minefields and hundred of anti-tank weapons and artillery, quite apart from the tanks.”

He’d whirled back around, reddening in anger. “So what would you have me do? The Fuhrer has dictated that we will attack at dawn on the fifth of July. Do you suggest I refuse an order? Perhaps you’d like to give him your opinion?”

He stood glowering at me and I realised that he was trapped, just like the rest of us, a prisoner of his oath to Adolf Hitler and his duty as an army officer to follow orders. I stood rigidly at attention, after a few moments he slackened.

“I believe your report in every detail, Hoffman and we will do our best to allow for the difficulties you outline, more than that I cannot do. Now, I suggest you re-join your unit and prepare as best you can for the coming battle.”

Now we were assembled in the darkness ready to begin the attack and there were still so many imponderables. The Lucy spy ring a huge question mark, had our security department, the Gestapo and the SD, really managed to track down and destroy the traitor, or had they managed to give Stalin our

plans so that we would be going into a gigantic armoured trap? I hadn't seen von Betternich or Wiedel since we'd got back and the date of the attack was announced. Had they arrested some poor devil and incarcerated them deep in some dark cellar, where they were busily torturing them, ripping out fingernails to try and extract information? I didn't speculate any more, the guns opened fire, a shattering cacophony of noise that battered at my senses. At five o'clock hundreds of guns opened fire at a single signal, the darkness turned to bright light as a multitude of flashes announced the opening salvo, but it was not our salvo. My worst fears were realised as the Soviets launched a pre-emptive artillery barrage that had us all diving for cover. Staff officers ran frantically up and down the line re-organising our guns and within a short time they were ready for our own opening salvo. Tanks and assault guns joined in, firing repeatedly and inside the salient lit up with explosions. The barrage was planned to last for an hour, first counter-battery fire and then the immense, shattering barrages that were designed to destroy the enemy inside their bunkers and fortifications. The Russians shifted their aim to counter-battery fire and we began to move forward, away from the guns that offered such tempting targets to the enemy. The rain was pouring down in torrents, making it almost impossible to see where we were going, even our half-tracks slipped on the gradients as they struggled to grip the treacherous mud.

Finally we broke out of the worst of the soft ground and began to make progress over the steppe. Our first objective was a hill in the distance and through the rain we could see our Tigers charging across the steppes, the mine-clearing teams worked frantically to keep up with them and when they detected a mine they lay alongside it to mark its position, there was no time to do more. Bauer gripped the wheel tightly as we bumped and jolted along, Mundt manned the forward MG34 and Wesserman the rear. From time to time Soviet infantry popped up with anti-tank rifles and we headed straight for them while Mundt and Wesserman fired streams of bullets that sent them tumbling back into their holes in the ground. We stopped briefly to check that one Soviet gunner was dead but we'd only managed to wound him badly in the stomach. It was a fatal wound, there was only one thing left to do, Mundt pointed the gun down and sent a short burst into him that smashed the remaining life out of him. Perhaps many people would consider it inhumane, but if I ever received such an agonising and fatal wound I hoped that my enemy would deliver a similar coup-de-grace. I picked up his rifle and put it in the half-track to take back with us for later inspection, it was a PTRD-41,

ProtivoTankovoye Ruzhyo Degtyaryova, an anti-tank rifle produced and used from early 1941 by the Soviets. It was a single-shot weapon firing a 14.5mm round, although unable to penetrate the frontal armour of our heavy Panzers, it could penetrate the thinner sides of earlier models as well as our more thinly armoured self-propelled assault guns and of course our half-tracks.

I gave the order and Bauer started forward again, racing to catch up with the Panzers. They were making good time and we had to go at full speed to catch up. We were approaching the start of the slope and already the Soviets were pouring fire down on us. Just in time one of our assault guns spotted a Russian KV-1 heavy tank, dug in at the side of the slope, only the movement of its turret alerted our gunners who fired three 88mm rounds in quick succession from the STuGIIIs that destroyed their target. We lurched up the slope and into a gale of fire, machine gunners, riflemen and light anti-tank weapons were all deployed against us. Against the intense fire the mine clearing teams had no chance and we had to just keep going, but we were lucky on that occasion and no mines were encountered. Then we broached the top of the hill just as a company of T34s was rolling forwards to meet our attack. We attempted to keep the infantry in check while the armour slogged it out, gun to gun, for possession of the hill.

On that occasion our Tigers totally outclassed the Russians, they poured tight, accurate disciplined fire on the Russians and we lost one Tiger that simply exploded to a direct hit, to eight T34s destroyed. Five of them were completely destroyed by multiple hits, the other three were damaged and immobilised, we saw the crews bailing out and diving for cover but machine guns from Panzers and half-tracks swept the immediate area around them and most were cut down in the open.

More T34s appeared in the distance heading towards us and the turrets of the Panzers swung around to begin engaging. I shouted for Mundt.

“Willy, deploy the PAK 36, we need to cover the Panzers.”

He nodded, put Voss on the machine gun and took three of the men to uncouple and prepare the gun. The rest of my Panzer Grenadiers jumped out and started to check the trenches and foxholes that littered the hilltop. A bullet whistled past my head, I shouted “Sniper,” just as the men jumped for cover, and several shots were fired in the direction that the bullet had come from. Mundt’s team worked feverishly to deploy the anti-tank gun, braving the flying metal that flew everywhere and the sniper that was hidden somewhere in front of us. One of the crew, Schutze Vogel, threw up his arms

and collapsed to the ground as the crack of the sniper's rifle announced another kill. We searched the terrain but the man was well hidden and it was impossible to discover his stand. All that could be done was to lay down a curtain of fire in his general direction and hope to keep his head down until we could deal with him. Voss and Wesserman poured machine gun fire towards him while Mundt set up the gun. Finally they were loaded and able to take shelter behind the shield. Immediately they sighted on a T34 that was less than two hundred metres to our front, I heard Willy shout 'fire!' and the weapon sent the missile hurtling towards the Russian. It hit the side of the tank, a direct hit on one of the fuel drums that the Soviets carried on the deck of the T34 and the whole armoured vehicle exploded in a sheet of flames and smoke. We were faced with the dilemma of reloading from the front while there was a sniper loose. I shouted to the machine gunners to keep up the rate of fire and Mundt bravely rushed out to load the projectile. He slammed it in the muzzle and turned to run back just as a bullet cracked out from the unseen sniper and whistled past the position he'd just vacated, it hit the armoured shield of the gun and ricocheted off to hit the side of his steel helmet. He flinched but ran behind the shelter of the gun, chased by a second bullet that the sniper snapped off to try and finish him. I shouted orders at the men.

"We need to deal with that sniper, he'll kill the next man that goes out to load the gun. Bauer, drive the half-track forward and we'll try and flush him out. Keep clear of the PAK, they need to keep shooting at the T34s. Machine gunners, watch for him and keep your heads down!"

Bauer roared across the hilltop, it was desperate. We had to get near enough to the sniper to see him, yet keep our distance from the marauding T34s. One saw and fired off a shot that narrowly missed the body of our Hanomag, but Mundt had seen the danger and he sent another shot from the PAK 36 that caused the Russian to catch fire, black smoke belched across the battlefield coming straight towards us and protected us from the vision of the sniper. We reached his approximate position and the two gunners poured bullets in his direction while the rest of us jumped out and circled around warily to look for him. We couldn't see far inside the black smoke, which meant that neither could he. At first there was nothing, just endless grass and tangled foliage. Then another bullet cracked out, not aimed at us but we distinctly saw the slight disturbance in the grass as the bullet left his rifle. Vellermann was the nearest, he ran up to the spot where we'd seen the bullet come from and emptied a clip from his MP38 into the ground. The barrel of a

rifle tilted and pointed straight up, almost a gesture of surrender. I walked over to look into the sniper's stand, he was sprawled at the bottom of a shallow hole, still clutching his rifle but it has twisted to point up at the odd angle as he died. I nodded at Vellermann, "Good work," then we raced back to the half-track.

We drove the short distance back to the PAK 36, Mundt and his crew were busily engaging the Soviet armour, it was easier to keep loading the 'Stielgranaten' now that the sniper had been dealt with. There was little for us to do, we kept watch for Soviet infantry with anti-tank weapons but they seemed to have been dealt with by our Panzer Grenadiers, taking them on foxhole by foxhole. Soon the last of the Soviet armour had disappeared, it was time to move. We hitched up the gun and started after the Panzers. Almost instantly we stopped again, a Soviet infantryman had popped out of a foxhole fifty metres in front of us. He hadn't seen us and was fixated on one of our new Panzer Vs that has stopped only two hundred metres away to attend to a breakdown. The crew didn't see him, they had opened the engine hatch, smoke poured out and they were scrambling to repair the problem. It was another PTRD-41, he was loading the cumbersome weapon and I had time to run towards him, I heard some of my men coming behind me. Just before we reached him his head turned and he spotted us, several heavily armed SS troopers rushing towards him. He looked down at his gun for a moment, obviously thinking about taking the shot, then put up his hands. We came up to him and one of the men jumped into his foxhole and searched it for weapons, but apart from the anti-tank rifle he was unarmed, probably he had been part of a crew that had run off when our attack started. We were able to talk to him in broken Russian and German, but his actual dialect was a mystery to us, he certainly wasn't ethnic Russian, possibly he was from Uzbekistan or one of the outlying satellite states.

"Which unit are you from?" I said to him harshly.

He spoke in a garbled language. The only sense I could make out was that he was part of the Voronezh Front, which we already knew was the combined arms unit that faced us. It was impossible to get any further with him, I considered tying him up and waiting for one of our support teams to take him into captivity, we had to press on quickly to catch up with our Fourth Panzer Army, but suddenly an armoured car came towards us, an eight-wheeled SD 232 drew up. The hatch opened and von Meusebach's head popped out.

“What’s going on, Hoffman?” he shouted down to me.

I was so taken aback that I couldn’t answer for a few seconds. I’d thought he was in the centre of our Regiment, controlling his companies and platoons and directing them during the battle. Instead he had obviously just come up from the rear. He realised why I was so surprised and hastened to explain.

“We had a slight electrical problem, that’s why I’m delayed. What are you doing with that prisoner?”

I told him I was about to tie his arms and legs and leave him for the rear units to collect when they came through.

“I can’t have Russian prisoners running loose in the rear, Obersturmfuhrer. I’ll take him back to our HQ for interrogation, you may carry on.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I pointed to the armoured car and pushed the Russian in its direction. One of the crew opened a lower hatch and took the prisoner inside. Without looking at the CO I climbed into our half-track and gave Bauer the order to drive away. Mundt was next to me, manning the MG34. He looked at me meaningfully.

“Shut up, Willy.”

“I didn’t say anything, Obersturmfuhrer.”

Several minutes later, he spoke again. “We need a leader, not a yellow bastard like him!”

“I know, Willy, I know.” I was tired of all of it, the politics, the posturing, soldiers that seemed to do everything except what they were paid to do, to fight. We drove to the edge of the hilltop and looked down on the steppe that unfolded in front of us. It was almost like watching a war game at the staff college, laid out on a table. Except that this was no game. Hundreds of tanks from both sides wheeled and manoeuvred, tens of thousands of infantry, the fortifications were visible, tank traps and ditches, barbed wire, some of the Soviet armour was hull down, dug into defensive positions where they could shoot at our own armour in enfilade.

The first of our own Panzers had started down the hillside and some of the half-tracks were already following.

“Bauer, you know what to do.”

He accelerated away down the slope, driving at full speed to make us a harder target. Already we could see our own objectives, the Soviet anti-tank

crews that were deployed to start shooting at the Panzers. I didn't need to give the order, Bauer turned towards the nearest enemy strongpoint just as the rest of our half-tracks were doing all over the forward edge of the battlefield, the noise was incredible. Explosions, sharp cracks of shells, machine gun fire and the roar of the tank engines. Everywhere there was smoke and chaos. The crew of the Soviet anti-tank gun saw us and shifted aim. They had a 45 mm anti-tank gun, their M1942 backed up with a Maxim heavy 7.62mm machine gun in support, the distinctive wheeled design with the metal shield to protect the crew. The Maxim opened up on us and Mundt and Wesserman fired back short, accurate bursts that caused the Soviets to dive for cover, except the crew of the anti-tank gun, who ignored the machine gun fire to crouch behind their gun and continued loading. We were a hundred and fifty metres away from them when they suddenly fired the first shell, I felt a brief moment of terror as the shell rocked towards us, I could even see the black disc of its outline just before it hit. I knew we were finished, there was an appalling crash, I must have closed my eyes, I opened them again and we were still alive. Behind me there was a huge jagged hole in the bodywork and another the other side. Voss laughed nervously.

"Silly bastards loaded with armour-piercing, it went straight through."

Bauer had stopped, I looked up and the enemy were rapidly reloading, I knew that this time it would be high explosive. They wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

I shouted, "Bauer, get moving before they can reload!"

He drove forward at top speed, lurching towards the enemy gun. Our MG34s kept up a high rate of fire, making the Russians keep their heads down. Two of the machine gun crew were already down, sprawled on the ground and the gun had stopped firing, the danger to us was the anti-tank gun. One hit from a high explosive round would finish us, Bauer understood the danger and bore down on it, we were only metres away when they looked up and saw our charging half-track. They immediately fired but it was not an aimed shot, the shell whistled over our heads and disappeared. Seconds later we hit them with a mighty crash, the gun was thrown over and the crew leapt to avoid the meeting of half-track and artillery, the buckled and bent steel threatened to overwhelm them.

We leapt out of the vehicle with machine pistols blazing, one of the Russians was trying to bring the Maxim into use, another was ramming a new drum magazine into his PPSh. Our only chance was to kill them before they

killed us and we fired and kept firing until they lay dead, a crumpled heap of brown uniforms. It was time to move on, I shouted orders and we left the bodies and broken steel and pressed on to the next enemy position. We worked with the other platoons, clearing enemy defensive positions, marking and clearing mines and taking out enemy armour whenever the opportunity presented itself. By nightfall we had advanced several kilometres and had to stop and wait for dawn, advancing in darkness would have been a certain recipe for disaster. We clustered around in a wide circle, like wagons in the old Western movies. We were in the lee of a tank park, having dozens of heavily armoured Panzers between us and the enemy was comforting. Bauer brewed coffee and Beidenberg unpacked cold rations for us to eat. Mundt leaned over to me and said in a loud whisper, “Have you seen von Meusebach lately?”

I knew exactly what he meant. I was lost for words, torn between my duty to the CO and my contempt for the man.

“No, Willy, you know perfectly well he hasn’t been around since he took that Russian prisoner back. Muller has been running around in a half-track trying to keep control of the Regiment, but unfortunately he hasn’t a radio in his vehicle so he can’t keep in communication with HQ.”

He grunted. “We could have done with the armoured car, a couple of our half-tracks were lost. He should have been there to look after them,” he stared at me. “Look, Sir, we need a CO, there’s no room on this front for cowards.”

“Indeed there isn’t, we’ve taken care of that problem!”

We all whirled around. For the first time I saw a Gestapo officer on the battlefield. Wiedel, von Betternich’s assistant, together with Muller.

Wiedel grinned, unusual for him or any Gestapo man. “May I introduce your new commanding officer, Obersturmbannfuhrer Muller!”

“What happened to von Meusebach?” I asked, not believing that he could have been killed in action when he was so careful to stay away from the fighting.

“He has returned to Berlin,” Muller replied. “There has been a lot of disquiet at Division about his lack of enthusiasm to get to grips with the enemy, Obergruppenfuhrer Hausser gave him the choice of returning to a desk at RSHA or leading tomorrow’s first battle. From the front.” He looked around to make sure that we understood the significance of his words. “Von Meusebach decided that his health was preventing him from giving of his

best to the Deutschland Regiment and this afternoon he began to pack his things to get the train back to Germany, where he can get medical attention and perhaps return to the front at a later date. In the meantime I am back in charge."

"Congratulations, Sir," I said, meaning it.

"Thank you, Hoffman. We're due to carry on in the morning. I assure you I will be leading the Regiment. The armoured car that von Meusebach used will be returned tonight and I will be using it to manage the Regiment."

He walked away and Wiedel hung back.

"I trust that you had something to do with this, Wiedel."

He shrugged. "Sometimes we have to intervene in areas where we would be least expected to get involved. In this case, someone reported that your CO was a coward who was causing difficulties to the Deutschland Regiment, von Betternich passed it up the line to SD Berlin and they contacted Himmler's adjutant who issued the ultimatum. None of us was surprised that von Meusebach opted to pack."

I thought he was re-joining Muller, but he hung back.

"What? What is it?" I asked him.

"How have you found things on the first day, any real problems?"

"Apart from the Red Army, do you mean?"

"I mean anything to suggest that they were better informed about our movements than they should have been."

I thought about the artillery barrage, timed to start an hour before our own barrage, nothing could have been calculated better to cause us the maximum difficulties. I told him about it.

"Yes, we heard about that from the front commanders. Anything else?"

"They were dug in on our exact line of advance, yes, they certainly knew a lot more than they should have done. Was it Lucy?"

He nodded. "We're almost certain, there were too many coincidences. The artillery barrage you referred to, the way their defences seemed to anticipate our lines of advance, it seems that the mysterious Lucy is something of a thorn in our sides. Very well, we'll keep looking. If we need any help from your platoon, I'll radio Muller."

"In that case I'll have to hope that his equipment is not working."

He grinned. "Still bitter, Hoffman. Remember, there was nothing any of us could do to save one life, no matter what you think. We cannot override the authority of Reichsfuhrer Himmler. But if we can unmask this Lucy

traitor, we can save thousands of lives of your comrades, perhaps even stave off defeat."

I looked at him quickly. The Gestapo had arrested and executed people for saying less than that. But it was no slip of the tongue.

"Yes, I see you're surprised. I've been reviewing the intelligence from our over flights of the salient. The battle today was just the first of many you will need to win to take your objective. Do you know that the Soviet defences go to a depth of seventy-five kilometres?"

I was shocked, I'd seen the extent of some of their preparations but hadn't realised that they were even bigger than I'd seen, much bigger. "Are you saying we've got to do the same again all the way through to Kursk and beyond?"

He nodded. "We've counted eight full lines of defence so far, there may be more. They've anticipated every step we've taken and are going to take. We need to find this Lucy and fast. I'll call you if we get any developments."

He walked away and I sat thinking about what he'd said. I couldn't tell the men, it would wipe out their morale if they knew the scale of what we faced.

In the morning we continued with the attack. We fought on for three more days. As Wiedel had predicted each day was like the last, we had to put maximum effort into taking every metre of ground, the Soviets clung on tenaciously, refusing to retreat until they were almost wiped out to the last man. Now that we were deep inside the Soviet defences, they were able to use their anti-tank guns to devastating effect on the weaker side armour of our Panzers and the losses were mounting, losses that we couldn't replace. The Panzer Vs that the Fuhrer had held up the attack for so long for proved almost useless, they were constantly out of action with engine fires and mechanical and electrical failures. On the evening of the fourth day, we were called to a Regimental Officers' briefing. Muller presided as CO once more, Glasser, his adjutant fastened a map to the wall of a ruined barn that we were using as a briefing room. The CO pointed to a village many kilometres to the southwest of Kursk.

"Men, this is Prokhorovka. It is our objective for tomorrow, General Hoth has decided that this is where we will place our maximum effort. Every tank within his command will be used to press home this next attack, about six hundred in all."

We stood there stunned. When the battle started we, the Fourth Army,

comprised more than twice that number, almost fifteen hundred tanks. We'd lost more than a half of our armour for the pitiful few kilometres we'd advanced so far and already this operation smelled like an all or nothing last-ditch attempt. It wasn't an admission of failure, but it certainly suggested that defeat may well be not too far away.

In the morning the wind came up and blew dust everywhere, visibility was reduced to a few hundred metres. We began the advance, as usual following the Panzers, giving them protection from the Soviet anti-tank infantry and other defences that lay across their path. Our mine clearers had been in action during the night and the lines of advance were marked with small flags. The Panzers travelled at speed and began firing as soon as the Russian targets came into view but the battlefield soon descended into chaos. The smoke from the explosions and the burning tanks, frequently the fuel caught fire and sent even denser cloud of black smoke into the air mixed with the dust storm to form an impenetrable fog.

"How's your vision?" I asked Bauer, we'd narrowly avoided running into a ravine and I was anxious that we would wreck our vehicle by hitting some other unexpected obstacle.

"I can manage for now, but at least it stops the Red Army from being able to see us," he said happily. "It's like a destroyer smoke screen, Sir."

"It's stopping us from seeing them too, Bauer. If we can't see them we can't destroy them."

I had no wish to leave whole divisions of Russians in our rear, ready to cripple out supply lines and enable them to come at us from two sides at once, but all we could do was keep following the Panzers. We pressed on and I estimated that we were less than a kilometre from Prokhorovka. A tank rolled out of the smoke and dust and rolled past us, I could hardly believe it, the compact, angular shape of a Russian T34 with its red star emblazoned on the turret. I shouted urgently to Bauer.

"Stefan, there are T34s all around us, get us behind some cover so that we can stop and unlimber the gun!"

He found a narrow balka in the ground and drove the half-track in so that most of the body was inside the shoulders of the entrance of ravine. There was no time to think, we had to get the gun into action.

"Uncouple the gun, make sure we have some cover and load with armour piercing, we've got ourselves tangled in the middle of Soviet armour."

They started to drag the gun back out of the balka and set it behind a low bank of earth that would give us some protection. While we watched the smoke cleared briefly and we could see what looked like a scene from hell, tanks from both armies wheeling and fighting, guns blazing, smoke and flames pouring out of stricken vehicles, crews leaping out of burning tanks, their uniforms on fire and their comrades trying to beat them out.

"Ready!" Mundt shouted.

I watched carefully, there was one Soviet tank, a KV-1, not as nimble as the T34.

"Tank, eleven o'clock, fire when you're ready, Willy!"

He spotted the target and his gunners rapidly worked the gun around to lay it on the target. The was an enormous 'boom' as he fired and seconds after we saw the shell strike the Russian, but it had hit the heavy frontal armour and failed to destroy it. Wesserman rushed around to fit another shell into the muzzle and dashed back behind cover as Mundt fired again, this time it hit the side of the turret and exploded, flames began to lick out of the tank, then the whole vehicle exploded in a furious eruption of fiery metal fragments. They were already reloading and I searched for more targets amidst the chaotic fury of the battle.

We fought through the day in that position, the armies seemed to be stalemated. At one time the battle seemed to abate, just after midday, and we caught a pair of Soviet anti-tank gunners unawares. They'd set up in a nearby foxhole without noticing we were already hiding in the balka, Bauer was a good shot, he had his Kar 98 clipped inside the half-track and he picked it up, took aim and shot both the Russians. We rushed out to check them, one was dead, the other fatally wounded. Their unit insignia were the 5th Guards Tank Army.

"That's an elite unit," Mundt said thoughtfully. "They only give them the 'Guards' designation when they've proved themselves in battle. This is going to be one hell of a fight."

"It already is," Voss protested. "It can't get any worse than this."

None of us dared to reply. In the afternoon the Luftwaffe came over to take on the Soviet tanks, Stukas with twin 37mm anti-tank cannons and took their toll of the enemy armour, Heinkel 111 bombers flew sortie after sortie, smashing the Red Army legions where they lay, in theory making our job easier. The Red Air Force came up in swarms and there was a constant battle between the fighters for supremacy over the battlefield, a mad, Wagnerian

fury that lit up the sky with smoke, flame and noise. We pushed on, metre by metre, pushing back the Soviets, nearer and nearer to Prokhorovka. It was clearly in sight, Muller kept rushing from platoon to platoon, company to company, “We need to give our Panzers more support they’re almost there. Just one more push and we’ll roll over the Soviets and take Prokhorovka!”

We never did take that flyspeck of a Soviet village. The following morning we were still attacking, tanks and artillery, Stukas and Heinkel bombers pounding the Russian positions, but it seemed that every time we destroyed a company, a regiment, a whole army, another one stepped forward to take its place. Our tank force was dwindling. The rate of fire we were able to sustain was dropping, hour by hour. A gap opened up in front of us where a Soviet position had been destroyed in the last bombing raid, we had a chance to dash forward and take it before they sent in more troops. Mundt looked across to me, waiting for the order.

“Shouldn’t we go now, Sir? We’ve got a gap we can exploit, if we leave it any longer the Soviets will come back in force and make our job that much harder.”

I shook my head. “Look around, Willy. We’re losing it, how many of our Panzers have you seen mounting attacks lately?”

“It’s true, things have been a bit quiet. I assumed they were regrouping for a new attack.”

“I’m not so sure, the battlefield is littered with wrecked armour and not all of it is Russian. How the hell can we sustain those kinds of losses?”

He scratched his head. “If what you’re saying is correct, Sir, it’s all over. We can’t just sit here, either we go forward or back. And if we’re not going forward, that’s it, we’re finished.”

“I may be wrong, my friend, but I think we should wait before we stick our necks out.”

Up and down the line things had gone quiet. I imagined that if the commanders did the maths, in terms of our losses for each kilometre of ground taken, they would find they were unsustainable. Reaching Prokhorovka was only a partial objective, once we’d taken it we would still need to push through the formidable defences that stood between here and Kursk. It didn’t add up. We waited hour after hour, but the battlefield was static. Night fell and movement stopped almost entirely. The following day we started pulling back, out of the salient and nearer to Kharkov. We all knew that the next danger we had to face was the inevitable Soviet

counterattack.

“We’ll almost certainly need to strengthen the defences in Kharkov itself and give ourselves space and time to regroup before they attack,” Muller said confidently when he came around to check preparations for our withdrawal. “They’ll need a long time to recover from the pounding we just gave them.”

I wondered how long we’d need to recover from the pounding we’d just received from the Soviets, but it wasn’t the kind of question that would be well received by a senior officer.

## Chapter Nine

*'Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live'.*

*Adolf Hitler*

It was the beginning of August and we’d been back in our new regimental headquarters for three weeks, an old school on the outskirts of Kharkov, a welcome change from the miserable hovels of Podvirky. After the battle for the salient we were exhausted, but at least we could take comfort from the fact that the Soviets were undoubtedly feeling it more than we were. When we’d left the battlefield the landscape was a litter of bodies and broken armour, most of it Russian, although we’d lost a dangerous number of our own Panzers. Muller had managed to recruit forty Hiwis to help us create defences against the Russian attack that was expected in the autumn. They were still dragging sandbags around the old school yard when the salvo arrived. We dived for cover as the first shells bracketed our positions, Mundt and Bauer were next to me in a newly dug slit trench.

“Jesus Christ, they didn’t take long,” Bauer said, wide eyed at the colossal weight of shells that were landing all around us.

In an incredibly short time the enemy had brought up their big guns, hundreds of them.

“They must have been ready for us, Stefan. I have the distinct impression that for a long time we’ve been playing the Russians’ game. You know what good chess players they are rumoured to be.”

“They should stick to chess, Sir,” Mundt said bitterly. “This is getting

damned hot."

If anything, he understated the case. The school behind us, our supposed new quarters was completely destroyed as shell after shell struck home and reduced it to rubble. Even while they were still firing the Soviet light bombers came in, a flight of Ilyushin IL-4s, twin-engine aircraft that unloaded thousands of kilos of bombs on us and other targets, some of them just churned up the rubble of the destroyed school.

"Where's the Luftwaffe?" Voss shouted bitterly, he'd run over to jump into our slit trench after his sandbagged machine gun emplacement was destroyed in a bomb blast.

"I think half of them are destroyed on the ground inside the salient," Mundt said bitterly, "alongside half of our Panzer force."

The barrage of bombs and shells lasted most of the day, our own guns desperately used counter battery fire in a vain attempt to dilute the Russian artillery, but they were only partially successful. More flights of IL-4s came over, our anti-aircraft fire was ready for them this time and dozens of our four-barrelled Flakvierlings opened up on them, together with every other gun that was able to shoot. We brought down five out of a flight of fourteen, but the others ignored the ground fire and relentlessly went on to drop their bomb loads. Belatedly, a pair of Focke-Wulf 190s cam roaring in to do battle, chasing after the bombers and downing another three.

"A pity the bastards didn't do that before they dropped their bombs," Voss said, continuing his rant about the Luftwaffe.

I said nothing. The Red Air Force had become more and more effective, at least along this front. Whereas a few months ago, our Messerschmidt's and Focke-Wulfs could roam the battlefield freely, they were now more frequently engaged by Soviet fighters who were taking a huge toll of our irreplaceable pilots and aircraft. Their aircraft had improved, as had their pilots, to deadly effect. And like on the ground, they had more and more of them, a seemingly inexhaustible supply. By evening the bombing and shelling had largely ended from both sides and we spent an uneasy night waiting for it to begin again. By dawn it was quiet everywhere, as if the armies were gathering strength. We were enjoying a quiet moment, drinking coffee, when a messenger came in. I was to report to Gestapo Headquarters. The only transport we had was the half-track, its body dotted with scars and holes from stray fragments but largely undamaged, but I decided to leave it and walk. It was only two kilometres and I wanted to get out of the cramped

conditions for a short time and stretch my legs. I left Beidenberg in charge of the platoon and took Mundt and Bauer with me, they'd become more than just soldiers in my platoon, they were companions too, despite the difference in rank, after all, this was the SS.

We had barely gone half a kilometre, strolling along a rubble-strewn street when a shot rang out and clanged on Bauer's helmet and we dived undercover, I was relieved to see that he was uninjured.

"Did anyone see where it came from?" Mundt asked, scanning the surrounding wrecked buildings anxiously.

"Probably quite a distance, Willy. If he'd been nearer, the bullet would have penetrated his helmet."

"So what do we do, Sir? Just leave him there to shoot the next German soldier that comes past?"

"You're right, we need to find him and finish him. Let's move out in the direction of the shot and see if we can't flush him out."

We moved cautiously from building to building, I'd estimated that he was hidden in a ruined office block about four hundred metres away. We crawled until we were only fifty metres away. It was time to get him to show himself.

"Stefan, go back to that low wall we came around, be behind it and show your helmet. If he puts his head up we should reach him with the MP38s from here."

He nodded and crawled away.

"Are you ready, Willy?"

"Yes, Sir, a pity we haven't got a rifle, though, we could have made certain."

I smiled. "We're the SS, Scharfuhrer, it's our job to make do."

"That's all we ever do these days. Maybe for once they'll give us the equipment and men to finish the job."

It was not like Willy to moan so much. The battle in the salient had gone badly, very badly. We'd inflicted heavy losses on the Russians, but there were just so many of them. The whole of the war in Russia had become a war of attrition, of killing and destroying as many of the enemy as possible while they inflicted the same heavy punishment on us. A foolish strategy, I reflected, one that could only benefit the Russians. I wasn't sure if we had a choice, if the opportunity to conduct the war in a different way existed, but if it didn't, why had we ever come here in the first place? It was a question that

only the politicians could answer.

"Bauer should be about ready," Willy said, jerking me out of my thoughts.

I cocked my MP38 and waited where I could see the wrecked building, it had once had several floors but was now nothing but rubble. I surveyed every metre of the jumbled pile of rock, nothing. Then I looked again, there, in the far corner there was an old steel filing cabinet that had tumbled down, one of the drawers had fallen out. Inside the open door space I had seen a tiny movement. Was it the sniper? Then Willy shouted, "Stefan is lifting his helmet, look out!"

It all happened so quickly. I saw a rifle barrel extend from the wreckage, inside the metal cabinet. As he fired a tiny puff of smoke ejected from the barrel and the crack of a rifle shot echoing around us, I leapt up. I could see him, framed by the steel, his startled face behind the gun. I aimed quickly and squeezed the trigger, sending the whole clip into the narrow space, Willy saw where I was firing and adjusted his aim to pour his own fire into the same place. The face disappeared and we rushed forward, slamming in new clips as we ran. We simultaneously cocked our weapons and rounded the broken metal, ready to fire instantly but we needn't have worried, he was dead, torn apart in a storm of gunfire. We turned as there was a clatter of boots, but it was only Bauer.

"Did you get him, Sir?"

"He won't be shooting at any of our men again, Bauer."

Mundt picked up his rifle, a Moisin Nagant and smashed it repeatedly against the stonework, putting it out of use. Then we headed back to the street to make our cautious way into the city.

We had to walk past the Hotel October to reach Gestapo Headquarters, as we neared it I could see a crowd of people on the pavement looking up at a lamppost, a body swung there.

"It looks as if the Einsatzgruppe has been hanging partisans again," Mundt said nonchalantly, as if such horrors were part of normal life. I nodded automatically as I was more concerned to keep alert for snipers, even this close to the centre of the city the risks were very high. I heard Bauer say, "Christ, she must have been a pretty one," and something made look around at the body they were trying to cut down.

Her face was horribly distorted, in death it had gone a ghostly white, all of the features distorted, but I still recognised her. Nadia Vlasov, the girl

we'd brought back on that mad horseback ride through the salient, the girl who I had hoped to be with again before she had entertained von Meusebach in her hotel room. As was usual for these executions she had a cardboard sign hung around her neck, but it was in Russian script, not German. So the partisans had finally got to her, presumably in punishment for her father's betrayal of Stalin. Mundt recognised her too. "I'm sorry, Obersturmfuhrer, that was a bastard thing to do."

"It's a bastard of a war. Poor kid, she didn't deserve that just for what her father did."

We stood and watched them cut her down, then she was taken away for burial with the other thousands of casualties that were the victims of the shelling and bombing, the snipers and the Einsatzgruppe. We walked on to Gestapo HQ and I went in alone to find von Betternich. He was in his office, sat behind his desk staring into space.

He looked up as I went in and saluted. "Ah, Hoffman, I was just thinking about the latest military disaster."

"Does that mean that the battle for the salient is officially over? There won't be any reinforcements to try again?"

He looked baffled. "The salient? Of course not, don't you know that the Fuhrer has already issued orders for more of our armoured divisions to be transferred to Italy?"

"Italy? I thought we could contain them on Sicily, what about the Italian army?"

He shook his head. "It is only a matter of weeks before the Allies reach Messina and begin to cross to the mainland. I'm afraid the war is taking a turn for the worse, Obersturmfuhrer, you can certainly forget about trying to retake the Kursk salient."

"So it was all for nothing, all of the losses, the deaths, the sacrifice?"

He spread his hands. "My dear fellow, that is war, is it not? There are winners and there are losers. To the victors the spoils, is that not what they say?"

"What do you want me for, Sir?" I snapped out. "I'm far too busy to run around playing these games."

His expression hardened. "I'm sorry you don't find it to your liking, Hoffman. Most people find that wars are not entirely to their liking. Especially when they are on the losing side."

"Are you now saying that we are losing?"

His expression softened. “I didn’t say that. What do you think?”

“What do you want me for this time?”

He smiled at my refusal to answer his question. “We need to make an arrest, at least one.”

“Does that mean you’ve found the Lucy traitor?”

“I’m afraid not, no. The person we want is General Schmidt of the Second Panzer Army. Perhaps you and your men would accompany me. I have a Kubelwagen outside, we can use that.”

I was so astonished I didn’t even think to ask him what the General had done. I assumed he must have been passing secrets to the Russians, although it could have just been theft. He got up and limped down the stairs, the men fell in behind me. We climbed into the Kubi and drove out to the headquarters of the Second Army. Von Betternich showed his pass and we were ushered into Schmidt’s office.

“Yes, what can I do for you?” The General who looked up was lean and tough looking. His sharp eyes took in me, and my troopers standing behind the SD man.

“Have you men come to volunteer for the Panzers, God knows we could use some new men?”

“General Schmidt,” von Betternich announced in formal tones. “You are under arrest for treasonable activities, you must come with us!”

His jaw dropped. “Treason, are you mad? This is nonsense, I’ll contact OKH immediately and tell them to sort it all out, this is just a stupid mistake!”

“The order was issued by the Supreme Leader of OKH, I’m afraid there is no mistake.”

He looked worried now, uncertain, but not afraid. “What the hell do they think that I’ve done?”

The SD Man took out a document. “It says on the warrant that on the 17th of June you said in front of witnesses that in your opinion, and I quote, ‘This mad man Adolf Hitler is leading us to disaster, he’s leading us from one defeat to another’.

“Yes, so? What I said is absolutely true,” he said incredulously. “We all know it, Stalingrad, the Kursk salient was another disaster. The Allies have landed in Sicily. Need I go on?”

“You need not, no. What you have just repeated is indeed treason. Hoffman, get your men to take him away!”

The adjutant and staff stood watching with expressions of horror as we marched their CO out to our waiting vehicle. The adjutant had already been on the radio to OKH to confirm the order and he had to stand back and watch the charade take place. I felt sick as I led the brave, front line officer out of his office, but I had no choice or they'd arrest me too. I knew we couldn't go on like it, arresting our valuable and knowledgeable senior officers and allowing one man with little or no military experience to make decisions that would plunge whole armies into disaster. We drove back to the city centre in silence. General Schmidt seemed to have gone into a state of mental paralysis. He knew it was an error from which he'd never recover and he'd be lucky just to stay alive. We deposited him in the cell and left the building, but von Betternich called me back. "I want you back here tonight, Hoffman, we may have a lead on our Lucy spy, be here for seven o'clock. With luck we might have the bastard in custody before morning."

I saluted and walked away, still sick to the stomach to see that Panzer general put into a cell when he was so desperately needed. We marched carefully back out of the city, wary this time of snipers but this time there were no random shots fired at us. Beidenberg had the men repairing the fortifications, Hiwis were busy helping dig trenches and carry more sandbags to the gun emplacements.

"Any problems?" I asked him. "Apart from the obvious, of course."

He smiled. "All quiet at the moment, Sir, but I think the Russians must surely be massing not too far away to attack the city."

I nodded. "I think you're right, this damned place has been like a bone in their throats almost since the start of Barbarossa, they'll certainly be working out how quickly they can take it back off us. Your defences will be sorely needed before too long."

I left him and went to the Regimental HQ nearby, Muller was outside with Glasser, the adjutant.

"What was that business this morning?" the CO asked me.

"General Schmidt, they arrested him for treason, Sir."

He momentarily closed his eyes. "Dear God, if they take all of our best commanders we'll have no one left to lead us. It's almost as bad as the Stalin purges."

"Are there any signs of another Russian attack, Sir?"

He shook his head. "We haven't noticed unusual armour and troop movements, but we know they'll come shortly. It's a pity we lost so much of

our own armour trying to take Kursk."

I asked him were there any estimates of our losses yet. He looked around carefully, to make sure no one was listening. It was such a common gesture in the new Germany of Adolf Hitler that I barely noticed it.

"Unofficially, they put our losses at around a thousand Panzers across the whole of Army Group South and Army Group Centre. They're not all totally destroyed, of course, but the ones that are just damaged are out of action until we can repair them. We have about six hundred Panzers left, if we scrape up everything including some of the more obsolete stuff."

It was a day for bad news. "Can we hold them with those numbers, Sir?"

He gave me a look that was very eloquent. "You need to make up your own mind about that, I'd rather not guess."

Glasser was looking worried in case his CO said something that would incriminate him. I looked at them both. "I think we've made up our minds already."

They both nodded.

The Soviet Air Force appeared to be as exhausted as we were, there were few signs of enemy aircraft in the sky and we began to relax until a flight of four Soviet fighters stormed over the lines, spraying cannon and machine gun fire in their path. We dived for cover in the newly dug slit trenches, holding our breath for the bombs that the small Russian fighter bombers carried, but these were Yak 1s, a single-seat fighter designed more for aerial superiority and escort duties for bombers and low level attack aircraft like the Ilyushin IL-2 Sturmovik. The fortifications protected us from the worst of the storm of fire and while the Flakvierlings sent torrents of fire skyward to bring down the raiders, we kept our heads down and waited for it to be over. As they flew away our anti-aircraft fire hit one of them but the other three flew out of range and out of sight.

"Bloody Luftwaffe again," Voss moaned, "what the hell are they thinking of? Has anyone seen any kind of air combat patrol today?" We all shook our heads. "Damn right, they're all lying in bed."

"I think many of them are lying dead on the battle field of the Kursk salient, Karl-Heinz. Some of them may have been transferred to Italy, of course."

"Can't the Italians protect their own country?" he snapped. "I thought they were supposed to be Allies. They're bloody useless."

"Karl-Heinz is right, you know," Beidenberg said, surprising all of us,

he rarely said anything while we were discussing the progress of the war. “They collapsed at Stalingrad where they were supposed to be holding the line and they collapsed in North Africa. They’re hopeless soldiers. They’ll lose the whole of Italy if we don’t prop them up.”

I felt sorry for the Italians. Before I came out to Russia to join the Deutschland Regiment, I’d trained with several of them at officer training school in Lichterfelde. They tried to explain Italian politics to me. The problem was the Mussolini’s fascists were very much in the minority, unlike those who admired Hitler in Germany who were very much in the majority, especially after he enjoyed his early triumphs in Alsace-Lorraine, the Danzig Corridor, Austria and Czechoslovakia. After we conquered France he could do no wrong, unlike Mussolini who was viewed with the utmost suspicion in Italy. They maintained that it wasn’t that the Italians couldn’t fight, just that most didn’t want to. I felt bound to defend them, I remembered them as young men who loved life, who enjoyed wine, women and opera in equal measure.

“As I recall, Rommel was defeated in North Africa,” I said quietly. “And wasn’t General von Paul defeated at Stalingrad too? It’s not just the Italians that are losing.”

They were silent at the enormity of what I’d just said. It was only the truth, but the implications for all of us were shocking. The attack seemed to be over and we went back to work, but it was work that seemed increasingly without reason, without purpose, without hope.

I took my trusty NCO, Willy Mundt together with Stefan Bauer into the city to report to the Gestapo. The senior SD officer von Betternich was waiting for us together with Gerd Wiedel, his Gestapo counterpart. Wiedel had a map of the city pinned to the wall, he pointed to a location on the northern outskirts.

“We’ve pinpointed a radio transmission coming out of here two nights in succession. We deliberately kept away from him to make him feel as if he was safe to use that location. Tonight, with any luck, we’ll have him.”

“Is it Lucy?” I asked him.

“We think so, but his transmissions are encoded, we can’t be sure until have him in our hands. If we can take him it will change everything. The radio van is ready as soon as he starts transmitting and we’ve made the Kubi available for you.”

Von Betternich was smiling to himself as Wiedel spoke, evidently he

didn't share his colleague's enthusiasm. I went back outside to bring the Kubi around to the front. We scrounged coffee from the Gestapo canteen and sat around waiting. Even the Gestapo couldn't do better than the foul-tasting ersatz coffee and as I looked around at the broken, rubble-strewn surroundings that no one had bothered to tidy for several weeks, at the peeling paintwork and cracked masonry of the Gestapo headquarters building, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of masters of Europe we Germans had become. More and more it seemed as if we were masters of a huge, lice-ridden rubbish tip, except that the lice carried machine guns and often rode in tanks.

"There was an article in Volkischer Beobachter last week," Bauer said abruptly, apparently just making conversation. Mundt and I looked at him expectantly. "They're still asking for applicants to apply for farms in the German occupied part of the Soviet Union. The General Government, what used to be Poland, is still short of people too, they say there are lots of empty farms just waiting for Germans to come forward and claim them."

"Did they say what happened to the former owners of the farms, Stefan?"

"No, they didn't mention that, Sir."

He was half smiling, the story was of course true, those articles were always appearing, but the way the war was going made the occupancy of a farm in the former regions of Poland and the Ukraine more like suicide with every week that went by. He was smiling broadly. It was one of those word games we often played, recounting the latest idiocy from Dr Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry with a straight face in the hopes of catching your audience with a laugh.

"Stefan, I've thought about another article in the Beobachter."

"Yes, Sir, what's that?"

"It's about an SS Schutze playing word games outside of Gestapo HQ."

He looked around quickly and his face fell. "I'd forgotten that."

Mundt and I both laughed then, the joke had fallen on his head like a bolt of lightning.

"He's broadcasting, we need to leave now," Wiedel said as he rushed out into the courtyard. Von Betternich came limping after him and Wiedel helped him into the funkwagen and then joined us in the Kubi. We roared out of the courtyard and made our way at speed across the city.

"We want him alive," Wiedel said as Mundt and I checked and cocked

our MP38s.

I nodded. “Don’t worry, we’ll only shoot if he starts shooting at us.”

The truck stopped just before an intersection.

“This time we’ll go forward on foot, Hoffman, if he sees the vehicles he’ll make a run for it.”

I nodded. We left Bauer with the Kubi and walked carefully forward, I saw the door of the truck open and von Betternich climbed out and followed at a distance. We rounded the corner and Wiedel pointed out the target building.

“Willy, take Bauer and go around the back, I’ll go in the front with Herr Wiedel.”

The Scharfuhrer nodded and walked quietly along the street and disappeared down a lane that led to the rear of the building. Wiedel led the way to the front of the building and tested the front door quietly. It was locked.

“Can you smash it open, Hoffman?”

I nodded, handed him my machine pistol to hold and stepped back three paces. Then charged the door with my shoulder, it splintered and opened inwards. I grabbed my weapon from Wiedel as I rushed through the entrance. The sound of a Morse Code transmission in progress was coming from an upstairs room. I charged up the stairs with Wiedel close behind, there was a second flight of stairs and we went up to the top floor, the beeping of the Morse Code was loud, then it stopped. I went into the room where I estimated it had been coming from. There was a dressing table and a brass bedstead. On the dressing table was a potable radio set that was packed in a canvas case, opened to allow the set to be used. At the side was the Morse key, a wire came out of the side of the radio and stretched upwards, I looked up and there was a trapdoor into the ceiling above the dressing table that led into the roof space.

“Whoever he is, he’s obviously gone up there,” I said to Wiedel. “I’ll go after him, I would suggest you check the rest of the house in case there is another way out.”

I climbed onto the dresser and swung myself up through the trapdoor. The wire aerial disappeared through an opened inspection cover in the roof, I ran across the tops of the roof beams to reach it when it suddenly slammed shut. I pushed hard but whoever had closed it had bolted it, it was a dead end. I went back through the hatch, climbed down again, and ran out to the

stairway. Wiedel was on the next landing down. I shook my head.

"He was up there, but he's bolted his escape route shut, we need to go outside to find him!"

We ran back down the stairs and out of the front door. There was no sign of him, he had to come down the outside somewhere, but where?

"Wiedel, you go to the left, I'll go to the right."

He nodded and ran off to the side of the house, I went the other way but still there was nothing. Mundt and Bauer came towards me, how could he have slipped through our net? Then I saw a small building tucked into the corner of the garden wall, covered in green ivy that almost completely hid it from view. The door was shut so I went carefully towards it, kicked it in and rushed in with my machine pistol ready. A German officer was sitting on an old wooden stool. He looked up as I crashed through the door.

"There was no need to smash the door, my friend, it wasn't locked."

"Who the hell are you?" I asked him, keeping my weapon pointed at him.

He sighed. "Captain Helmersdorf, Abwehr, Army Intelligence. What the hell are you doing here?"

I was taken aback, it was almost as if I was the quarry and not him. I told him who I was and what we were doing here.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding," he said. "You have interrupted an Abwehr operation, I suggest you leave."

"And I suggest you explain yourself to the Gestapo," Wiedel's voice interrupted as he walked into the tiny room.

The Abwehr man stared at him. "The Gestapo has no jurisdiction over the Abwehr."

"In matters of treachery we have absolute jurisdiction, as you know. Hoffman, arrest him, we'll take him back with us and question him more!"

"I insist that I contact Army Headquarters to clear this up," Helmersdorf said firmly.

Wiedel walked up to him and punched him hard in the face. "Traitors don't insist on anything, you piece of shit. Shut up or the next one will be a kick in the balls. You should save your energy for later, I'm sure you'll have lots to tell us."

I felt slightly ashamed at seeing the Gestapo man hit the officer, but I turned a blind eye. Meddling in Gestapo business was never a good idea and besides, if he really was the traitor, he deserved whatever he got. I sent

Mundt and Bauer to fetch the spy's radio equipment. Von Betternich limped up to us, eyeing the Abwehr man.

"So this is the Lucy traitor, is it?"

"We think so, Sir."

"I am on a mission for Army Intelligence, you fools," he snarled. He winced as Wiedel went to hit him again but the SD man put up a hand to stop him.

"Which mission is that?"

"We had a report of unauthorised transmissions coming from this area and I came to investigate," Helmersdorf said. "I was looking in that garden workshop when your men came crashing in, they made so much noise that if there was a spy here he's long gone."

"That's bullshit," Wiedel said. "Are you saying that you came here on your own?"

"Sometimes it is better to be subtle, not something the Gestapo had much of a reputation for," he sneered.

Wiedel raised his hand but von Betternich stopped him again and gave the Abwehr officer a hard stare. "I warn you, whatever you may think of the Gestapo, their methods of extracting information are very effective. We'll discuss this further when we get back, take him away."

Mundt and Bauer took an arm each and escorted him to the Kubelwagen. Von Betternich looked at me. "What do you think?"

"I think it's him, Sir. He was almost certainly hiding from us. Besides, there's no one else around. It has to be him."

He nodded. "I'm sure you're right, we'll soon find out either way. Wiedel, while you're questioning him I'll make some discreet enquiries at Army Headquarters and see if they have anything to say about him."

We rode back into the city centre in silence, unsure as to whether we'd uncovered a traitor or fallen foul of an ongoing Abwehr investigation. As we got near the centre it was obvious that something was wrong, lights were coming on, vehicles and armour were starting to move and men running through the streets. We were stopped at a crossroads by the Feldgendarmerie checkpoint. Wiedel asked the sergeant what was up.

"It's the Soviets, Sir, they're attacking the city. They've got two or three fucking Soviet armies descending and coming straight at us!"

# Chapter Ten

*‘One must not judge everyone in the world by his qualities as a soldier: otherwise we should have no civilization’*

*Erwin Rommel*

We reached the Gestapo Office and left the two security officers with their Abwehr captive, then we made our way back to Regimental HQ and I reported to Muller.

“Obersturmfuhrer, the signs are that we’re in for something of a shit storm. Our intelligence reports that the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts are coming out of the Kursk Bulge and heading for Kharkov. Von Manstein and von Kluge have just got back from the Wolfschanze, our orders are to hold the city at all costs!”

“How long have got before they hit us?”

“I’ve no idea, Hoffman. Perhaps two weeks, that’s the word from HQ.”

I left him reflecting how the fortunes of war had changed so suddenly, only recently we were attacking the Kursk salient with a view to putting the impetus back into our Eastern Front offensive. Now we were just talking about hanging on at all costs. That evening I was able to get away and I only had one destination in mind. Irina. I knocked on her door and she opened it “Yes? What do you want?”

“Irina, in spite of everything, I want you to come and have dinner with me.”

She stood for a moment, indecisive. She’d been about to say no, I realised that, but a glint came into her eyes. “Yes, alright. I’ll get my jacket.”

She came out of the house with a thin cotton jacket, the evening was warm and balmy, at least the weather hadn’t turned on us, it seemed that everything else had. We found one of the few remaining restaurants still open. This one was tiny, little more than the front room of a private house. She’d hardly spoken to me but after the first course was served and the waiter opened a bottle of local wine, I asked her what was on her mind.

“You know why I came to help you last time, you persuaded me that it was important that you Germans win the war.”

I nodded. “Isn’t that still true?”

“It would be, if it was possible, but Jurgen, you know it isn’t going to happen.”

I thought about her reply. It was true that we'd suffered some reversals on the Eastern Front, but we hadn't lost yet, I mentioned that to her. She smiled.

"Do you think we don't listen to the news? We know that the Allies have taken North Africa, they've taken Sicily and they'll soon be on the Italian mainland. Leningrad is holding out, Stalingrad was a terrible defeat and the last battle in the Kursk salient was hardly a victory. The Germans are losing."

I didn't agree with her, not entirely. We weren't winning, certainly, but we weren't completely losing either, we had massive forces at our disposal.

"I still think we will win eventually, Irina," I told her earnestly, although as I said it I knew that it was a wildly optimistic statement. We needed to find a counter to the vast and overwhelming numbers that the Soviets could bring to the battlefield and so far, we hadn't found the solution. We desperately needed the secret weapons the Fuhrer kept promising. When would they come?

"I want you to get me to Germany, Jurgen. When the Russians take Kharkov, you know I'll be shot as a spy, don't you?"

"Irina, they haven't taken Kharkov yet, you're quite safe."

She sneered slightly. "You need to wake up, Jurgen, they retook the city before and they're massing their forces outside the city to take it again. I have to leave before they come back."

"You're thinking of Nadia Vlasov, the girl the partisans killed?"

"There have been many such hangings of supposed traitors, so yes, I'm terrified. But Nadia Vlasov wasn't killed by partisans."

"But, I saw her hanging there, with a sign on her chest, it had to be partisans!"

She smiled. "That is what it was supposed to look like, but some local people saw it happen, they work inside the hotel. The Germans suspected her of passing information to the Russians, so they murdered her and made it look like a partisan reprisal. It was propaganda, pure and simple, but I suppose if your people hadn't got her, the Russians would have, sooner or later. I have to get out, Jurgen. Please will you help me?"

I was only half listening to her. Our people had killed Nadia Vlasov. It made no sense, unless it was part of some devious plot by the Gestapo or even more likely, the Sicherheitsdienst. And that meant only one person, the most senior SD officer in Kharkov. SD Obersturmbannfuhrer Walter von

Betternich, who had shown himself to be totally capable of arranging a murder if would further his own ends, or the ends of the Third Reich, which was not necessarily the same thing. I realised that Irina was still talking to me.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"Damnit, Jurgen, listen to me! I have to get out of here, can you help me?"

I heard myself telling her that I would find a way to get her back to Germany, but I was still reeling at the thought that von Betternich may have been behind the public hanging of Nadia Vlasov. I knew there would have to be a confrontation with him sooner or later, but one that I would have to prepare for thoroughly, he was a formidable opponent. Would I kill him? It was a tempting thought, he certainly deserved to die, but in the vicious slaughter of the Russian war, perhaps most us were not without blame. I pushed the problems to one side. I needed to concentrate on Irina.

"Yes, I'll do what I can. If I can possibly find a good reason to get you on a train returning to the Reich you could leave with the correct documentation, I can always say that you are my fiancée. When you get to the Reich, you can find yourself accommodation and work, it won't be difficult, everyone is desperate for workers these days."

She smiled. "Your fiancée? That would be wonderful. When are we to be married?"

I nearly choked on my wine. "I only meant..."

"I know what you meant, don't worry. I thought of going to Berlin."

"Berlin? You cannot be serious. It's being bombed to rubble. You need to find somewhere quiet, away from the worst of the bombing. Dresden would be worth considering, it's a beautiful old city and you'd love it. Very medieval, it's somehow managed to stay untouched by the war."

"In that case I shall set up home in Dresden."

We finished our meal and the band started to play, I took her out onto the dance floor and we held each other tightly, clinging to a little warmth, a little love and hopefully a little more later. I wasn't to be disappointed.

"Jurgen, when you take me home tonight, I don't want to be alone."

"Nor do I, Irina."

When we got to her house we couldn't wait to get to the bedroom, there was a thick rug in front of the empty hearth and we tore off our clothes and literally savaged each other's bodies. It was a lust born of animal need. A lust

that understood that tonight, like every other night on the Eastern Front, could be our last. We stroked and caressed our partner's bodies as if they were a mighty treasure, a golden prize in the lottery of life and one that may only be won once in a lifetime. Afterwards, we lit cigarettes and lay together comfortably on the rug, smoking in silence. Eventually, I had to get up and get dressed.

"So duty has to call again, does it?" she smiled.

"I'm afraid so. Someone has to keep the railway line to Germany safe."

Her face fell, I realised at once that I shouldn't have brought the war back to this rare moment. I kissed her goodbye and slipped out.

When I got back to my unit, they were already up and racing to reinforce the defences. I found Muller and asked him what was up.

"The Red Army, that's what's up," he snarled grimly. "Intelligence said that it would be at least two weeks before they were ready to move, the Russians were much too weak after Kursk. Last night, the First Tank Army and the Fifth Guards Tank Army attacked in force. Belgorod has fallen, while adjoining and supporting Soviet forces have widened the gap, they're converging on Kharkov, Hoffman, I suggest you prepare your men. I'm expecting the city to come under attack later today!"

I found the men and passed on the grim news, but the regimental grapevine had already informed them. We were ordered to move forward to a prepared defensive line five kilometres outside the city and we began to load the half-track with the supplies we would need. A few Panzers rumbled past us heading east to guard the defences, but they were awfully few.

"That was a real work of genius, moving our armour to Italy," Voss moaned. "We'll need more than this pitiful bunch to hold back the Reds."

"They're all we've got, Voss, we'll just have to manage," I said curtly. "Besides, it was an order of the Fuhrer that they were transferred to the Western theatre."

"That's what I meant," he said slyly.

I let it go, he had a point, it was poor bastards like him and the rest of us that would bear the brunt of the failure to come to grips with the Soviet hordes, not OKW, OKH or Reichsfuhrer Himmler. We were about to leave when the air raid siren sounded.

"Out, out, take cover!"

We scrambled out of the half-track and jumped into the slit trench. The Soviets were using IL-2 Sturmoviks with a top cover of Yak-1s, not that the

escort fighters were needed. Just like our armour, the aircraft losses of the Kursk salient had been crippling and the Luftwaffe were still struggling to catch up. The Soviets seemed to have no such difficulties. They came in huge air fleets while our aircraft were nowhere to be seen. While the Yaks circled overhead the Sturmoviks came in one after the other, dropping their bombs and waiting for their following aircraft to complete their bombing runs, then coming in for a second pass to shatter our position with cannon and machine gun fire. When they'd finished they had the sky to themselves and the Yaks came down on us and shot up the camp. We had two Flakvierlings, the four-barrelled anti-aircraft guns that fired constantly at the enemy, hurling curtains of shells upwards and bringing down two Sturmoviks in flames, one of the Yaks was also hit and fled east trailing smoke from our gunfire, but when they had gone the damage was incalculable. Our half-track was destroyed, as were most of the vehicles in our unit, including the CO's armoured reconnaissance car. Smoke and fire was everywhere, much of our stores had been destroyed and the medics were already laying out bodies on the ground where they had taken a direct hit to several of the sandbagged shelters and two of the slit trenches. One of the Flak guns had been destroyed too, smashed into ruin by multiple hits from a cannon. Ten minutes before we'd been an understrength regiment, now, we had barely enough equipment and personnel for a company. Muller came around to check on us, his face was chalk white.

"We lost so many, Hoffman. All gone, men, equipment, everything. How the hell we're going to stop the Soviets now I don't know. Glasser's dead too."

Glasser, the Regimental adjutant.

"I'm sorry, Sir, we all liked him. We'll manage, somehow."

"Will we, Hoffman, will we? I hope so, you'd better proceed independently to the defensive positions, we're desperately short of men now and they'll be glad of any they can get. Make sure you take anti-tank weapons."

"They were in the half-track, Sir."

He went away, shaking his head.

The men were looking bitterly at the remains of the half-track. "When do we get a replacement?" Mundt asked. The others were watching carefully, waiting on my reply.

"I suspect there won't be a replacement, Scharfuhrer. We'll have to

walk, like Napoleon's Grand Army did before us. Let's get moving, we need to man the defences before the Russian armies arrive. Mundt, see if you can find some anti-tank launchers, we lost all of ours."

They started to gather equipment and twenty minutes later we marched out of the camp, heading for the city defences. Mundt had found several spare launchers from platoons who would no longer need them and they'd loaded everything onto a two-wheeled cart that they were pulling behind us. We were indeed reduced to a re-enactment of the Grand Army of Napoleon, compelled to travel on foot with a handcart for our supplies. When we reached the defences we were assigned a position on a low hill and we started to dig a slit trench. We were only just in time as in the distance we all heard the rumbling and squealing of tank tracks. I stood up to inspect our defences. We had a STuGIII assault gun to either side of us. A platoon was dug in on a nearby rise with a 3.7cm PAK, and to the front of us were our few remaining Panzers, one Tiger that was dug into a defensive position, clearly it was unable to manoeuvre and was being used as a defensive gun. There were half a dozen Panzer IVs, and two of the new Panzer Vs that presumably had been repaired. I knew that all had broken down during the battle for Kursk.

"It's not much, is it, Sir?" Mundt said. He'd come up to look with me.

I shrugged. "I wish I could say it's enough, Willy, but no, it's not much. We lost so much at Kursk, the Russians don't seem to have been affected all. We need time, time to recover, to get more men and more tanks to hit back."

We stood looking at the scratch defences that had been hurriedly thrown together.

"It's a bit of a merry-go-round, isn't it?" he said suddenly. "Backwards and forwards all the time, will we ever have enough to beat them with?"

"Perhaps the new secret weapons, Willy."

He looked pessimistic. "I hear the Fuhrer believes in black magic. Perhaps that's what he means by secret weapons. Do you believe in all that stuff?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "You mean fairy stories, bolts of fire from the heavens, that kind of thing? I think if we're reduced to believing in that kind of crap we're really done for."

"I hear that Himmler believes in it too, Sir," he persisted.

"In that case he should grow up and find us some more Panzers and aircraft, Willy. That's what we need to hold back the Russians, not witches' spells."

“But...”

“Shut up, Willy,” I laughed. “Before I get Himmler to turn you into a frog. Now, how are we going to handle these T34s when they come at us?”

He put his attention back to the ground in front of us. “Defence in depth, we need to hit them hard when they come up, then pull back to the next defensive position. Hopefully, we’ll stop them before they reach the city.”

“I agree. I’ll have a word with Muller, he’s probably thinking along the same lines, and ask him to arrange for his Hiwis to start preparing our next defensive position. In the meantime, supposing we arrange a forward position to ambush our Russian visitors? There’s a balka down there that goes all the way forward to that gap between the two ridges, they’ll have to come through there. If we set up a few of our anti-tank launchers we could take out some of their armour and then retreat back down the balka.”

He followed the lines of terrain where I was pointing and nodded.

“It could work, yes, it would certainly knock out some of their armour before it gets here. It’ll be very risky, though, if they’re carrying tank riders, they’ll be all over us.”

“We’d better take the MG34 forward with us, then. I’ll see if Muller can spare another machine gun, then we can keep this position manned, we could do with the extra firepower.”

I went over to Muller’s position and told him what we had planned. “Yes, we’ll be pulling back to the next positions if we can’t hold them here. Are you sure you want to take the chance with that forward ambush?”

“I’m sure, yes, Sir. We need every advantage we can get.”

“Very well, I’ll detail two men to bring over another machine gun. We’ve got two of the new MG42s, you can have one of those, they have a higher rate of fire than the 34.” I thanked him and went back to our unit.

We started to load up our equipment. I took Mundt, Bauer and Wesserman with me. Beidenberg stayed behind to man the position with three other men and Muller’s promised machine gun crew turned up with their MG42 and deployed it ready for use. Laden with anti-tank Panzerfausts, machine pistols and ammunition belts, as well as the MG34, we started down the hill and into the balka. We stumbled along for half a kilometre until we came to a point where there was a natural low bulwark of stone and mud that we could use as a shield.

“Bauer, set up the machine gun but keep out of sight unless we see any infantry. Wesserman, Scharfuhrer Mundt and I will operate the Panzerfausts,

if we see any tank riders, Wesserman, leave the Panzerfausts and start loading for Stefan. Any questions?"

"If they pull back in a hurry, it'll be a bastard lugging that machine gun," Mundt said.

"You're right, if we run for it, leave everything, just take the personal weapons."

We hurriedly deployed. More Panzers were coming up from the Fourth Army and it looked as if we'd have a strong force to hold back the Russians, but of course it was relative. They'd surprised our intelligence people by mounting any kind of a counter-offensive at all so quickly after Kursk, so God only knew what kind of surprise they had in store for us now. We didn't have long to wait, they started with an artillery barrage, a great rumble in the distance that became a whistling noise in the air and then the ground trembled as the first of the shells landed. We dived to the ground and waited for it to end.

The barrage lasted for two hours, all we could do was huddle in the balka, trying to dig ourselves deeper and deeper to keep out of the flying steel and shattering explosions that threatened to destroy our main defensive position half a kilometre back. Several shells fell short and dropped around us, we had to keep our heads well down to avoid the shards of steel that scoured the battlefield. Then it stopped as suddenly as it had started, but now there was a new sound, the rumble of tank engines, the squeaking and screeching of their tracks. There was no need to say anything, we climbed to the parapet of the ravine that sheltered us and five hundred metres away were the enemy. I estimated about eighty T34s and half a dozen of the heavy KV-1s, most had troops riding on them. Our own guns opened fire. The Tiger's 88mm gun bellowed and was joined by the big assault guns of the STuGIIIs. The rest of our armour followed and immediately we scored hits on the Russians. Three of their tanks slewed to a halt, soldiers flung from them like chaff on the wind. The rest of them kept coming, ominously, firing their main guns as they rolled forward. They were firing armour-piercing rounds now, trying to blunt the edge of our armour and our Panzers and assault guns engaged in a duel of increasing intensity as they drew nearer. The Tiger took several hits but seemed to shrug them off, the T34s were faring much worse, the shells from our heavy tanks were starting to thin out their ranks. I pitied the Russian infantry riding on top of the tanks, subjected to the hail of steel that whistled around them and slashed through their ranks. It seemed

peculiarly cruel to subject the frail bodies of these brave men to the kind of gunfire that was designed to destroy tanks, an unequal contest between the highest of military destructive arts and the frailties of the human flesh. But the T34s shrugged off the gunfire and came on.

"Time to prepare the Panzerfausts!" I shouted. "Bauer, bring up that machine gun, by the time their tanks are in range, we'll need to start hitting the infantry."

We lined up on the lip of the ravine, three of us with a Panzerfaust each. Bauer had the MG34 ready, a belt loaded and boxes of ammunition next to him. Wesserman was ready too, I noted that he had looped several belts of MG34 ammunition around his body, ready to load for Bauer and to keep up with him if they had to change positions in a hurry, as so often happened when the enemy were able to flank your position. Or of course in the case of a counterattack, which was not a likely scenario on this battlefield. The main guns of our Panzers and assault guns knocked out more T34s, but still they got nearer, then they were within range. I sighted the nearest tank and pulled the trigger, seeing my missile launch and fly true towards the Russian. It exploded on the side, a good hit that smashed the track and stopped the vehicle moving any further, but it wasn't finished, they were still firing their main gun which at this range threatened even the colossal armour of the Tiger tank. Mundt saw the danger and fired at the turret, scoring a hit that stopped the firing, Wesserman shot at another T34 and then a KV-1 saw the danger and lumbered towards us. Tank rider infantry were racing towards our position now, intent on crushing our forward post, but Bauer opened up with the MG34 and mowed several of them down before the rest dropped into cover. The KV-1 was still coming and we launched more Panzerfaust missiles against it, seeing them strike the heavy armour again and again without effect. Mundt managed a hit on one of the track linkages that stopped it dead, but the main gun swung towards us to swat the annoying nest of opposition that threatened their advance. As shells landed around us, we fired missile after missile against the turret, eventually seeing smoke rise as we hit something vital, then the tank simply blew up, taking with it twenty or thirty infantrymen who were crouched nearby. Three T34s started to edge towards us, it was time to move.

"Drop everything, let's go!" I shouted.

We hurtled back along the balka. A machine gun had started to fire at the Russians. The crew of the MG42 set up alongside Beidenberg had seen

the danger and were giving us covering fire from the pursuing Russian infantry. Some of the Soviets managed to jump down into the balka and start after us and several shots came over out heads until we rounded a bend in the ravine and were out of their sight.

"How many of them do you reckon?" I asked Mundt.

"About four or five, not too many, Sir."

"Maybe we should hit them when they come around that bend, Willy, otherwise we'll be sitting ducks, we can't fight them at long range with out MP38s."

He nodded. "Good plan, Sir. Bauer, Wesserman, stop, we're going back to the bend in the ravine to wait for the Russians."

We raced back and crouched down. In the distance we heard the excited shouts of the Russians, the pounding of their boots and then they were in front of us, five Soviet infantrymen. Each of us was lying prone on the ground to minimise our target profile but the enemy were clearly visible, easy targets and we knocked them all down in a series of short bursts, at a range of no more than fifteen metres the MP38 was unbeatable and they stood no chance. Three of them had Moisin-Nagants that could have shot us at a range that rendered our machine pistols virtually useless.

"That's it, they're all down, let's go!"

I jumped to my feet and made sure they were all up with me and we ran for our next defensive position. The Panzers and assault guns continued their deadly duel with the Soviet armour, but it was clear that there were too many for us and after a few minutes I ordered the position evacuated and a fall back to the next defensive position. As we started to run I saw other platoons of Panzer Grenadiers heading the same way, then our armour started to back away, keeping their heavy frontal armour towards the enemy.

We fought from the next position, constantly whittling down the enemy forces and pulling back, but when the pace of the battle finally died down and the Soviets stopped attacking, we were dangerously near Kharkov. Muller came around and gave orders for us to fall back to the city and establish the last line of defences there. We set off at a fast march and crossed into the relative safety of our own lines of armour and guns.

"What do we do now?" Wesserman asked. "Are we going to just wait and keep retreating every time those bastards attack? Why aren't we hitting back?"

He was tired and angry. We were all tired and angry. It seemed that no

matter what we did the Soviets had the answer for us, they had repelled our attack on the salient and were now smashing back at us almost without drawing breath. Our own forces were worn out, exhausted, low on men and morale, low on armour and aircraft, low on petrol and ammunition. I shook my head.

"I don't know, Gerd, I'm sorry. If I was to guess I'd say that we'll be retreating from Kharkov fairly soon, if the Soviets keep attacking in the kind of numbers they seem to be able to muster."

I thought of Irina then, I'd promised to get her out of the city and on a train back to Germany. I had to get her out tonight. Tomorrow the Soviet hordes could attack in such massive numbers that we'd be driven out of the city in the first attack.

"Scharfuhrer I need to go and see Muller, take over the platoon. I may have business in the city, if I'm given permission to go I'll be gone for a couple of hours, no more."

"Give her my love, Sir," he grinned.

I raced to find Muller and told him what I needed to do.

"You may as well go, Hoffman," he said tiredly. "It doesn't make much difference now. Call into Divisional Headquarters and see if they have any dispatches for us."

He wrote out a movement order for me, as I watched him I was shocked at his appearance. He had always been neat and smart, the perfect senior officer. Now he was ragged and dishevelled, unshaven, streaked with soot and grease, his shoulders hunched over in resignation.

"Do we have any idea of where we may be going next, Sir?"

He shook his head. "Only that it will be towards the west, Hoffman. We've started this retreat and God only knows where it will end. We're fighting for our very survival."

"But, Sir, we've got massive forces in place, we can beat back the Russians!"

He smiled sadly. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I'm not sure if it is well-founded. We need men, Hoffman, equipment, tanks and guns. What do they send us? The fucking Gestapo."

I'd never heard him swear before either, I saluted and left, Muller's demeanour suggested that the future for us was not likely to be the golden future we had been promised.

I managed to avoid the snipers on my way into the city. Two of them

took shots at me but I was moving from cover to cover. I found Irina and told her to put a few things in a bag.

"Are the Russians coming then, Jurgen?" she asked me, surprised at the sudden urgency.

"Irina, they could be here within days, you need to move now before most of the city tries to get out!"

We got to the station and I produced a document I'd had drawn up earlier, stating that Irina Rakevsky was formally betrothed to Obersturmfuhrer Jurgen Hoffman and was travelling to the Reich on his behalf to prepare for the wedding. Despite the prevalence in Russia for recruiting women to fight on the front lines and fly fighter aircraft and bombers, as well as man the Soviet armaments factories, in the Reich the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler, still place family life above all. A woman's place was in the home and there was nothing unusual about the arrangement I'd made with Irina, who after all was a citizen now of the Greater German Reich as well as betrothed to an officer of the SS. I managed to get her a ticket to change at Leipzig en route to Dresden. I gave her the address of an uncle of mine who lived in the centre of the city.

"Contact him, I've included a letter of introduction, he'll give you all the help you need. When I get back I will contact him for your address. Good luck."

Her eyes were damp and shining. "Jurgen, my darling, I wish you were coming with me."

I grinned. "Maybe you'd soon get fed up with me, I'm just a German soldier after all. Make a life for yourself. Dresden is such a nice, safe city. I'll look you up when I am able, now go."

We kissed passionately, then she broke away to climb on the train, most of the doors were closed and the guard was signalling frantically it was time to go. She waved out of the window. I waved back and went out of the station.

At the sandbagged Feldgendarmerie post outside I showed my papers to the sergeant. He looked at them carefully and then offered me some advice. "Obersturmfuhrer, a word of warning, we've had a lot of partisan attacks around here lately, they seem to be targeting the area of the main station. I'd watch your step as you leave, if I were you."

I thanked him but before I had walked ten steps a familiar figure stepped

out in front of me.

"Hoffman, how interesting to find you here. Did Miss Rakevsky get off alright?"

I fixed him with a hard gaze. "She did, yes, Sir, so you can forget about her. Tell me, why did you have Nadia Vlasov executed?"

He stepped back slightly at the force of my question. "Who said that I did that?"

"Never mind who said it, why did you do it?"

Over his shoulder I could see an opened window, a dark space inside an empty office building. I remembered the sergeant's advice and kept an eye on it as I was talking to von Betternich.

"You have to understand, it's politics, Hoffman. The fortunes of war, if you like."

He grinned. I saw a barrel poke out of the window, it had to be a barrel, yet it was a perfectly round disc, which meant it was pointing in my direction. At least, in von Betternich's direction, he was giving me protection from it with his body. I opened my mouth to shout a warning, then I though of Nadia, of Heide too, the Jewish nurse he had sent to a camp. My mind went into a kind of fugue, should I warn him, should I not? Did he deserve to die for what he had done? It was as if everything happened in slow motion, I swore I could see the sniper, the gun barrel moved a little as he straightened his aim. This evil Svengali would be finished forever, out of my life and unable to threaten the lives of those around me. He had to die, I hesitated a fraction more, then I leapt forward and threw him to the ground as the bullet hissed pass us, digging chips out of the cobbles and disappearing to bury itself into a thick wooden fence. The Feldgendarmerie nearby had heard the shot and rush out to hunt down the sniper. I picked up the SD officer and helped him to regain his balance with his walking cane.

"Thank you, Hoffman. I wonder that you bothered, you could have let me die, why didn't you?"

I shook my head, "I don't know, just forget it."

"But I won't forget it, my friend. I owe you a favour, remember, favours are like money in the bank in the German Reich."

"Just stay away from me then!"

He smiled broadly and sighed. "Ah, the one favour I cannot grant. But for the time being, I will manage without your valuable services. Until we meet again, Hoffman."

I nodded, but I couldn’t bring myself to acknowledge him. Had I done a very stupid thing, saving his life? Or would it have cost me my own soul to let him die? I imagine that only a priest could answer that kind of question, but I had little time for priests. I had a war to fight and they would have their work cut out anyway with the broken and bleeding souls that war always generated in unlimited quantities. Von Betternich and people like him, Hitler, Himmler, they could find their own particular road to hell, mine was already mapped out. I thought of Bormann and that odd shooting in the Vinnitsa wood. The most probable explanation was that he had killed the partisan to stop the man revealing Bormann’s involvement with supplying the Russians with information, perhaps the Reichsleiter was already treading his own particular path to hell.

In the distance, I could hear shouts of alarm as people were running. The Feldgendarmerie sergeant ran back to us.

“Soviet armour, they’re moving on the city, they could be here any moment!”

The wind changed suddenly and the clank and squeak of tracked armoured fighting vehicles was distinctly audible. The Russians were returning to reclaim what was theirs, what we’d taken from them and we had little with which to counter their armoured might. At least I’d got Irina away in time and I’d managed to keep my conscience clear with both her and von Betternich.

It was time to return to my unit and continue fighting the unending battle, the conflict that left the steppes covered in spilled blood and broken iron, all that remained of the ambitions of glory that had brought the fallen to this war, never to return home.

THE END

# DEVIL'S GUARD: THE REAL STORY

By Eric Meyer

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# FOREWORD

There have been various ‘true’ stories written about the so-called ‘Devil’s Guard’, a contingent of exclusively former Waffen-SS soldiers fighting against the Viet Minh in Vietnam; or Indochina, as it was known in the early 1950’s. My research suggested that there was never such a unit. Instead, all Foreign Legion units were comprised of men from many different backgrounds, although some inevitably had more than their fair share of former German soldiers, many of them Waffen-SS.

Many supposed ‘true’ accounts of former Waffen-SS involvement in French Indochina seem singularly lacking in the verifiable detail that is the essence of a reasonable historical account. I interviewed a number of former soldiers who fought in that war, and it was from one of these Legionnaires that I obtained this story. Is it ‘true’, the reader may ask? The answer is sadly yes and no. Yes, it is based on what I learned from people who were actually there. Yes, the details, dates, places, units and equipment could all be verified. But did these particular events ever happen as recorded in this story? That is like answering the question ‘who Shot JFK’ on that fateful day in Dallas, Texas. We shall never know. Certainly, I believe it is based on a true story, but beyond that sadly vague definition it is impossible to fully verify. But it could have happened....

I hope and trust you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Eric Meyer

* * * * *

# INTRODUCTION

Following the German defeat in 1945, the Waffen-SS, Heinrich Himmler’s private army, was largely hunted down by the victorious Allies, and many were imprisoned. Post-war recruitment by the French Foreign Legion amongst former German soldiers netted a substantial number of former Waffen-SS troopers. After all, they were being hunted by the victorious allies, and the French offered them a new identity; in return for them using their renowned fighting skills for their new employers. Until

1947, there was little control on who joined the Legion, and recruit backgrounds were not extensively checked. After 1947 things tightened up, although without doubt, many former SS continued to join up.

Many of these soldiers were sent to Indochina, newly restored to France following the defeat of the Japanese. Indochina, of course, is now known as Vietnam. The French returned to Indochina determined to rule as a colonial overlord, trampling over a variety of agreements made with the native population, and represented by the regime of Ho Chi Minh. The result was a series of battles in which the French became increasingly embattled and called upon more and more troops to reinforce what to many was already a lost cause. Perhaps the Americans would have done well to read the history books before they embarked on their disastrous Vietnamese debacle.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that troops on all sides fought courageously, notably the French Foreign Legion, the Paratroops and the Colonial Infantry who bore much of the brunt of the fighting. Ranged against them were the forces of the Viet Minh, a forerunner to the Viet Cong, and led by the notable military leader Vo Nguyen Giap. Giap was a thorn in the side of the French, and his clever leadership and organization led eventually to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, which marked the end of French ambitions in the region.

This book documents an account of a mission to attack Giap personally. It is based upon personal accounts, and much of it is undocumented. However, there can be little doubt that French military minds would have wrestled with the problem of how to rid themselves of this turbulent leader.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER ONE

Avril rapidly emptied his MAT49 submachine gun into the oncoming horde of Viet Minh, heard the firing pin click on an empty clip, reloaded and desperately opened fire again; seeing his bullets smack home into the Vietnamese fanatics hurling themselves bodily at his French troops. The firefight, one kilometre west of the town of Mao Khe, had begun as a simple skirmish. The Lieutenant’s company was part of the 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion, led by Captain Charles Balmain and attached to Mobile Group 2.

They had been marching into Mao Khe when they ran headlong into General Giap's 320th Division; who were themselves rushing to support the massed Viet Minh attack on the town.

Vo Nguyen Giap was born on August 25th, 1911, and had risen to become leader of the Vietnam People's Army. He was both a politician and a formidable soldier. He was also a journalist and served as a politburo member of the Lao Dong Party. Giap was the most prominent military commander, besides Ho Chi Minh, during the Indochina war and was responsible for all major operations and leadership throughout the war. Clever, cunning, calculating, he was a man who didn't like to lose and would sacrifice his own troops and civilians in huge numbers, if he thought that it was necessary to win the war. The swift mobilisation of several divisions of troops to surround Mao Khe bore all the hallmarks of his effective brand of military strategy.

Initially, two reconnaissance platoons had exchanged fire, and both commanders rushed up more and more men. It was a bloodbath. Even though they were killing the Viet Minh like pigs in a slaughterhouse, a vastly superior force outnumbered them.

Avril heard screams and shouts from his men as they were hit by enemy rounds, and the wet 'thud' as the bullets smashed through tissue and bone to destroy his command, soldier by soldier. Captain Balmain was one of the early casualties. He was struck by a bullet fired from an SKS rifle, the fraternal gift of the Soviet Union who was desperate to win favour with the Vietnamese communists. He was dead, and his body lying on the ground with the back of his head missing where the bullet had drilled through his skull.

The French frequently faced the SKS, a Soviet semi-automatic carbine chambered for the 7.62 round, designed in 1945 by Sergei Simonov. The SKS had a conventional carbine layout, with a wooden stock and no pistol grip. Most versions were fitted with an integral folding bayonet which hinged down from the end of the barrel, and some versions were even equipped with a grenade launching attachment. Another product of Russian and Chinese generosity, the SKS was cheap, easy to strip and maintain in jungle conditions, and an effective killer in the short range exchanges of gunfire that were so common in the jungle.

"Retreat, fall back, men. We need to form a tighter perimeter," Avril shouted.

His paras, veterans of the war in Indochina, slowly edged back, firing

desperately to give themselves time to form a stronger defence. Avril sighted a small hill, more of a hillock, about a hundred metres behind them.

"Run, men, run, we need to get on that hill. Follow me!"

They ran, a stumbling, scrambling desperate flight. Some fell, hit by Viet Minh fire.

"Don't stop for the wounded. There's no time, just run!" Avril shouted, urging them on.

He turned to fire a burst into the oncoming Vietnamese and saw two of them fall. Then he turned, legs pumping as he ran up the hill, urging his men, "Run, we're nearly there, run!"

A bullet tore into the sleeve of his shirt, a near miss. He felt another clip his right boot, and then flatten itself into a nearby rock. But he was there, leaping over the rocks that lay scattered at the top of the hill, and flung himself flat on the ground. His men jumped down nearby and began to fire on the pursuing enemy. He switched magazines and fired short bursts into the Viet Minh who were hurtling towards them. Three more paras went down. The rest were sheltering behind the rocks, pouring an increasing amount of fire at the Viet Minh. The Vietnamese guerrillas began to falter as they saw their comrades falling all around them. They turned and ran back, and still more of their numbers fell as they took cover behind the trees and rocks surrounding the hill.

Avril drew breath and shouted at his men to cease fire. The occasional shot came up at them from the Viet Minh, but none were well aimed.

"Save your ammunition, men." he called. "They'll be back soon, and we'll need every bullet. Sergeant Hassiba," his second in command, now that Balmain was dead.

"We need a count of the ammunition, and find out what we have left. It'll be a long time before headquarters knows we're stuck here, and until then, we need to make the supplies last."

Sergeant Karim Hassiba was Algerian and a veteran of the colonial infantry. He'd seen service in the Second World War as a green private soldier, fighting with the Free French forces through Nazi Germany. He doubled away to check the remaining ordnance. Avril then gave orders to another Algerian, Corporal Wahid Farouk, to tally their remaining food and water. They could be there for a long stay.

The men slumped down, lighting cigarettes and taking hasty gulps of water from their water bottles. He hoped it was only water, but it was hardly

the time to check. He got out his binoculars and scanned the wooded ground around the bottom of the hill. The Viet Minh were there and hiding, but occasionally they moved from cover to cover. They were all around, and so breaking out from this hill was going to be hard and bloody.

"Private Laroche, get on the radio and contact headquarters, and let me know when you get through." He stood and watched the radioman warming up the radio, and then went to do the rounds of his position. It was grim. A total of sixty-seven men left from the original one hundred and thirty that set out on this mission. Nearly half were dead or missing. Ammunition was less than forty rounds per man, and a total of eleven hand grenades with food and water for twenty-four hours at most. He went back to the radioman.

"Laroche, have you got through yet?"

"Sir, the radio is broken, completely broken."

He showed Avril a hole torn out of the metal in the case where an enemy bullet had gone through the equipment, wrecking it beyond repair.

"See what you can do Laroche. Keep trying to fix it."

"Yes, Sir," the radioman looked doubtful. "I'll do what I can."

Avril called Sergeant Hassiba to discuss their options. He valued the tough Algerian's opinion; gathered in more than a dozen tight spots. Algerians and Moroccans formed the backbone of the French colonial units, and many of them made exceptional soldiers, brave and resourceful. Good to have in a situation like this.

"Sergeant, I think reinforcements could take more time than we have left to us."

"Yes, I think so too. We need to get out of this trap, Sir, before we're completely out of food and ammunition."

"Any ideas?"

"Whichever way we go, we'll have to fight through the Viets. Wait until night, and then break through."

Avril checked his watch. It was almost two thirty in the afternoon.

"Not enough ammunition to hold them off and wait that long, Sergeant. We need to go soon, before they attack and run us out of ammunition."

"Then, we…" Hassiba stopped.

They could see the Viets were massing at the bottom of the hill, and they didn't seem unduly concerned that the French might open fire. Clearly, their commander was no fool, and he knew the French troops would be dangerously low on ammunition.

“You’d better get the men ready, Sergeant. They’ll be attacking soon.”

“And then?” Hassiba asked. “If we fight off this attack? What then?”

“We’ll fight them, Sergeant, and as soon as possible, we’ll try to break out.”

“Fight them with what, Sir?”

Avril sighed. The Algerian was right. Their ammunition was almost exhausted. After that, there would be nothing left but surrender, and the prospect of showing the white flag to these ugly Asian monkeys was not pleasant. The Viets were known for their brutality to captured French troops; often using them for bayonet practice and gruesome games of torture and execution.

“Tell the men single shots only, and no automatic fire. They need to make every shot count. As soon as we beat them back, we’ll try and get out. Make sure the men are ready to move, the second I give the order.”

“Yes, Sir.” Hassiba saluted and ran off to pass the orders to the men.

They waited. Some chain smoked, the Catholics amongst them fingering rosary beads, and the Muslims reading small, worn looking copies of the Koran. Avril watched the Viets milling around. The officers and commissars shouted orders, getting the men into position, and firing them up with stirring party rhetoric.

One man giving orders stood out from the rag-taggle band of guerrillas. He was dressed in what appeared to be a soiled cream linen safari suit, an incongruity in the jungle war. He wore an old fedora hat with a red bandana wrapped around its brim. He carried no pack, just a pistol in one hand. Next to him a soldier carried a loudhailer. The man in the suit gave an order, and the soldier passed him a microphone attached to the loudhailer. There were a series of clicks and buzzes, and then his voice came clearly up to them in fluent French.

“Men, soldiers who are fighting for the French colonialists! This is not your war! France has enslaved your own countries, Morocco, Algeria, and here in Vietnam too. They are keeping you in chains to exploit you. My name is Commissar Colonel Min, and I speak for the People’s Revolutionary Army, the Viet Minh.”

The Viet Minh, the League for the Independence of Vietnam, was a national independence movement founded in South China on May 19th, 1941. The Viet Minh initially formed to seek independence for Vietnam from the French Empire. When the Japanese occupation began, the Viet Minh

opposed Japan with support from the United States and the Republic of China. After the Second World War, the Viet Minh opposed the re-occupation of Vietnam by France and continued a campaign of armed resistance. They were short on modern military knowledge and created a military school in Tinh Quang Ngai in 1946.

More than four hundred Vietnamese were trained by Japanese soldiers, becoming the hard core of a new military movement fighting for the liberation of Indochina from the French. French General Jean-Etienne Valluy quickly pushed the Viet Minh out of Hanoi when his infantry, supported by armoured units, re-took Hanoi fighting small battles against isolated Viet Minh groups. The French encircled the Viet Minh base, Viet Bac, in 1947, but failed to defeat the Viet Minh forces and had to retreat soon after. The newly Communist People's Republic of China gave the Viet Minh both sheltered bases and heavy weapons with which to fight the French. With the additional weapons, the Viet Minh were able to take control over many rural areas of the country. Soon after that, they began to advance towards the French occupied areas.

“We…” His voice tailed off as a screech of static, followed by the piercing howl of feedback, sliced through his words. There were more clicks and static, and he continued.

“We invite you to lay down your arms. Your officers are just lackeys of the French government. Come to us. We will provide you with money and passage home.”

Avril turned to look at his men. They were listening with avid fascination to the Commissar’s words, but he was not unduly worried. They had seen the Viets’ treatment of prisoners too often to be tempted into taking up the offer to surrender. Better to die quickly in battle than to suffer a long lingering death, hacked to shreds with your balls stuffed into your mouth.

“Private Chevaux,” Avril called, “come over here. Do you think you could take him at this distance?”

Chevaux had advertised in the French military newspaper Caravelle for this posting, a system at that time unique to France.

‘Private, Infantry Regt., sharpshooter, Saigon. Seeks exchange Mobile Group North Vietnam. Reply PO Box 269, Caravelle’.

The reply had come quickly from an overweight, over-aged private who was happy to swap the rough and tumble of service in a mobile group operating close to the Central Highland, for a more peaceful end to his

service career in the backwater of Saigon. Chevaux seized the chance to practice his first love, long range sniping. He had become a valued and deadly member of the Second Parachute Battalion, part of the Elite Mobile Two.

Chevaux ran over to him, clutching his rifle. He was the Paras' champion sharpshooter, and a crack shot with the modified Springfield rifle he carried.

The M1903 Springfield, or more formally the United States Rifle, Calibre .30, Model 1903, was an American magazine-fed, 5-shot, bolt-action service rifle used primarily during the first half of the twentieth century. It was officially adopted as a United States military bolt-action rifle in 1905 and saw service in World War I. It was officially replaced, as the standard infantry rifle, by the faster firing, semi-automatic eight round M1 Garand in 1937.

However, the M1903 Springfield remained in service as a standard issue infantry rifle during World War II, since the U.S. entered the war without sufficient M1 rifles to arm all troops. It also remained in service as a sniper rifle during World War II, the Korean War and even in the early stages of the Vietnam War.

The 1903 rifle included a rear sight leaf that could be used to adjust for elevation. When the leaf was flat, the battle sight appeared on top. This sight was set for 546 yards and was not adjustable. When the leaf was raised, it could be adjusted to a maximum extreme range of 2,875 yards. The rear sight could also be adjusted for windage. The 1903A3 rear sight was an aperture sight adjustable both for elevation and windage.

Chevaux used a custom rifle sight that had been machined for him by the base armourer, a keen shooter and precision engineer. His skill with the weapon was legendary.

He looked down at the man with the loudhailer.

"I think so, Lieutenant."

"Do it, Private. Show him the French brand of propaganda."

"Yes, Sir."

Chevaux, a half French half Vietnamese native of Saigon, lay down behind a low mound of earth and settled his rifle in a 'V' formed by two pieces of stone. He checked the wind, picking up a leaf from the ground and throwing it up in the air to check speed and direction. The other men watched, fascinated. It was a long shot, and impossible for most men, but

Chevaux was not most men. His shooting sometimes seemed to be more inspired by magic than technique.

Four hundred metres away, Min rambled on.

"For those of you who wish merely to go home, we will provide first class flights back to your home country. You will receive a reward of five thousand dollars each to help you on your journey. All you need do is…"

"I'm ready," Chevaux said quietly.

"Do him," Avril said.

"To shoot your officers and…"

'Crack!' The bullet flew unerringly to its target. Min spun around, and the loudhailer crescendoed with furious, whining feedback, and then was shut off. The Viets milled around him, and two soldiers rushed across with a stretcher and loaded him onto it, carrying him off into the jungle. The rest of the guerrillas could be seen angrily gesturing up to the hilltop.

"A shoulder wound, I'm afraid," Chevaux apologised.

"But it shut him up, Private Chevaux. Well done, a magnificent shot. I owe you a bottle of Scotch when we get back to Hanoi."

The soldiers nearby looked at their lieutenant glumly. There were more angry shouts and commands from below. The Viet Minh were anxious to avenge the wounding of their Commissar. The odds against the French were formidable. No one needed to say, 'if we get back to Hanoi'.

"They're coming, Sir," shouted a soldier.

From below them the shouts became battle cries, "Tien-Le!", 'Forward!' as the Viet Minh began a desperate charge up the hill. Rifle and machine gun fire whizzed all around the French troops. The Viet Minh were blazing away with rifles and submachine guns as they ran at the vastly outnumbered French position.

"Single shots, men, single shots, and make them count. Take cover and open fire!"

Avril checked around him. His lookouts at the rear were watching sharply for an enemy assault from behind. He ducked down and fired.

The French poured a withering fire down on the attackers. Precise aimed shots sliced into the Vietnamese guerrillas, sending scores of them tumbling to the ground, killed or wounded. But there were too many. For every man that fell, another two took his place, charging forward yelling savagely and manically forcing their way forward to kill the hated French invaders. Avril heard a click as a nearby man ran out of ammunition, and his firing pin fell

on an empty chamber.

"Grenades, throw the grenades," he shouted.

Eleven soldiers stood, each holding one of their last precious grenades, pins pulled. They flung them into the advancing horde, but two of the grenade throwers were thrown back by Viet bullets. Explosions and screams added an unearthly harmony to the savage din of battle. Body parts spiralled into to the air and smoke billowed. The wounded screamed their last, but still they came.

"Fix bayonets!" Avril shouted.

His men snatched out the sharpened bayonets and clicked them to their rifles. The first of the Viet Minh hurtled over the lip of the hill and flung themselves on the French soldiers. Several men fired, and others skewered the Viets with the bayonets. The situation was desperate.

"Form around me!" Avril shouted.

The survivors rushed to gather around him in a tight, defensive circle. Bullets smacked sickeningly into flesh as the Viet Minh shot indiscriminately at the tightly packed group of French survivors. Then they charged into them. Avril holstered his pistol, snatched up a rifle and stabbed an oncoming guerrilla with the bayonet. The man screamed and went down, his guts spilling out onto the hilltop as the bayonet ripped his stomach apart.

Avril got his pistol out and checked the chamber. Two bullets! He would need one for himself, rather than be taken alive and suffer the tortured hell the Viet Minh meted out to their French prisoners.

Suddenly, there was a lull in the fighting. The Viet Minh paused, startled by something he couldn't see. Avril was astonished. Why didn't they finish it? Then an eerie cry rang across the hilltop.

"Deutschland!"

A German cry, out of place in this French colony of Vietnam, and then more cries.

"Vive la France, Allah Akbar!"

The shouts became louder and overlapped each other, so that he couldn't make out who was shouting what. Then a group of men charged across the top. They had come from the side of the hill away from the fighting. They were all shooting fast short, accurate bursts from the submachine guns they all carried. Mostly German MP40's, he noted with bemusement. Quick sharp commands were spat out in a mixture of French and German, and two machine gun squads deployed on the hilltop. Instantly,

the guns began firing more German weapons; the heavy, menacing, deep repetitive burst of the MG34's flinging the Viet Minh attackers to the ground in a bloody, mangled ruin.

They were legionnaires, he noted, French Foreign Legion. The Legion had a reputation in Vietnam as brave, hard fighting men. So much so, that they were often sent into the thickest part of the battle, and the most dangerous missions that chewed normal men up and spat them out.

But these were in a different league from any legionnaires Avril had seen before. They moved and fought with precision, commands obeyed instantly, men rushed forward, fired and dropped to reload. Their comrades rushed up behind them giving covering fire; it was magnificent. They were no more than about a half company, perhaps fifty men.

Hundreds of Viet Minh still milled around the hilltop, but they were already defeated. The new arrivals rushed at them, tearing into them with the machine-like precision that was awe-inspiring. The Viets turned and ran. Instantly, the Legion sergeant in charge barked an order. Eight men rushed forward and unslung their rifles as they ran. They reached the edge of the hilltop and began pouring their accurate rifle fire on the retreating men. Many fell. Some managed to reach the cover of the jungle and ran out of the deadly hail of rifle fire. Others crawled forward, wounded, trying to follow their comrades. One by one, they were dispatched by the riflemen, and silence descended on the hill.

Avril stood frozen, numbed by the furious firefight, and amazed to still be alive. The sergeant came up to him. Avril reached out and shook his hand.

"Thank you, Sergeant. You saved our lives, without question. We were finished."

"You're welcome, Lieutenant. Very welcome."

"Corporal," he shouted to one of his legionnaires. "Do we have any wounded? No? Good, but get some help for the paras. Some of them look hurt."

Avril looked again and then blinked. The Sergeant wore a death's head enamel badge pinned to his uniform. The Lieutenant looked around, and most of the other legionnaires also wore similar death's head insignia on their uniforms. Then he remembered the battle shouts, 'Deutschland', so what was that all about?

"You're Germans, yes? That badge. You're Nazis!"

"Sieg Heil," the Sergeant replied, smiling broadly. "Ex-Nazis, actually,

my friend. We're all on the same side now, and not all of us are German. We have some Vietnamese, Montagnards, hill fighters and several North Africans, Muslims. Even men from the Ukraine and Russia, and some of them are Orthodox Christians. But our biggest group by far is German."

"Wherever you're from, thank God you came," Avril replied.

He looked around at the legionnaires, and they looked exceptionally tough, a group of hard, competent veterans. Their uniforms were a collection of official Legion issue and personal items. Their equipment was similarly a mix of standard and non-standard. Most were festooned with bandoliers, hand grenades and each carried a submachine gun, mostly the German MP40. They all looked hard, savage, but with an air of calm assurance. These were men who'd done this many, many times before. Savagely fallen on a foe many times their number and wiped them out through sheer force of hard precision soldiering, delivered with a vicious savagery that seemed calculated and confident. This savagery terrifying an enemy without allowing their own emotions to impair their almost robotic, production line killing.

"Lieutenant, the monkeys will reform before long, and then they'll be back. They may even have mortars, so we need to get off this hill."

"How did you find us?" Avril asked him.

"We were ordered to Mao Khe. General de Lattre has got wind of a big Viet force in the area. Our friend Giap is stirring up lots of trouble for us, it seems. We were heading for the town when we heard the shooting, so we detoured to take a look."

"Lucky for us you did. It's the first time I've been happy to meet a German with a machine gun," Avril smiled.

"I'm Lieutenant Avril, Andre Avril, 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion."

"And I'm Sergeant Jurgen Hoffman, Sir. A Company, 2nd Battalion, 13th Half Brigade, Foreign Legion."

"And before the Foreign Legion, Sergeant?"

Hoffman stared at him. Then he grinned.

"Waffen-SS, Das Reich, Panzer Infantry. My rank was SS-Sturmbannführer. Is that a problem for you, Lieutenant?"

"Not at all, Sergeant, what's done is done. We're all damn grateful to you and your men. What next, do you think?"

They were interrupted by a whistling sound, and a mortar shell arced high in the sky, descending towards them.

"Down!" shouted Hoffman.

He grabbed Avril and flung him to the ground. The shell exploded just past the crest of the hill, showering them with dirt and foliage, but there were no casualties.

Hoffman leapt to his feet and began shouting orders, “Grab your equipment, and check your weapons, men. Point men, we’re going out the way we came in. Move out, go, go!”

“Lieutenant, get your men ready. I suggest you march in the middle of my unit. We’ll hand out spare ammunition on the way. Let’s go.”

Avril stood open mouthed for a moment. He was a paratrooper, a lieutenant in the elite of the French army, indeed, the elite of any army. This legionnaire sergeant was like a whirlwind rushing him along, and with no time for planning, consultation, and command decisions.

“Sergeant, should we not...”

Another mortar shell slammed into the hilltop. They managed to drop flat, but two of Avril’s men were too slow and still on their feet when it landed. The metal fragments sliced through them, leaving butchered pieces of flesh flying through the air.

“Whatever it is, Lieutenant, save it for later. We’re going. Move out!”

The point men were already halfway down the reverse side of the hill, and machine gunners were covering them against any possible ambush. Hoffman’s sharpshooters covered the Viet Minh positions, and fired when any of them dared to show his face out of the jungle in possible preparation for an attack. Avril could see two corporals pushing his own men into position in the centre of the Foreign Legion column. Hoffman grabbed him. “Come, Lieutenant. Our place is at the front, that’s the way we do it in the Legion. In the Waffen-SS, too,” he laughed.

The two commanders, Sergeant and Lieutenant, ran to the front of the column and began trekking down the hill, their men following. As soon as they reached the bottom, the machine gunners joined the main group, then the sharpshooters. The rearguard joined them just as they were moving into the dark green foliage, and out of sight of the hilltop which soon would be swarming with Viet Minh. They entered the jungle and followed a track the legionnaires seemed to be familiar with, marching on for two kilometres. Seeing Avril glancing around him, Hoffman explained.

“This path leads to Mao Khe, Lieutenant. General de Lattre invited us to join him there. I’ve ordered our quartermaster to supply your men with fresh ammunition. I trust you were headed to Mao Khe too?”

Avril was still stunned by the suddenness of the Viet Minh attack which could have been the end of his entire command, and the ferocious assault and rescue by these German-led legionnaires.

"I will need to contact my HQ for further orders, Sergeant."

"Orders?" Hoffman looked puzzled. "Were you not ordered to join the action at Mao Khe?"

"Yes, of course, but…" Avril was interrupted.

"Then that's where we're going. Keep moving. The Viets will already be looking for us."

The Sergeant pressed forward, leading a blistering pace. Avril could feel himself beginning to tire, but it would be embarrassing to admit it to this ex-Nazi. Then he heard a shout from his men.

"Sir, we've got two men down, both wounded. We need to stop for a rest."

Avril shouted over to Hoffman.

"Sergeant, you heard, we need to take a break."

The German smiled at him.

"You take a break and you die, Lieutenant. The Viets will be up behind us. Do you want your men killed?"

Avril boiled over. He was greatly indebted to the Sergeant for their rescue, but he had wounded who needed tending to.

"No, but neither do I want my wounded to die from lack of basic medical care. We take a break, and that's an order, Sergeant."

Hoffman shrugged, turned and made a hand signal. Instantly, his men deployed sharpshooters and machine gunners, rushing out to make guard points to the front and rear of the column.

"The Lieutenant ordered a rest, men. Keep sharp, the Viet Minh are all around us." He turned to look at Avril.

"What now, Sir?" he put an emphasis on the 'Sir'. Avril knew he was being mocked, but the German's arrogance was irritating, and besides his wounded did need attention.

Sergeant Hoffman wore a black 'Schiff', a German side cap popular in the Waffen-SS, instead of the regulation Foreign Legion beret. He was a complicated man and possibly an unrepentant Nazi, but a fine soldier. The Lieutenant knew he was totally and utterly outclassed in military matters by what this SS veteran had demonstrated on the hilltop, but he was determined to show him that a Frenchman could be his equal. He went to his men and

double-checked their supplies. The legionnaires had replenished their ammunition during the march, so they had enough bullets to fight with.

"Make sure the wounded can walk, Corporal. Give them as much help as they need. We'll be leaving shortly. You should…"

An outbreak of firing cut off his words. The Viet Minh had caught up and were attacking in strength.

Hoffman's machine guns had opened up, and the rearguard caught the pursuing Viet Minh unawares. The heavy MG34's fired in quick short bursts, and the answering screams an eloquent testimony to their deadly accuracy and rate of fire. Four sharpshooters went hurtling back to join them. Within seconds, the crack of their measured, aimed shots added to the crescendo and chaos of the MG34's firing over the sound of the Viet Minh Soviet made SKS rifles, the chatter of the MAT 49's and home-made Sten guns directly copied from the British design that the Viets were using in increasing numbers.

At the start of the war, the Viet Minh didn't have the means to acquire weaponry in large quantities. Initially, these hurdles were overcome by the use of looted weapons, stolen from the Japanese and later the French. Nationalist China provided some training facilities and weaponry during WW2 as part of the American-led scheme of anti-Japanese partisans. Much Japanese weaponry fell into Viet Minh hands during the confusion of the Japanese surrender in 1945.

Later, with the Communist victory in China of 1949, secure bases for training and weapon production could be placed beyond or close to the Chinese border with Tonkin. The quantity and diversity of Viet Minh weaponry increased steadily throughout the war, as did the skill with which this material was distributed, and the training standards of the regular troops.

The VM readily produced numerous clandestine arms workshops throughout Vietnam. They also established a hidden factory in Thailand and others just across the Chinese border in Yunnan. These eventually produced rifles, SMGs, grenades, ammunition, mortars, RCLs, bazookas, mines, Bangalore Torpedoes and other explosive devices. The first factories were set up to produce the relatively simple British Sten gun, using machinery and material either bought or stolen. During 1946-47, these workshops produced around 30,000 Sten guns. Less than accurate at anything other than short range fighting, they were devastating in the sudden surprise attacks frequently encountered by French forces in Indochina.

“We need to move, Lieutenant. It seems your rest has been terminated by our monkey friends.”

Avril shrugged off Hoffman’s arrogant, goading remark. It was true they needed to move fast to get away from these marauding guerrillas snapping at their heels, and rejoin the main French forces that were facing Giap at Mao Khe. He shouted to his men.

“Move out.”

Hoffman’s legionnaires needed no orders. They were up, and ready to move, in a strong mobile defensive formation.

“Let’s go,” Hoffman shouted.

For the next thirty minutes, they fought a running battle. Avril was astounded at the speed and professionalism of these Foreign Legion fighters. Their style of fighting looked somehow familiar, when he realised where he’d seen it before. In old German wartime newsreels, when he was a young man in occupied France. The Germans were always keen to show off the prowess of their conquering armies.

What he was seeing was the very embodiment of a Waffen-SS fighting unit engaged in a running battle, fast, hard hitting, and with the unit commander leading from the front. Hoffman had trained his men to fight as an SS unit, attacking where the enemy was strongest. Avril noted that Hoffman himself seemed to be everywhere at once, joining the machine gunners and sharpshooters to check their progress and constantly monitoring their positions, the men and the equipment.

It was not the French way, where a degree of separation was usually considered correct between the officers, NCO’s and men. The officer gave orders to a subordinate structure of sergeants and corporals, who passed his wishes on to the men. Now, the SS style of fighting had arrived in Vietnam. Perhaps they were needed, reflected Avril. Without them, his command would have been overrun.

The previous year, Giap’s forces had torn apart the French defenders along Route Coloniale 4, following the retreat from Cao Bang, giving them virtually the keys to the whole of Northern Tonkin, the far north of the country.

The Battle of Cao Bang was an ongoing campaign in northern Indochina during the Indochina War, between the French Far East Expeditionary Corps and the Viet Minh, which began in October 1947 and ended in September 1949.

Since the start of the conflict, Viet Minh troops had ambushed French convoys along the Vietnam-China border from the Gulf of Tonkin on a hundred and forty seven mile route to a French garrison at Cao Bang, known as Route Colonial 4, or RC4. Repeated ambushes led to French operations of increasing strength to reopen the road, including a costly mission by the Foreign Legion in February 1948.

On July 25th, 1948, the Cao Bang encampment was itself attacked and held out for three days, with two companies defending against two battalions of Viet Minh; a further twenty-eight ambushes took place in 1948.

In February 1949, five Viet Minh battalions and mortar units took a French post at Lao Cai and resumed ambushes through the monsoon season.

On September 3rd, 1949, one hundred vehicles left That Khe in a reinforced convoy on a sixteen-mile drive through infantry screens. The French, reduced to one soldier per vehicle due to troop numbers, were ambushed by automatic fire. The first twenty trucks were halted, as were the final ten, and the middle of the convoy was cut down by shellfire. The following day, French troops reoccupied the surrounded hilltops. However, only four French wounded were found alive.

The campaign at Cao Bang resulted in a change in convoy practices for the remainder of the war. Vehicles now travelled from post to post, in ten to twelve vehicle convoys, through security screens of French troops and with aircraft observation. In 1950, supply convoys to Cao Bang were discontinued in favour of air supply.

Giap had tried to repeat his recent stunning victory at Vinh Yen, but this time the French routed his troops. Now he was trying again to defeat the French in a major action at Mao Khe. The Vietnamese guerrillas seemed to be everywhere at once, sniping and ambushing the colonial forces almost at will.

Avril shuddered for even thinking it, as he was the victim of the brutal Nazi conquerors in his own native land of France. Yet here he was on the opposite side, and it was the French who were the colonial conquerors, fighting a desperate action to try and contain the communists. With men like Hoffman, and his SS-trained legionnaires, it would certainly make a difference.

He laughed to himself, imagining telling the French High Command to adopt SS fighting tactics. That would be the end of his career. He might just find himself in charge of a barracks storeroom outside of Marseille. He heard

a shout ahead. They were nearing the edge of the jungle, and in the distance he could see the buildings of Mao Khe. There was a tricolour flag on a pole. Thank God, the French were still in command of the town.

As abruptly as they had appeared, the Viet Minh who'd dogged their heels during the withdrawal from the hilltop retreated back into the jungle, their noses bloodied by Hoffman's incisive and determined rear guard defence.

No more French troops had been hit, and the legionnaires estimated the enemy casualties at around eighty or ninety. Avril had no reason to doubt it; a stunning result, and now they had rejoined the main army.

They marched into the town, saluting the flag as they went past.

"I must leave you now, Lieutenant," Hoffman said.

"My unit is camped the other side of the town. I wish you good luck."

He held out his hand, and Avril took it.

"Thank you, Sergeant Hoffman."

"You are very welcome, my friend," he smiled, sardonically.

"A little compensation from the Reich, Ja?"

"Fuck you," Avril replied, but he smiled to take the sting out of the words as he walked away.

He found the headquarters of the 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion and went to report on his unit action and casualties, including the death of their commander, Captain Balmain. A full colonel sat at a folding table, pouring over maps of the area. Avril made his report, including the part played by Hoffman's legionnaires.

"He seemed to know what his was doing, this Sergeant Hoffman," Avril told the Colonel.

The Colonel goggled at him.

"Seemed to know? Hoffman? You don't know him? He's a superb soldier, Lieutenant. He's still only a sergeant because of the rules in the Legion that uniquely allow only Frenchmen to be officers."

"Yes, he told me he was German, and a member of the Waffen-SS during the war."

The Colonel smiled at him.

"That's true. Hoffman's not his real name, so I understand. Like most former SS men, he took an assumed name when he joined the Legion. You know that after 1947, our government prohibited any former SS being recruited into the Legion, but by that time, of course, many had already

joined."

"How did they know who was SS and who was not?" Avril asked.

"By the tattoo, Lieutenant, the blood type tattoo under the armpit, that almost all SS recruits were required to have. The idea was that if they were wounded in battle, they would get matching blood in the event a transfusion was needed. When the war turned against Germany, many SS recruits declined the tattoo, especially when it became known that SS soldiers taken prisoner were subjected to terrible torture. So many recruits in the Legion were unknown to us as former SS."

"I see. Well, Hoffman is certainly a good man in a fight."

"Good?" The Colonel's smile broadened. "Yes, he is good. He apparently joined the Waffen-SS in the ranks as a private soldier. He was commissioned quite early on, after destroying two Soviet tanks singlehanded on the Eastern Front, using hand held Panzerfausts. He once showed me the tank destroyer badges, and Hoffman earned a total of five before the war ended. He holds the Iron Cross First Class with Oak Leaves for bravery, heaven knows how many lesser medals, wound badges, campaign medals, cuff titles, you name it and he was there! He reached the rank of Sturmbannführer, that's equivalent to Major, before his wounds took him out of the battlefield just before the war ended. He ended up in a French POW camp, from where he was recruited to the Legion. He was one of the most highly decorated soldiers in his regiment, SS Das Reich. Our commanders here turned a blind eye when the government banned ex-SS volunteers, and they flatly refused to throw him out. You were lucky he came to your aid. The Viets know of him, and they have a price on his head. I believe it currently stands at ten thousand United States dollars."

"I can see why they would want him dead," said Avril.

"Indeed, Lieutenant. Indeed. Now, I suggest you attend to your men. General de Lattre expects the offensive to begin at any time, and Giap has been building his reinforcements in the area for several days. I suspect we'll be very busy."

"Yes, Sir." They exchanged salutes, and Avril went off to organise his men.

They needed fresh supplies, weapons, ammunition, food and a radio to replace the one smashed in the Viet Minh assault.

Three hours later, and with only a small part of his resupply efforts completed, the Viet Minh struck with both artillery and infantry, flinging

themselves against the French troops in massed human wave assaults. They were, indeed, going to be very busy.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER TWO

I watched the Lieutenant walk away, and he looked tired, dangerously tired. Worse still, he looked beaten. I wondered how he would have fared on the Eastern Front, fighting another communist enemy, the savage hordes of Stalin's Soviet Union.

That was a war beyond the worst nightmares of man. A war against an enemy, that no matter how many were killed seemed to have the limitless capacity to regenerate itself. Knock out a tank, and two or three more appeared. Mow down a company of advancing Soviet infantry, and a regiment appeared in its place. It seemed to be a communist philosophy that life was cheap, able to be sacrificed as recklessly as its commanders wished, in both wartime and peacetime alike.

Our mission here was the same as in Russia. Kill the enemy, nothing more. Slaughter them so that they couldn't be patched up and pitched back into the battle. Terrify them with a violent ferocity that was calculated to keep them awake long into the reaches of the night.

The communists shared the same philosophy, it was true; a campaign of limitless violence calculated to murder and terrorise all who opposed them.

But theirs was a war with a difference. We begrudged every man who fell in battle, every death and every casualty. Our tactics were based on preserving the lives of the men at any cost. The communists just spent the lives of their troops as if each man had the value of a piece of confetti, tossed at a village wedding, and no more value than a useless, discarded piece of coloured paper. Their civilians were fair game too; human slaves to be exploited, threatened, tortured and killed if they failed to obey their masters. Eventually, this war would be decided not by the side that killed the most enemy. There were just too many soldiers on each side to simply kill them all. It would be decided, by the army that convinced the civilians to resist the terror, or forced them to submit to it. That freedom was worth fighting for. Slavery was a living death in itself.

“Jurgen, you’ve got problems of the world on your shoulders!” a cheery voice called over to me.

It was my good friend in the Legion, Captain Jacques Legrand.

“Jacques,” I replied, happy to see the young captain, and we shook hands. Although several years younger than me, Legrand was always happy to listen to the voices of more experienced men, officers or not. Unlike the regular French troops, the Legion in Vietnam had much of the easy formality I had been used to in the Waffen-SS. He handed me a cigarette, and took one himself as we chatted about our next mission. A tall, handsome and accomplished young man, he always seemed to have the most attractive girls in the bar competing to be on his arm, or in his bed. But when he was on duty, he was the complete professional. I focussed on what he was saying.

“What’s going on?”

“The brass expects Giap to launch an attack at any moment. Artillery are all standing by for fire orders. The air force are running back-to-back missions reconnoitring the enemy positions, and waiting for a chance to unload their bombs onto the heads of our local communists. Are your men ready to deploy? I don’t think we’ve got much time left to us. I gather you were involved in some kind of a skirmish outside the town, so do you need time to re-equip and regroup?”

I shook my head.

“It was nothing big, and Sergeant Petrov is drawing ammunition from the stores right now. No casualties. We just need time to catch our breath, and we’ll be ready to fight.”

“Good, I’ve got some beer in the tent. Do you want one?”

“Another time, Jacques,” I smiled. “What’s the intelligence on the enemy forces?”

“Not good, three divisions, 308, 312 and the 316. In total, they’ve got at least ten thousand men, possibly even more.”

“And us? What’s our strength?”

“Apart from the Legion, we’ve got Colonial paratroops and infantry, a Senegalese unit, the 30th, several armoured cars, and some Tho partisan units.”

“Partisans?” I spat out.

I hated partisans. A large part of my time in Russia had been spent slaughtering the irregulars that infiltrated our lines and caused such havoc and fear to the regular troops. They were like lice, and when you felt the itch

and discovered them amongst you, you killed them.

"Yes, I know the record of the Waffen-SS in Russia," he laughed, "but these people really hate the communists. They're good fighters too. De Lattre also arranged for some gunboats on the river, the Da Bach. They'll give us useful artillery support. We're outnumbered, of course, even allowing for the Viet Minh we don't yet know about, but we're better equipped and better prepared. We'll blow them back to the stone age," he grinned.

"It sounds good, in theory, Jacques. Let's see how it goes in practice. I need to rejoin my men, and we'll join you shortly."

We exchanged salutes, and I went off to find my company office, where I received orders to report to the captain on the defensive perimeter of Mao Khe. The whole town was a hubbub of military preparation. French Colonial infantry and paratroopers, Senegalese, their black faces striking and incongruous, Vietnamese and part-Vietnamese, a mix of languages and troops. Foreign Legion, speaking French, Viet, German, Russian and Ukrainian, and even some languages I'd never heard before in my life. Officers and sergeants shouted commands; corporals chivvied their men into assigned places.

Hard-eyed madams watched them all bustling past their brothels, calculating how many would be alive by tomorrow, and how much could they charge. The girls watched from the balconies, trying to catch the eye of any soldier that took their fancy. A French soldier meant a passport out of this war-ravaged country to the real or imagined luxuries of Paris, if you could persuade them to marry you. Some did, and it meant clothes, good restaurants, theatre and social life. And, of course, security, the security that comes from knowing one's country is not being torn apart by a vicious and bloody civil war. The security that comes from knowing the door will not be smashed down at midnight by a gang of drunken soldiers, or a band of fanatical Viet Minh seeking revenge on women who dared to sell their bodies to the hated French colonialists.

I found my unit sitting in the sun outside a Vietnamese native bar. I didn't have to worry about drunkenness, thankfully. These men were professionals and needed no lessons in the value of keeping a clear head to fight the enemy, and win. My NCOs were all ex-SS. Not a result of deliberate racial discrimination, but discrimination nonetheless. I had trained my unit, with the permission of my commander, to fight the SS way. Our tactics were simple; the brutally hard application of maximum force, designed to shock

and intimidate the enemy, giving us time to kill as many of them as possible while they were still gathering their wits. It only worked when the whole unit moved and fought as one man. Endless training, drills, ruthless discipline, and a strong esprit-de-corps were the ingredients that mixed together made us what we were. An elite fighting unit, respected by our superiors, and hated and feared by the Viet Minh. I needed experienced men to make it work, men who had fought and bled across the battlefields of Europe, practising the ruthless SS way of fighting that particular war.

They nodded a greeting as I walked up to them. My four NCOs sat relaxed, waiting to hear the unit orders.

Corporal Karl-Heinz Vogelmann, a lean, hard veteran of SS Das Reich. He had fought in Russia as well as many other European battlegrounds.

Corporal Manfred von Kessler, the unit clown, invariably smiling and cracking jokes, his short, tubby appearance hid the reality of the man inside. Ex-SS Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler, von Kessler was a ruthless killer when needed.

Sergeant Paul Schuster, ex-SS Totenkopf.

Senior Sergeant Friedrich Bauer, lean, almost cadaverous, and another veteran of SS-Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler.

They were all veterans of the battlefields of Kursk, the Demyansk Pocket and many other Russian theatres, Greece, the Balkans, France, and finally the bloody struggle for Germany, Berlin, and the heart of the Reich itself.

Like me, they had acquired literally dozens of decorations, tank destroyer badges, wound badges, Iron Crosses and campaign cuff titles. Also like me they had opted to join the French Foreign Legion at a time when the future for Waffen-SS veterans looked bleak. Even before we left school, we were playing soldiers in the Hitler Youth. Then the war arrived and changed our lives forever. Adolf Hitler's colossal, cruel miscalculation, surely the biggest lie any leader had ever inflicted on his people, with the exception of Joseph Stalin, of course. And our local warlord, Ho Chi Minh was doing his best to get to the top of the blood-soaked dictator ladder.

So here we were, Hitler's orphans, rootless, homeless, still fighting wars on foreign soil. At least we'd become good at what we did. Not all had learned quickly enough, but they were buried in the soil of Indochina, the forgotten men of ill-fated colonial conquests.

The men sat there smoking and chatting, laughing at another of von

Kessler's jokes. Two girls were with hem, Mai St Martin, Vogelmann's pretty Eurasian girlfriend, and Thien van Hoc, von Kessler's equally beautiful Vietnamese native girl. The girls usually stayed near our base in Hanoi, but on this mission had accompanied the main force to this town of Mao Khe that was supposedly safe. Once again, our blundering intelligence officers had led us blindly into a dangerous battle zone that threatened to overwhelm us.

"Have you come to tell us about a week's leave we have been awarded, Jurgen?" my Senior Sergeant, Friedrich Bauer, asked me.

They all laughed. Giap had begun to throw in huge numbers of troops in the surrounding areas, well-equipped divisions of hardened veterans. He was looking to build on his Cao Bang victory, so there would be no leave for us, not in the foreseeable future.

"We're here to man a defensive perimeter around the town. Reports show that the enemy are preparing to attack in strength." I showed them the map.

"Our company has been ordered here, and Captain Leforge is already there with the rest of our company. We are to report there to him directly, so get the men together. Latest intelligence places the Viets already massing just outside the town and an attack is certainly imminent."

"So the monkeys are swinging through the jungle towards us, are they?" Vogelmann grinned.

The Corporal had a black eye patch and a ragged beard to hide the injuries he sustained when a tank shell came too close to his foxhole. His men called him Blackbeard. He was also a fan of the new 'Tarzan' films that he'd seen in the cinema in Germany before the collapse. He came to Indochina expecting to see men in leotards swinging through the jungle on vines, dragging their attractive female mates along with them. We were certain he was still looking. In the meantime, he regarded the Viet Minh as no higher up the scale than monkeys; a label many of us here gave to the ugly and brutal men that fought for the communist leader Ho Chi Minh.

"Indeed they are, Karl-Heinz. If you don't get out of that chair pretty damn quickly and pick up your weapons, they'll catch you sleeping and singe your arse."

There was a roar of laughter at Vogelmann's expense, but the nudge to get him into action was unnecessary. They were already getting up, checking their weapons and packs and preparing to rejoin the company. Suddenly, a

mortar bomb whistled overhead and landed the other side of the town with a tremendous crash, spurring the bustle of troops preparing for the coming battle to move faster.

Friedrich Bauer looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I reckon about two kilometres away, Jurgen. That was a heavy mortar. About thirty minutes before they hit us?"

"Agreed," I replied. "Come on, let's get a nice SS welcome ready for Vogelmann's monkey friends. We need to move fast. Vogelmann, von Kessler, get the girls moving. There's a supply convoy returning to Hanoi in the next hour, so make sure they're on it."

They needed no more urging. We double-timed to our positions as more mortar shells began landing around us. It wasn't a good sign; heavy mortars meant that for once our intelligence had got it right. These were well-equipped and trained Viet Minh forces. We would have a battle on our hands.

We saluted Captain Jean Leforge, and he returned the salutes.

"We have at least three divisions of Viet Minh expected to hit us shortly. As soon as their positions are confirmed, the artillery will start hitting them. We've also got the gunboats on the river waiting for fire orders. Our job is simple, we're moving forward to meet them, and give them a bloody nose. They won't be expecting opposition before they reach the town, so get your men ready. We move out in ten minutes."

A runner came up with messages for him, so we left the Captain and went to check in with our men.

Sergeant Petrov greeted me, another veteran of the Eastern front, except that he fought for the Russians. Short, slight, with dark hair, a pointed beard and wire-framed glasses, he was the very image of the unfortunate Leon Trotsky, murdered by Joseph Stalin. Cut off from his unit, the Second Shock Army, he was taken prisoner by the Wehrmacht and spent the rest of the war in a camp. Nikolai Petrov had survived the prison camp to be repatriated to Stalin's Russia, only to be branded a traitor for having been captured by the Nazis. Facing a lengthy term in a Siberian Gulag, Nikolai Petrov had jumped a train heading west, eventually winding up in France where he was recruited by the Legion. Strangely, he too had fought at Kursk, where many of our Waffen-SS recruits had fought. Had they ever exchanged shots? I wondered. Perhaps a question best not asked. Petrov carried out the job of quartermaster, when he was not engaged in what he was best at, the job of killing. In the field, he hunted down the Vietnamese partisans with all the brutality and

dedication of the most ruthless SS-Partisanjaeger, the German partisan hunters who operated behind the lines to hunt down and exterminate Russian guerrillas.

"Jurgen, we're ready to move. Everyone is carrying their maximum load of weapons and ammunition, and food and water for two days. If we haven't done the job by then, we'll not need any more than that."

I agreed. We should be out and back within twenty-four hours. We simply had to hit the enemy hard and fast, our speciality. Hit their forward reconnaissance units, try and disrupt their command and control, and generally inspire a healthy amount of fear in the Viet Minh. That would slow their advance, so that we would have time to bring the artillery into play and shred their slant-eyed fanatics into a million pieces. That, at least, was the theory.

"Thanks, Nikolai." I checked my watch. "Five minutes, then we move."

I joined Captain Leforge, the company commander. He was a graduate of the École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, the French equivalent of the American West Point or British Sandhurst officer training schools.

The French elite military academy was founded in Fontainebleau in 1803 by Napoleon Bonaparte near Paris in the buildings of the Maison Royale de St-Louis; a school founded in 1685 by Louis XIV for impoverished daughters of noblemen who had died for France. The cadets moved several times more, eventually settling in Saint-Cyr, located west of Paris, in 1808. They left the school with the rank of lieutenant and joined the specialist centre for their chosen branch for one additional year, before being assigned to a regiment to serve as a platoon leader. Like his illustrious French predecessor, Napoleon Bonaparte, Leforge had intended joining the Artillery, the pride of the French army.

Unlike Napoleon, he didn't make it that far. A bully went too far in the Military College, and Leforge's good friend was left with a fractured skull after the bully, one of the instructors, went too far in meting out punishment. Leforge went straight for the man to eke out revenge, breaking two of the bully's legs and one of his arms in the process. Rough justice had no place in the stiff, tradition-ruled French army, and it was made crystal clear that the regular army had no place for him. And so he entered the Foreign Legion, where he soon found a place for his brand of unconventional soldiering in the steaming jungles of South-East Asia; leading his elite company of hardened troops, all survivors of the most brutal battlefields the world had yet seen.

“Move out,” Leforge shouted down the line.

Instantly, our reconnaissance patrol went forward, a section of four men led by Corporal Manfred von Kessler. They travelled five hundred metres ahead of the main force and were lightly equipped and armed. Their packs and equipment were shared out amongst the men so that they only carried MP40 submachine guns with them; with the exception of Private Jean-Claude Armand, who carried a silenced Kar 98 sniper rifle.

Their job was to be our eyes and ears. If they ran into a Viet Minh main force, their only defence would be to see them before they were seen themselves, and then rejoin the company as quickly as possible. They disappeared into the dark greenery of the jungle, and Leforge signalled us to follow.

We travelled for only a kilometre before von Kessler brought his men back hurriedly.

“We have company,” he told Leforge, who waited with me and the other sergeants.

“Viet Minh battalion, I’d guess, certainly more than five hundred men. They’re grouped up ahead, about half a kilometre from here, and the trail is totally blocked.”

“No way around them?”

“None.”

“Very well,” Leforge said, “we’ll give them a bloody nose. That’s what we’re here for, to disrupt their attack, so if we can get these monkeys running, maybe they’ll make the rest think twice about staying. Hoffman, any suggestions?”

I thought for a moment. The odds were high, at least five hundred Viet Minh and only a hundred of us, but we had the advantage of surprise. We were undoubtedly more heavily armed; and had absorbed the lessons of many battles where the odds were stacked against us.

“They must be preparing to move, and the attack is undoubtedly building right now. I suggest we prepare an ambush right here, and mine the track. We can detonate it as they come past, and open up with everything we’ve got. That should do it, but if they get any warning that we’re here, it won’t work, and then we’ll have a real fight on our hands.”

“Agreed, Sergeant Hoffmann. We’ll make damn sure they don’t get wind of our presence. Senior Sergeant Bauer, Sergeant Schuster,” he called. “Pass the word. Make preparations for the ambush right here, and if anyone

makes a sound when they're in position, I'll gut them personally. Clear?"

"Sir!"

Bauer and Schuster doubled away to get the men into position.

"Sergeant Hoffmann, get your explosives man to mine the path. We may not have much time."

"Yes, Sir," I replied and went to find Petrov.

Nikolai Petrov was a man of many talents, learned on the battlefields of the Eastern Front, and then honed to perfection in the jungle hell of Indochina. One of his talents was with explosives. He had the instinct to know exactly how much explosive was required for a particular job, never too much, never too little. He also had the cunning to know how to disguise his deadly charges, making them all but impossible to detect, until it was too late, of course.

"Petrov, we need this track mined, several hundred Viet Minh, so we'll need staged charges along a section of track, say two hundred metres? Do you have enough charges?"

"That will be twenty charges at ten metre intervals. I think we have about fifteen charges with us, so that'll make about fourteen metre intervals. It should do it, Jurgen."

"Very well, get it done. I'll get the men deployed."

I went and deployed my section, fifty men, all heavily concealed with criss-crossing fields of fire. The last thing I needed was 'friendly fire casualties'. I could see Senior Sergeant Bauer doing the same thing with the other half of the company. Captain Leforge was on the radio to Headquarters, calling in details of the Viet Minh location. I did the rounds of my men.

"When the mines explode, usual drill, hit them with everything we've got. I want grenades hitting them, semi-automatic fire, and I want to see those MP40's earning their keep. You know how it goes, and no time for niceties, kill the bastards! Vogelmann, how are the MG42's looking, any problems?"

"All set, Jurgen, just waiting for business."

I checked the heavy machine guns. We had eight in the company, four in my section and four in Bauer's. A lot of firepower for a mere company, but we found the nuisance of carrying them around the jungle, was more than outweighed by the devastating effect of multiple heavy machine guns opening fire unexpectedly on the slant-eyed monkeys. I could just make out two of the tips of the barrels, and the other two were totally invisible, but the enemy wouldn't see them until it was too late.

“Good, Karl-Heinz, just watch the crossfire,” I warned him.

He looked at me reproachfully. He’d learned his trade in the SS-Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler. From the Russian Front to the final offensives in Western Europe, then surviving in Indochina for more than five years, so he wasn’t about to make mistakes.

“Good.” I went to find Leforge.

“We’re all set, Captain.”

“Good, get in position, it shouldn’t be long.”

I walked into the jungle foliage and took up position with my troops. I wasn’t unduly worried. We’d done this many times before, although a company up against at least a battalion was high odds, and high enough to make me cautious. We waited, and the minutes dragged by. I started to get nervous; the slightest noise would alert the Viet Minh, and we couldn’t survive a prolonged firefight.

But we were professionals, doing our job, and the job we had trained for. Some of us thousands of miles away in the snowy wastes of the Soviet Union, in the forests of the Ardennes; or the ruined cities of Germany, bombed by the RAF and US Air Force, shelled and machine gunned by the Allied forces as they crushed the mighty German war machine.

There was no noise, and no one smoked to give the game away. No one spoke, even murmured. We were all well aware of the high stakes on which our lives, and the lives of our comrades, rested.

Then I heard it, initially, a slight noise, and just a disturbance in the natural rhythm of the jungle. It was the gentle footfalls of hundreds of men, moving stealthily along the path. I heard the odd snatch of whispered conversation. They were confident; so confident to be whispering to each other, and they hadn’t even put point men to provide forward reconnaissance. The arrogant bastards, I thought. They may think they own this patch of jungle, but they haven’t won it yet.

Then they came into view. They were Viet Minh regulars, wearing the distinctive beige uniform with the upturned conical hats. They carried an assortment of weapons, Mauser rifles, German war surplus, like our MP40s and MG42s. Soviet made PPSh submachine guns with stick magazines, more suited to light, mobile jungle warfare than the more traditional pancake magazine commonly used on the Eastern Front. Some of the regulars carried Russian Moisin Nagant rifles, and others were carrying captured French and British equipment, including the familiar Lee Enfield Mark 4. In the middle

of the line of Viet Minh walked their officers and commissars, all of whom were distinguished by their headgear, a collection of trilby type hats and forage caps. Each of them, unlike their men, carried a holstered pistol, while the men carried heavy rucksacks. It was as if the officers and commissars disdained to wear the headgear of the common soldier, which they probably did, as the message of Marxist equality was strictly for the peasants.

In reality, Ho Chi Minh's new Vietnam was rather different, and it reminded me in many ways of Adolf Hitler's Germany. They had their versions of the Gestapo, the SS, and the SD. Elections were regarded as something of a fairy story. Adolf would have been quite at home amongst these people.

They were indeed at battalion strength. The leading men had almost gone past our hidden mines while the end of the line had still to come into view. Leforge judged it would have to be enough. He was crouched near to me, and I saw his hand signal to Petrov. Almost immediately there was a series of massive explosions, and the peaceful sounds of the forest were ripped apart by the noise. Thousands of birds took to the skies in a whistling, twittering swarm, hurriedly escaping man's destructive folly.

There was a short pause, and I could only hear slight background noises. Then tons of debris thrown up by the blast settled down over us.

Amidst the cries of agony from the wounded Viets, our men opened up. Grenades sailed over the jungle foliage, to land in the middle of the human devastation. So far, not a shot had been fired in return. Then I heard the heavy bursts of machine gun fire as the MG42s began sending their message of death. The fire was punctuated by the lighter bursts of submachine gun fire from the MP40s. In the distance, I could hear the crack, crack, as our sharpshooters picked off targets of opportunity; enemy soldiers who thought themselves lucky to have escaped the blast, fleeing down the track only to be struck down by our snipers. I could just make out Private Armand hidden in the fork made by two trees, invisible to the Viets on the path, firing shot after aimed shot at those who survived and tried to flee. He seemed to never miss. There would be a distinctive high crack that rose above the din of the machine guns and grenades. A man would throw up his arms and tumble over, then another crack, another man dead, and on it went, machine-like killing.

Eventually Leforge shouted for ceasefire and sent our reconnaissance patrol further up the path to check for any remaining Viets.

The jungle was quiet, eerily so, after the shattering noise of our gunfire. We picked our way carefully out of the jungle to check the casualties. We had to be careful, as some fanatics would feign death to get a shot at the hated white colonialists. We had a simple rule. If in doubt, kill the bastards. I used my pistol to put a bullet in a Viet I thought I saw moving. His head twitched to the side as my bullet took him in the back of his brain, and then he lay still. All along the path our men were despatching other survivors of our attack, wounded or not. The occasional shot rang out, a scream, a groan.

One Viet Minh, a Commissar by the look of him, took a grenade from a dead comrade next to him and went to throw it. He propped himself up with one arm in his agony, determined to inflict pain on the colonialist enemy. Senior Sergeant Bauer was nearby, watching carefully; the battlefield strewn with bodies was nothing new to him. He saw the movement, rushed over and threw the body of a dead Viet soldier on top of the grenade. There was a muted blast, and pieces of the dead soldier sprayed the ground, leaving the Commissar staring stupidly at his bloody shoulder. The dead body had protected all but his arm, which had disappeared and left a bloody, bleeding stump. His screams echoed through the jungle, until Bauer casually finished him with a three shot burst from his MP40.

Our patrol came rushing back.

“Some of the Viet Minh escaped, and there’s a much bigger Viet force following the one we just shot up. They’re coming straight towards us, so we won’t get a chance to ambush this lot. They’re being very careful, point men both sides of the track,” von Kessler reported to Leforge and me.

He was breathless, as they had been running. What a damn nuisance we’d used our mines and explosives on this action. We had no replacements. Leforge turned to me.

“Sergeant, I don’t see any alternative but a withdrawal to Mao Khe. We can’t hold off a division.”

I agreed. We had done our job, and done it well, several hundred less Viet Minh to join the attack on Mao Khe.

“Form up,” Leforge ordered. “We’re pulling back now. Point men, move out.”

Von Kessler took his four-man squad and began retracing our steps back to Mao Khe. The main body of men were on their feet, packs and equipment loaded, weapons checked and ready for instant action.

“Corporal Vogelmann, take five other men to the rearguard, and take

two of the MG42s."

"Sir," Vogelmann instantly issued orders, racing to the back of the column with the five men and two MG42s, and the heavy load spread between them.

Leforge said, "Jurgen, send your fastest two men back to our stores in the town. They're to bring back another batch of mines for Sergeant Petrov. If we've got time, we'll try mining the path nearer the town. They'll be careful, but so will we, and we may catch some of them again."

I went and detailed two men to dash back to get the explosives, and then I joined my men.

There was little talk. We'd all done this too many times before to discuss or question any orders. We survived this war by carrying out our missions with a dedicated professionalism; an unswerving attitude to battle that had carried us through many, many bloody fights, where the amateurs and the careless had fallen to enemy fire and their own rank stupidity.

"Move out," Leforge shouted.

The column moved off, heading back to Mao Khe. We travelled back half a kilometre, with only another half kilometre between the town and us. Our two runners met us on the path, carrying packs loaded with mines. They had fourteen in all, as many as they could carry.

Petrov took over, preparing the load on the march, fitting fuses and preparing the explosives for use. He dropped out of the column with three men. They let us go past and then began preparing their charges. I could see Petrov fitting a charge in one of the bigger trees, a clever move. The Viets would be looking for freshly dug soil. While they watched the ground, the charges at face level in the trees would detonate, hopefully blowing off more than a few of their communist ideas clean out of their heads.

He caught up with us just as we were entering Mao Khe.

"All set, Jurgen. We should catch a few of them."

As he spoke, there was a roar of explosions that rippled out of the jungle.

"Seems to have worked," he said with satisfaction. "That means they're only half a kilometre away."

"Yes, well done, Nikolai, go and join the men. The monkeys will be here soon looking for revenge."

He dashed off. Leforge had heard the explosion and was giving orders for the defence to be prepared.

“Radioman,” he shouted, “get me our air liaison, and I’ll order up a Napalm strike on the area around that Viet division.

Napalm is a result of a gelling agent mixed with gasoline which we frequently used in military operations as a part of an incendiary weapon. It causes severe burns to the skin and body, asphyxiation, unconsciousness and death. One of the main features was that it stuck well to the naked skin, and hence it left no real chance for removing the burning Napalm from the victim’s skin. We normally used it against dug-in enemy personnel.

The burning incendiary composition flowed into foxholes, trenches, bunkers, drainage and irrigation ditches, and other improvised troop shelters. In the killing fields of Indochina, it was a lethal killer, and one of the most deadly. Delivered by air, it was normally devastating to a well dug-in enemy.

“Jurgen,” he said to me.

“I want an artillery strike to hit them hard, so get on the field telephone. Call down an artillery strike on their estimated coordinates. If they want revenge, we’ll give them a bit more to feel sore about. By the time they get over that lot, the air force will be over with their second course of Napalm.”

I picked up a field telephone and got through to our artillery.

“Sorry, Sergeant,” the artillery officer replied, “all our artillery has been ordered to engage other targets. We’ve got a lot of Viets inbound. Try the navy. They’ll be glad to have your business.”

I thanked him and got through to our ships, waiting off the coast. We had a Dinassaut on the nearby river, a unique French invention that was proving to be very successful in this type of war. Several surplus US tank landing craft, donated to the French by their American friends, were converted into gunboats with the addition of mortars and a range of heavy weaponry. It was a lot of firepower.

The Dinassaut, or Division d'Infanterie Navale d'Assaut, a Naval Assault Infantry Division, was a type of riverine military unit employed by the French Navy during the Indochina War. Each Dinassaut consisted of approximately twelve craft; the American landing craft modified with armour and using tank turrets as weapons. They used other craft carrying 81mm mortars to be employed as riverine artillery. Used effectively, it was a formidable weapon.

I gave the coordinates and left them to open fire as soon as possible. We’d done everything possible. We were well positioned for defence, well armed and supplied. We now had to wait for the next move. It wasn’t the Viet

Minh who made it, but the Air Force who arrived with two Grumman F8F Bearcats, swooping in over the town for their attack run.

The Bearcat concept was inspired by the early 1943 evaluation of a captured Focke-Wulf Fw 190 by Grumman test pilots and engineering staff. Compared to the earlier Hellcat, the Bearcat was lighter, had a much better rate of climb and was 50 mph faster. The F8F prototypes were ordered in November 1943 and first flew on 21 August 1944, nine months later. The first production aircraft were delivered in February 1945, and the first squadron was operational by May, but World War II was over before the aircraft saw combat service.

Our air force had bought many of the American fighters and used them effectively in the skies of Indochina. Although their range was somewhat limited, which made them less useful than they might have been. Armed with four 0.50 calibre machine guns or four 20mm M3 cannon, as well as four unguided rockets, the F8F carried a bomb load of 1,000 pounds, which terrified the Viets even more when the bomb racks were loaded with Napalm.

The fighters had barely cleared the town when their pods of Napalm dropped away, and straight into the jungle where we believed the Viets to be assembling to attack the town. The Napalm hit the ground with a crashing explosion, sending up jets of flame and heavy clouds of oily, black smoke. The aircraft banked around for a second pass and emptied their machine guns on the Viet positions. Then the ships opened fire, their shells landing unerringly on the same target, directed by a naval fire controller who had joined us when the fire control order was passed on. For fifteen minutes, dozens of shells rained down on the small area of jungle, and then they ceased fire. Part of the jungle was ablaze. Clearly, any of the enemy who were still in that area was dead or dying, roasting even before they got to hell.

We had a brief period of quiet, and there was little to be done. We were dug in, so all we had to do was wait. Then they came. Where the edge of the jungle had been empty, it was suddenly filled with men, charging straight for us, and their ugly, hate-filled faces screaming their battle cries.

“Open fire!” the shout went up all along our line. First the MG42s opened up, their unique ripping sound sending their message of death into the Viet ranks. The rest of us opened up, MP40s, rifles. As the Viets reached our first line of barbed wire, the grenade throwers went into action.

We were receiving fire, both from the attackers and from other Viet Minh posted in the jungle, out of sight. Then mortars began.

The first shell hit thirty metres behind us, destroying a peasant hut. The second was only ten metres away, and I saw one of my men fall to the shower of fragments.

"Where's that naval man? I want him here right now. We've got a fire mission."

"Here, Sergeant," the anxious face of the naval lieutenant appeared next to me.

"Fire order for your ships, and hit the edge of the jungle. We need to stop those mortars and machine guns," I shouted to him above the intense storm of noise and bullets all around us.

"But, Sergeant, it's too near to our lines, and it's too risky in these..."

"Get those bloody boats firing, Lieutenant," I snarled at him, "or I'll send you out on your own to deal with the mortars."

He ducked down and got on the radio. Using his map, he gave the fire order. Less than a minute later, the first shells arrived, shredding the edge of the jungle and creeping towards our position. The oncoming Viet Minh were torn apart by high explosives, and mercifully the mortars stopped firing. Either they were hit, or they were moving to a safer position away from the bombardment.

The Viet Minh valued their heavy ordnance, unlike the men, who Giap treated as disposable stores to be consumed in endless numbers in his human wave attacks.

As quickly as it began, the battle ended. Including the damage we wreaked in the jungle, we had taken a heavy toll of the enemy. All around the town, the French forces, supported by artillery and navy gunfire, were pushing back the attack. We had beaten them back, for now.

Later that day, they attacked again, and through the night we repulsed constant nuisance attacks. The Viets were trying to wear us down with infiltration tactics. The next day they came again, and in strength. We pushed back three more major attacks, and dozens of minor actions, before we judged they'd had enough. By the evening, the jungle had gone quiet. The monkeys had gone swinging back into the jungle.

"Sergeant Hoffman," a runner called, "you're needed at Headquarters."

"What for?" I asked the man. This was unusual. Normally, the message would go through Leforge.

"No idea," he said. "They just said they wanted you, and so I came to pass on the order."

He turned and left. I went to inform Leforge, and then walked over to Headquarters. When I walked in, the divisional intelligence officer, Colonel Joffre who I knew well, was waiting for me.

“Jurgen,” he shook hands warmly.

I first came across Colonel Leon Joffre two years before. His attitude towards a former member of the SS was neither warm nor trusting. He’d lost members of his family to SS atrocities in France, notably when his brother was shot as part of a partisan reprisal. However, times had changed. Uncle Joe was no longer the friendly Russian ally. Instead, he was the ugly face behind the vicious communist uprising in Vietnam, and the SS man, who once was his enemy, now fought on his side, for France. It was very different.

We had exchanged views on several occasions; the natural reserve that French officers felt towards their men set aside, perhaps because of this unconventional war, or maybe as I had once been an officer too. We exchanged pleasantries, and he quickly came to the matter in hand.

“The communists are getting stronger, much stronger. If we don’t strike them hard very quickly, I fear that France will lose this war to these ugly little natives. That would be a catastrophe, so soon after the war in Europe.”

“I agree, Colonel,” I replied. “What did you have in mind, more troops?”

“Impossible, Paris has already indicated that they’re looking to reduce troop levels in Indochina, not increase them. We need another way.”

He paused and looked at me.

“Are you looking for suggestions, Colonel? Because if so, I don’t have any, but maybe several divisions of Waffen SS would tip the balance,” I smiled.

“I don’t think the world is ready for that, Jurgen. My department has come up with a plan, and one that involves a small group of men infiltrating Viet Minh held Tonkin. What would you say is our greatest problem at the moment?”

I didn’t need to think. There was only one name at the top of communist assets that was tipping the war away from France.

“Giap,” I told him, “without question. A very clever general and ruthless enough to squander every poor peasant in Indochina, to get the communist paradise he’s seeking.”

“Agreed, I have arrived at exactly the same conclusion. We’ve decided to recruit a unit to go into Giap’s base area,” he hesitated. The reason came to

me in a flash.

"You want him killed, Colonel. You want me to take a party of my men and apply SS partisan hunter tactics to the problem, yes? A straightforward murder mission."

Joffre looked embarrassed.

"I wouldn't put it quite like that, Jurgen."

"So how would you put it?"

He looked me in the eye.

"You know I can only go so far, and say so much. I have French army politics to consider. Let's just say I don't disagree with anything you have just said, and leave it at that. What do you think?"

"I am not optimistic, Colonel. It could be a suicide mission, but let me think about it."

The mission was scheduled to depart in four weeks time, after the rainy season had ended, and timed to coincide with a French army offensive to the north of Hanoi; which would divert Viet Minh attention from the infiltration mission. Colonel Joffre gave me two weeks to come to a final decision. In the meantime, he allowed me to discuss it with my own NCOs, but not with the men, and definitely not with Leforge.

"The last thing I want is this mission to be tossed around in the officers' mess, Jurgen. You and your trusted NCOs, that's it, no more."

I found Vogelmann, Bauer, von Kessler and Schuster sat outside a bar, relaxing and chatting with a couple of dusky native girls.

"Get rid of them," I said, looking at the girls. "You don't know where they've been. Besides, we need a private chat."

The women were sent off, and they left sulkily. We pulled our chairs closer together, and I explained Joffre's mission. There was a shocked silence.

"Giap," Vogelmann said, "will have more protection than the president of France. Do you think we'd ever get near him?"

"Us, no. But Russian military advisors, probably yes."

"Ah," he replied, "so that's it. They want Russian speakers."

"I suspect that's one of the reasons, yes," I told him. "I think the other is that they want people who are not too squeamish about killing."

"Like former SS men, you mean," Bauer smiled.

"Exactly," I grinned at him.

"I suppose we weren't always too fussy in the old days, Jurgen," said

Bauer. “We did tend to shoot first and ask questions afterwards.”

“Shit on the questions,” Vogelmann grinned. “I used to tell my men just to shoot first then move on.”

We spent the next hour chatting about possible options for the mission. There were lots of things to look at. It was by no means a simple plan. Getting in would not be too difficult. Getting close to Giap, even with us speaking Russian, which we all did to some degree, would be much more difficult. And after he was killed, getting out would be a problem on a whole new level.

Giap was their national icon, after Ho Chi Minh. Killing him could stoke up so much opposition that escaping may be an insurmountable problem. My inclination was to say no to Joffre. My men had sacrificed enough. They were in the Legion in Indochina to rebuild their lives and identities, not to throw away what life they had left to them. I felt it was a job for the air force, combined with some good intelligence on the ground about Giap’s movements. A squadron of fighter-bombers could do the job; blast his headquarters apart, and be back at base in time for evening drinks.

Three days later, we were back in action at Phu Ly, south of Hanoi, where the Viet Minh 304th Division had attacked in force.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER THREE

Headquarters received an urgent radio message from Phu Ly; the town was under attack. Giap was developing his strategy of wearing down the French forces by mounting large attacks, rather than using clever or subtle tactics. It was a clever move, in theory. He could lose men at a rate that would bring down governments in any civilised country. Ten thousand deaths to knock out a simple French outpost was a price he was happy to pay, at least in terms of his men’s lives. The Viet Minh master strategist stayed relatively safe behind his lines in Northern Tonkin, close enough to slip over the border if our forces managed to get too close. Phu Ly was less than a hundred kilometres from Mao Khe, and the Legion sent six APCs for us to travel in. My company packed into the vehicles and set off.

We arrived in the town under fire and quickly set up our headquarters in

a single storey baker's shop, long abandoned by its owner. It was in the town centre, near the church. Although the communists waged a campaign against the Christian religion in parts of the country they had overrun, this beautiful little church had so far been spared. The Viet Minh were besieging the northern side of the town; machine gun and rifle fire was smashing into buildings and mortar shells landed. Civilians were running everywhere, trying to escape the hail of lead and shrapnel sent over as gifts by their Viet Minh fraternal brethren. This was nothing new. Many of us from the SS had seen it often on the Eastern Front, and Russians were always ready to sacrifice their own civilians to get a shot at us Germans. Russian General Zhukov explained after the war on the Eastern front.

"If we come to a minefield, our infantry attack exactly as if it were not there. The losses we get from personnel mines, we consider only equal to those we would have gotten from machine guns and artillery if the Germans had chosen to defend the area with strong bodies of troops, instead of minefields."

He was known to round up civilians to walk over minefields in advance of his troops so that the soldiers could be spared to fight the enemy. The communists were certainly consistent.

I sent Private Armand up into the church bell tower to snipe at the enemy. Captain Leforge took half of the company and deployed at the east side of the little town, and I took the rest of the men and deployed to the west. We had two battalions of colonial infantry in the centre of the town, and they were hard pressed to hold off the enemy attacks that had quietened down since we arrived. The Viet Minh were obviously waiting to see where we deployed before mounting any further assaults on the town. The ground between the jungle and the first of the buildings was already littered with Viet casualties. Inside the town, we had almost thirty wounded lying around on litters, being tended to by medics. Eight body bags were visible, laid out on the ground under a shop canopy. The infantry officers looked wild eyed. They'd obviously been taken by surprise and suffered casualties before they were even able to begin fighting back.

The colonel in charge of the two battalions was Colonel Sartre, and I went to speak to him.

"Yes, Sergeant, what is it?" he snapped.

"Foreign Legion, we've just arrived, one company, Sir. My captain has deployed us to the east and west of the town. Could you tell me the situation,

enemy strength and positions?"

"If you need information, your captain can ask me. I don't have time for sergeants," he replied haughtily.

I looked pointedly at the casualties lying on the ground, the body bags, then back to him.

"Then perhaps you should make time, Colonel, if you want to avoid many more of these body bags."

His eyes widened, astonished at being spoken to in such an insubordinate manner.

"Who are you, Sergeant? What is your name?"

"Senior Sergeant Jurgen Hoffman, Sir, Foreign Legion."

"I thought so," he sneered. "A Nazi."

I boiled over. The Viet Minh were laying siege to the town. His men were draining away in a steady flow of casualties, wounded and dead, and the stupid bastard could only think to drag up old arguments.

"No, not a Nazi," I told him, "French Foreign Legion, and trying to stop you getting your silly head blown off, Sir!"

I emphasised the Sir, making it as insulting as I dared.

"Now, will you please let me have some idea as to what is going on with the Viet Minh, or do I have to beat it out of you?"

His jaw dropped, and I could see spittle beginning to ooze out of his mouth. He was terrified, that was obvious, reverting to the familiar safety of military rules and etiquette to try and protect him from enemy bullets. Fortunately, Captain Leforge chose that moment to join us, and he saluted the Colonel.

"Sir, we need to know where the enemy is deployed, their strength, and anything you can tell us to help get you out of this situation."

He looked from me to the Colonel, curious about the frigid atmosphere. Colonel Sartre hesitated for a moment, and then a mortar shell exploded in the nearby town square, causing him to flinch. He looked wildly around him, and then took the opportunity to pass on his responsibilities.

"Lieutenant, give this officer the intelligence he requires. I'm going to check the stores situation. Carry on."

He hurried away. The infantry lieutenant avoided my eyes, just handing me the maps and radio reports from their positions around the town. It took Leforge and me a few minutes to work out that the situation was grim.

We were under attack from the Viet Minh 304th Division, together with

elements of at least two other unidentified Viet Minh divisions. We were faced by possibly several thousand men, and our French forces, including the Legion, were little more than a thousand. It looked to us as if Colonel Sartre had almost thrown the battle away before it started, leaving whole sections of the town unguarded for Viet Minh squads to come surging in. Which in fact, they did. Hurling themselves at the defenders in suicidal rushes, allowing them to be slaughtered in droves, but slowly whittling away the numbers and morale of our men. Personally, I would like to have seen Colonel Sartre on the Russian Front, and possibly these Viet Minh would give him a flavour of what it was like to be there. I had to laugh inwardly at my vision of a tropical version of the battle of Kharkov.

"Time to go, I think, Sergeant. We've got a battle on our hands, thanks to the good Colonel."

"Yes, Sir, I'll rejoin my men."

"Captain, I could do with some advice on deploying my own men."

It was the lieutenant, standing next to the map table. Leforge looked him up and down, neat and freshly pressed in his new uniform.

"Your first battle, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir, I'm sorry. Lieutenant Mathieu."

"Don't be sorry," Leforge replied. "You've done the right thing, asking advice from someone who's done it before. Do you have a good sergeant, one with plenty of experience?"

"Er, yes Sir, Sergeant Villeneuve. He's been here since the start."

"Good. Go to him, ask his advice and put yourself in his hands. If you're lucky, he'll keep you and your men alive. I suggest you go now."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you Sir."

He hurried off, and we looked at each other. Just young lads!

By the time I got to my men on the east of the town, they had deployed; two each of the MG42s stationed at each of our flanks, and each gun had several spare belts ready to hand. The men had taken up position behind whatever cover they could find, in the empty windows of the few brick built houses, and several were behind a concrete statue commemorating some long forgotten hero. Some had upturned a pair of vehicles, rusting broken down cars probably left over from the Japanese occupation. They had spare ammunition and grenades ready to hand, and everyone was well camouflaged behind some sort of cover.

"Petrov," I called, "did you manage to mine the approach?"

“Sorry, Jurgen, the monkeys have got the open ground covered. I tried to get out there, but nearly got my arse shot off for my pains.”

“Thanks for trying, anyway.”

I checked around our positions. The men were well prepared, so there was nothing to do but wait. Occasionally, I heard a crack, followed by a scream. Armand was doing his job well, sniping from the church tower.

Then they came, a whole stream of men. The Viet Minh charged out of the jungle, screaming, ferociously. As they emerged, mortars started lobbing shells into the town, throwing clouds of dust, smoke and debris, and making it difficult to see what had been hit. Their flanking DP machine guns opened fire with a continuous clattering, spraying rounds around our positions. It was like being in a hailstorm, a very lethal hailstorm, but it was not one sided. Our troops needed no orders to fire, and ignoring the incoming bullets, the MG42s opened up at long range. As the Viets got nearer, it was the turn of the submachine guns, not the most accurate of weapons unless at close quarters. But there were so many attackers that it was literally a case of point and shoot.

I saw dozens of the charging men go down hit by our bullets, but most reached our outer defences, the rolls of barbed wire the infantry engineers had placed around most obvious approaches to the town. They leapt over the wire, and many were hit by the increasing rate of fire that we brought to bear. In the distance, I could hear our troops, the Colonial Infantry and the other half of our company, exchanging a blazing rate of fire with their attackers. Clearly, there would be no hope of calling on them to reinforce this position, which was now very hard pressed.

I could see two of our men down, and neither moved. At this rate, we were going to take a great many casualties.

I shouted to the men, “Grenades!” and watched them lob the missiles at the Viets. The explosions and rain of metal fragments resulted in more screams, and more bodies torn apart and falling to the ground. It was looking grim. I estimated the enemy force was at least five hundred strong. At best, they’d lost a hundred men to our gunfire, but that left four hundred to close in on us. There were too many, and we couldn’t fight those numbers at close quarters.

“Jurgen, get them to pull back. I’ve planted mines all around our positions,” a voice shouted.

It was Petrov, our Ukrainian demolitions expert. I looked around, and

there were wires snaking back to a house, a hundred metres further into the town.

"Yes, that's where the detonator is positioned. As soon as the Viets overrun this position, we can blow them back to Moscow."

"Excellent, Nikolai," I told him.

I got out my whistle and blew three short blasts, the signal to fall back. The men looked up, saw me pointing to the position one hundred metres away, and then followed me as I ran towards it. They needed no second order, and they literally scooped up their guns and ammunition and were hurtling away from the positions while the Viets were still fifty metres away.

The last man dived under cover just as the Viet Minh surged over our first defence line. I waited for a few moments as they milled around, to let more troops come up to the kill zone. Then they saw Petrov's wires. There was a screech of alarm, but it was too late. I turned the switch, and the whole area erupted in a massive explosion of smoke and flame. The screaming started, and it went on for a long time. At least half of the Viet Minh battalion that had attacked us lay dead or dying. The rest of them were either wounded or too shocked and stunned to respond. There was only one order to give.

"Forward, attack, finish them off. Follow me!"

In a flash, a literal flash, the situation had changed. The surviving Viet Minh still outnumbered us, but they were slow, shocked, and unable to think or even defend themselves. We gorged ourselves on killing. The riflemen had fixed bayonets, and the rest of us charged in with our MP40s blazing, emptying magazine after magazine into the demoralised troops.

They never had a chance. We killed them in batches, empty a clip, a line of men dead or dying. Reload, another clip empty, another line of corpses. Some of them tried to flee, but our MG42s had set up position behind a broken and shattered bungalow, firing from gaps between the broken masonry. They chewed into the retreating troops, flinging them brutally to the ground.

A few, a very brave few tried to regroup and fight back. We lobbed grenades into the middle of their ranks before they could even take aim, and more bodies were flung into the air. Finally, it ended.

Perhaps a hundred of the five hundred who attacked had managed to find the safety of the jungle. We had inflicted a stunning defeat on a much larger force, and almost wiped out an entire battalion. That would make them think twice before they hit us again. A shout came towards us from the town.

“Sergeant Hoffmann, they need help, quickly!”

I looked up. It was Lieutenant Mathieu, the colonial infantry officer.

“What is the situation, Lieutenant?” I asked.

“The Viet Minh, Sergeant, they’ve broken through in several places. If we don’t stop them, they’ll come in behind us.”

“And Colonel Sartre?”

He hesitated. “I, I, er, cannot find the Colonel.”

He looked shamefaced. We both knew what he meant.

“Very well. Bauer!” I shouted.

“Jurgen, what is it?” He came running up to us.

“Friedrich, the colonials have got trouble. The Viets have overrun them in several places, and I’m taking some men to give them a hand. Keep ten of the men here to watch this area, and you can have two of the MG42s,” I told him. “We need to move fast before the monkeys outflank us.”

He dashed away, calling out the names of troops he needed to stay with him. I shouted for the rest of the men to disengage and assemble with me. We’d lost four men killed in the short action and half a dozen wounded, so it meant we had around eighty men to help out the infantry. It would have to do.

“Lead the way, Lieutenant. Let’s move.”

“Er, right, you want me, er...”

“Lieutenant, run! Wherever the action is, that’s where you’re taking us.”

“Right.”

We followed him, sprinting along. We suddenly came across a pocket of Viet Minh setting up a machine gun, one of their Russian DPs. They were as surprised to see us as we were to see them, but we were faster, more experienced, and more ruthless. Without even checking our speed, our two-dozen machine pistols fired into them, and three grenades were lobbed over our heads to land in the middle of them. Then we were past, leaving a dead and dying machine gun crew bleeding on the street.

We came to the colonials’ position. They were desperately fighting against a much larger force of Viets, obviously another battalion that had launched a separate attack on them. It was not a moment too soon.

“Sergeant Schuster,” I shouted to Paul, “keep ten men back as a rearguard. We don’t know how many of them have already got past the colonials. The rest of you, come with me, and give them everything you’ve got. Charge!”

We jumped into the battle. The attackers were literally fighting hand-to-hand in some areas. I noticed the MG42s deploying to our flanks, and they would deter any more of the monkeys from getting into the close quarter fighting. Then we hit the body of struggling men. I tripped over the body of an infantryman, righted myself, and found a snarling Viet in front of me. I fired a burst and saw him go down, but there was another man behind him. I fired again, and he went down. And so it went, but we were turning the tide of battle; the unexpected arrival of our eighty men, seasoned veterans all, bloody fighters, survivors of countless battles, and we gave no quarter. The Viets died where they fought, shocked by our ferocity, a ferocity wrought in the course of our long struggle against communists everywhere. These were not men, not even monkeys. Monkeys at least should expect some respect. No, these were inhuman beasts, the denizens of Stalin and Ho's deepest, darkest schemes. They were rats, vermin, and to be exterminated. And so we exterminated them. We hacked and slashed at them, shot them. I saw more than one legionnaire strangling his victim to death, the white, blazing heat of barbarous savagery.

We were winning. The Viet Minh couldn't withstand our fresh attack, so they slowly began to edge back, and then finally they turned and ran. The men let out a cheer.

"Don't follow," I shouted. "We don't know what they've got waiting in the jungle. Help the wounded, clear the dead and break out the ammunition stores. Let's get this lot cleared. We don't know when they'll be coming back."

They started to carry out my orders. Men were running back and forth, carrying wounded soldiers, and a man ran past with a box of machine gun ammunition. Then the sound of a commotion broke my concentration.

"Who the hell authorised the Legion to give orders to my men?"

It was Colonel Sartre, red faced, apoplectic. I looked at him coolly.

"I did."

"You? A sergeant? I will report you for this, and consider yourself lucky not be under arrest. I gave orders to these men, and I expect them to be obeyed, not ignored because of a Foreign Legion sergeant."

At first he looked satisfied, as he'd publicly upbraided this Nazi. Then I laughed in his face and grabbed him by the front of his jacket. I put my face close to his and spoke quietly.

"You stupid, cowardly, jumped up piece of shit."

I could feel him shaking with both anger and fear.

"You've got men dead here, you turd. Dead, because you were too cowardly to come and lead them properly, like an officer. If you don't get reported for cowardice and deserting your men in the face of the enemy, I might even shoot you myself."

I looked around. A group of men, his and mine, were gathered around enjoying the show.

"Now I suggest you either start to act like an officer, or get your pistol, put it in your mouth and blow your yellow brains out. Sir!" I shouted.

I felt him flinch, and I flung him to one side and walked off, leaving him white and trembling.

There were a few officers like that in the French army in Vietnam, although I never encountered anything similar in the Legion. Most officers that I fought with were brave soldiers, even in the face of overwhelming odds, and a political situation that seemed to be totally stacked against them. I looked for Lieutenant Mathieu and found him nearby, chatting to Bauer.

"Lieutenant Mathieu, I suggest you start organising your men. I've strong doubts that the good Colonel will be good for very much. Keep an eye out for him. Cowards can be very vindictive," I told him.

He nodded, "Thank you, Sergeant, for everything you and your men have done today."

We kept a close eye on the jungle for the rest of that day, but the Viet Minh seemed to have lost heart. We made sure guards were posted and settled in for the evening. Sometime after ten we were sitting around a fire in the square, drinking some of the local rice wine someone had bought from an opportunistic seller who was making the rounds of the troops, selling his wares. Suddenly, we heard shouts from nearby. We hastily picked up our weapons and ran for the source of the trouble. Two shots rang out in quick succession, and then a burst of submachine gun fire. We ran around a corner and straight into a hand-to-hand fight between Viet Minh and eight of our colonial infantry, who had bumped into the Viets as they patrolled the town.

We waded into the melee, picking our targets. One Viet, a wiry, tough fighter, had already killed two of the infantry. I headed for him, but he saw me coming and raised his pistol, a Russian Tokarev, a common side arm from the Russian Front. I hit him square in the chest with a burst from my MP40 and saw him spin to the ground, his entrails spilling out, and one fighter who wouldn't trouble us again. The others were quickly despatched.

Apparently, they'd hidden in the town, waiting for dark to come out and attack us from behind. They cost us two men, and I immediately gave orders for the town to be turned upside down to find any more Viet Minh who were still in hiding. It was almost two o'clock before we had finished, the men grumbling and moaning that there were no more enemy in the town, and it was a fool's errand. But Vogelmann and Kessler had found two more Viets, both slightly wounded and probably waiting for the middle of the night to break out. We sent them to join their other comrades.

We spent all the next day helping the colonial infantry repair the town defences against the possibility of another attack. It was doubtful, the Viet Minh were known to be fight and run soldiers. Long, drawn out campaigns were not unknown, but still uncommon. Two more battalions of infantry arrived in lorries during the late afternoon, together with plenty of supplies and ammunition. We stayed for one more night, enjoying drinks and good food, part of the extra supplies the reinforcements brought with them, before leaving in the morning. We'd been recalled to Hanoi. I watched with Leforge and Bauer as the men loaded our trucks ready to move out. Vogelmann came over to us.

"Does this mean leave, Captain?" he asked. "It's been awhile since our last break, so any chance of taking a few days leave in the city?"

Leforge raised his eyes to the heavens. None of us had taken any leave for several months, since Giap's new offensives had started. Apart from the odd day grabbed when there was a rare lull in the fighting, there was little opportunity for anything other than fighting. We were outnumbered and often felt outgunned; something that was confirmed after the war when a unit comparison established that the Viet Minh were more heavily armed than the average French company. Fortunately we were not the average French company, and we suffered the burden of extra weapons and ammunition in order to give us the edge in a firefight.

But overall, the French army in Indochina was fighting for its life and everyone, apart from the politicians and the General Staff, knew it.

Our gear was finally loaded, and the troops piled into the lorries. We began driving back to Hanoi, a distance of sixty-five kilometres, about forty miles. Halfway there, we reached the village of Nhi Khe, and until recently a haven of peace in the midst of a war-torn countryside. The villagers gave allegiance to neither France nor Ho Chi Minh. The whole area was a humid, marshy plain, given over entirely to rice paddies. Each morning the villagers

came out to tend the rice shoots; while their children were given good elementary schooling in the village hut that served as a school, council chamber and even theatre when some travelling group arrived to stage a traditional Vietnamese play. They travelled to Hanoi and sold their rice to the merchants there, refusing to deal directly with either the French or the Viet Minh. They saw themselves as above the war, neutrals.

Now, smoke poured out of the village. Leforge gave rapid commands, and his leading vehicle came to a halt. The rest stopped, and we all deployed carefully to either side of the road. If it wasn't an ambush, it was still too dangerous to take any chances.

We approached the village warily, but it seemed to be deserted. The huts were in flames, still burning, and smoke pouring out. I sent Vogelmann with a small recon section in to check it out. Inside of ten minutes they were back, their faces pale and stretched.

"You need to see this, Jurgen. It's not good," he told me.

"Legion prisoners, they've been..."

He faltered. This was not like Vogelmann. Surely, he'd seen everything that inhumanity could do to man in battlefields, from the Eastern Front to these steaming jungles. I was wrong.

"They crucified four of them. While they were still alive, they cut all over their bodies with knives. Then they smeared what looks like honey on the bodies to attract the local insect life."

I nodded. "We'll move in. We can at least give the poor bastards a decent burial."

I found Captain Leforge and made my report.

"Very well, Jurgen. We may as well take a break here while we get those men buried. Dismount," he shouted to the company.

Men jumped down from the vehicles and advanced warily on the village, weapons at the ready despite Vogelmann's all clear. I heard a shout. It was Senior Sergeant Bauer.

"More bodies, Jurgen, and it looks like the villagers."

I went over to where he stood. It was a pit filled with bodies, men, women and children. Clearly the Viet Minh had tired of the village refusing to ally with them. It looked as if they'd forced them, the men, women and the children, to dig the pit, and then made them climb into it, killing them all with rifle fire. The most pitiful sight was of three small children lying on the top of the pile of death, their bodies destroyed by Viet Minh bullets. One

child, it looked as if she was a girl, still clutched a wooden doll. I had to walk away. It was too much.

At that time, the French had a policy of small forts, and often little more than concrete sheds, serving as a defensive line across Tonkin. The theory was that each fort would be part of a network of similar forts, some larger, but many similar to the one in this village. When a fort was attacked, the fort could call on a nearby post to send reinforcements. General de Lattre had built up the Vietnamese National Army to provide support for the French, and used these Vietnamese troops to man the so-called 'de Lattre Line,' a series of forts and bases. This freed French troops for offensives against the Viet Minh.

So much for theory. What had happened here was repeating itself all across Vietnam, especially here in the north where the Viet Minh were much stronger, both militarily and politically. All the isolated forts achieved, was to dilute the French military strength so that Giap's troops could pick them off one by one. The Viet Minh were anything but stupid. They learned quickly and were utterly ruthless, quick to exploit any French weakness as they had here at Nhi Khe, more French deaths, and more Vietnamese deaths. And still they kept building these small outposts. Some said it was the Maginot Line mentality, the fortification built by the French after the First World War to prevent their country being attacked from the east by Germany.

The Maginot Line, named after French Minister of Defence, André Maginot, was a line of concrete fortifications, tank obstacles, artillery casemates, machine gun posts, and other defences; which France constructed along its borders with Germany and Italy, in the light of experience from World War I, and in the run-up to World War II.

Belgium was neutral, so the Maginot line didn't extend across Belgium and to La Manche, the English Channel. It didn't need a military genius to work out that to invade France and avoid the Maginot Line, all that was needed was to conquer Belgium, a country with a tiny, weak army. Which, of course, is exactly what the German forces did. Would the French General Staff never learn? Probably not. The problem was that while they refused to heed even the most basic military lessons, soldiers like these poor devils died the most horrible deaths, as did the people they were supposed to protect.

I gave orders to cut down the murdered soldiers, give their tags to Captain Leforge, and bury the bodies in a deep grave. There was little we could do for the villagers. They were already in their death pit and beyond

our help. Leforge established radio contact with Hanoi, called in a report on the massacre, and then we waited while the burial detail finished the grave. Finally, the bodies were buried. We stood in a group around the grave, at attention. Leforge said a few words and six of our riflemen fired a volley into the air. Private Armand, our company sharpshooter, played the mournful 'Taps' on the battered bugle he carried around with him in his pack for just such an occasion. Afterwards, we stood for a few minutes in respectful silence. Then we embarked on the vehicles for Hanoi.

"Have you an answer for me, Sergeant Hoffman?" Colonel Joffre asked.

"Colonel, after what we saw today, I would love to hang Giap from a hook on a piece of piano wire," I told him.

"Ah, that's the old Nazi in you, Jurgen. I believe Adolf prescribed that treatment for people he didn't like."

Following the July 1944 attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler, those suspected of being a part of the plot were brought to trial presided over by the notorious judge of the People's Court, Richter Roland Freisler. Hitler said he wanted to see the leaders hung "like slaughtered cattle", and this is precisely what they did at the Plötzensee prison; hanging the condemned conspirators by piano wire or hemp rope from meat hooks. The men endured agonising strangulation before they died. The deranged Hitler even sent cameramen to film the executions for his enjoyment.

"Maybe," I grinned at him.

"But the answer is no, I'm afraid. Much as Giap deserves to die for encouraging his people to torture and murder innocent civilians, especially the children, I don't believe it is feasible to reach his headquarters, kill him and make an escape. We've discussed it, me and the other NCOs, and the consensus is that we would be committing suicide. Sorry."

Joffre showed me out of his office, chatting as we walked outside into the barracks square.

"Sergeant, think about it again. See if there's any way you think it could be done, without getting yourselves killed in the process. I could offer you whatever you wanted. Men, equipment, air support, you name it. Just think about it a little more, fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I agreed.

Just then, Manfred von Kessler came running up to us.

"Excuse me, Colonel," he saluted and turned to me. "Jurgen, we're wanted. Phat Diem, a few kilometres north of here, it's under attack. We're to

reinforce them immediately, and Captain Leforge is assembling the company now. They're sending two companies, and B Company is coming with us."

"Talk to me when you get back, Sergeant. Remember, anything you want!" Joffre called after me.

I waved an acknowledgment, and we doubled towards the vehicle park where our company was already loading onto four trucks. Captain Leforge climbed aboard the leading vehicle, and almost immediately it roared away. Paul Schuster was driving, and he smiled at me.

"I get the impression I'm driving a fire engine, Jurgen. All we ever seem to do is put out fires that someone else has started."

I thought about his words, and he was right. Was I wrong to refuse Joffre, his mission to assassinate Giap; the Viet Minh military architect, Ho Chi Minh's right hand man, the evil guerrilla leader behind so many of the atrocities we'd witnessed in this country? Of course, whatever the merits and demerits of the mission, it would be certainly asking the legionnaires to attempt a suicide mission.

We roared into Phat Diem, another depressing little village, another French military outpost, and another pile of bodies. Unlike Nhi Khe, we found no butchered, crucified bodies of French soldiers, but the bodies of eleven men, the post garrison. All apparently killed by the Viet Minh in a surprise attack. Bodies of the villagers littered the ground, and this time murdered where they stood, men, women and children, for daring to refuse support and sustenance for the Viet Minh. Another communist 'example' to make sure the next village cooperated. More women and children, together with their men, sacrificed for the teachings of Karl Marx. More soldiers sacrificed by the military geniuses of France on the altar of their South-East Asian Maginot Line.

We had time to bury the soldiers, but there were too many villagers, so we stacked them in a heap, leaving them for locals to attend to. It was the best we could do for the poor devils. The local area was probably still infested with Viet Minh, and time for giving a decent burial to all of them was a luxury we just didn't have. We mounted the vehicles and returned to Hanoi.

I was very thoughtful. Unlike Phu Ly, these last two villages were beyond fire fighting, and we were just acting as a burial detail for the victims. Surely, there must be a better way to fight this war than counting our own dead? As we dismounted in the barracks in Hanoi, a soldier ran up to me.

“Colonel Joffre needs to see you, Sergeant. He said to call in as soon as you returned.”

I returned his salute and walked over to Joffre’s office. When I walked in, he wasn’t alone. There was another Legion sergeant with him and Joffre’s second in command, Major Schumacher, who was a Frenchman, despite the German name. Apparently, his father was German, but he was born and brought up in France by his French Parisian mother. I knew Schumacher slightly, a good officer, and always ready to lend assistance to any of the men under his command.

“Jurgen, it’s good to see you safely back. Major Schumacher you know, and this is Sergeant Werner Muller.”

We shook hands.

“Muller,” Joffre continued, “like you, was a member of the Waffen-SS. He was with Otto Skorzeny, a part of the SS-Sonderverband z.b.V. Friedenthal, Skorzeny’s own unit.

Otto Skorzeny was an SS-Obersturmbannführer, Lieutenant Colonel, in the Waffen-SS during World War II. After fighting on the Eastern Front, he commanded a rescue mission that freed the deposed Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, from captivity. Skorzeny was also the leader of Operation Greif, in which German soldiers were to infiltrate through enemy lines, using their opponents' uniforms and native language. At the end of the war, Skorzeny was part of the Werwolf guerrilla movement.

“That’s very interesting, Sir,” I replied to Joffre, “but I’m not quite certain what you mean, what are you telling me?”

“I’m telling you, Sergeant, that Muller was one of the team who rescued Mussolini from Gran Sasso, after he was imprisoned by the Allies.

Mussolini was held in the Campo Imperatore Hotel at the top of the Gran Sasso Mountain, and only accessible by cable car from the valley below. Skorzeny flew over Gran Sasso and took pictures of the location with a handheld camera. General Kurt Student and Skorzeny formulated an attack plan.

On September 12, the Gran Sasso raid was carried out according to plan. Mussolini was rescued without firing a single shot. Flying out in a Storch airplane, Skorzeny escorted Mussolini to Rome and later to Berlin. The exploit earned Skorzeny fame, promotion to Major, and the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

Joffre smiled. “I’m also asking you, Sergeant, asking you, not ordering,

to talk to Muller, with a view to mounting a similar mission on Giap."

"You mean kidnap Giap, and lift him from under the noses of the Viet Minh High Command?"

"Exactly, Jurgen, that's exactly what I mean. Kidnap him, and bring him back here, if possible. If not, well, there's the other solution, so talk to Muller. I believe it could be done, and without unnecessary risks to the men. Just talk to him. Major Schumacher is here as liaison between you and myself. His job, his only job, is to advise and facilitate on this mission. Speak to Sergeant Muller, introduce him to your NCOs, and then let me know if it can be done. Any questions you have, Major Schumacher will advise. Report to me by noon tomorrow. Dismissed."

We saluted, and I left the office with Muller. I was reeling with surprise. I'd been thinking about the problem of how to hit the Viet Minh, for once to take the initiative. Now Joffre had produced this tough-looking SS veteran to show us how it could be done. Was this a stroke of fortune, or was it to be chiselled on my gravestone?

I took Muller straight back to our quarters to talk to the NCOs, Bauer, von Kessler, Vogelmann and Schuster. I could imagine their surprise. Skorzeny was one of the real stars of the SS, and anyone who had taken part in the Mussolini rescue would have a good tale to tell.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER FOUR

Muller did indeed have a good story to tell. Like many in post-First World War Germany, he remembered the hard times. Born in 1917, his father had been killed during the spring offensive of 1918 when our German forces had spent the last of their strength in a futile effort to break through the Western Front. His mother brought him up in Leipzig, where he remembered the hunger and poverty that followed the Versailles reparations, cruelly reducing an already bankrupt Germany into almost total ruin.

The Treaty of Versailles was signed at the end of World War I, finally ending the state of war between Germany and the Allied Powers. It took six months of negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference to conclude the peace treaty, and laid the foundations for the Nazis to sweep to power in the

shattered state that was Germany, following the economic collapse of the 1920's. Germany was obliged to accept sole responsibility for causing the First World War and, under the terms of the treaty to disarm, make substantial territorial concessions and pay reparations to certain countries that had formed the Entente Powers. The total cost of these reparations was assessed at 31.4 billion US dollars, and many economists estimated it would have taken Germany until 1988 to pay. The result of the treaty was a weak compromise that left none contented. Germany was not pacified or conciliated, nor permanently weakened. This would prove to be a factor leading to later conflicts, notably and directly, the Second World War.

Even before the treaty was signed, during the influenza pandemic that swept a war-worn and starving Europe after the war, Muller's two sisters and brother died, leaving him an only child of a single mother.

The 1918 flu pandemic, known as Spanish Flu, spread widely across the world. Many victims were healthy young adults, in contrast to most influenza outbreaks which predominantly affected young, elderly or weakened people. The pandemic lasted from March 1918 to June 1920, spreading even to the Arctic and remote Pacific islands. An estimated fifty million people died; about three per cent of the world's population.

In the later 1920's, Muller was fascinated by the constant street battles between the right wing groups of former solders, the Frei Korps, the Stalhlhelm, the SA, when they met their communist party opponents.

And, of course, there was Adolf Hitler, the mesmeric Austrian, saviour of Germany, and the one man who could 'save' Germany. His mother idolised the Austrian corporal, and so did Werner Muller. In 1935, he joined the SS-Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler, proudly wearing the uniform of an SS-Schütze. One of his officers in the LAH was Otto Skorzeny. When Skorzeny formed the SS-Sonderverband z.b.V. Friedenthal, Muller followed him. Then came an intensive period of training, during which Muller became a competent parachutist. His final mission was Operation Greif, conceived by Hitler; a false-flag operation led by Waffen-SS commando Otto Skorzeny, during the Battle of the Bulge.

Wounded during the battle by bullet wounds to both legs, Muller spent the last few months of the war in a hospital bed outside of Berlin. When the Russians arrived in Berlin, Muller managed to escape, following little known trails until he reached Allied lines and eventually the safety of Switzerland.

It was a story familiar to us all. We had all, in one way or another, had

to find our own way to escape the Allied plans to revenge themselves on the SS, blaming them for all the bad things that happened during the war. Then, like us, he joined the Foreign Legion, and finding himself once more fighting the communists.

We all questioned him extensively on his ideas to kidnap, or kill if necessary, Giap.

"There are several factors you need to consider," Muller told us.

"Firstly, security. Skorzeny's previous missions were plagued by lapses of security. When we took Mussolini, the operation was very, very tight indeed. Apart from Hitler, Himmler and Skorzeny, the only people who knew the purpose of the mission were us, the troops who were actually involved in it. Security in this place is a joke, and that is your first problem."

We all murmured agreement. Everyone in Indochina seemed to be either actually, or potentially, sending information on the French military directly to the Viet Minh.

"Secondly," he continued, "the planning and intelligence needs to be first class, and beyond anything I've seen in this place, anyway. What you need is..."

He hesitated to say it, but we knew what he meant, German planners and German intelligence, people with the skills and ruthlessness of the SS, the SD, and the Abwehr and German military intelligence.

The French, our masters, seemed to be only good at one thing, maintaining the status quo, and repeating the mistakes their forbearers had made time and time again.

"Thirdly, you need a crack SS unit to go in there and snatch the bastard, or finish him off."

We all laughed loudly, but it was true. French military methods would not suffice. The hard, ruthless efficiency of the Waffen-SS was needed. We'd been one of the best fighting units the world had ever known, before being frittered away in a series of useless operations that decimated our ranks. But if you asked the SS to do the job, they got it done, or died in the process. Our infantry and panzer units had been the most feared in Europe, for good reason.

"Is that it?" I asked Muller.

He nodded. "That's it, really. Keep it totally secret, first rate intelligence and planning, and send in the SS. That's about it. Of course, I'll be able to help with plenty of operational detail, but those three things are the most

important."

He looked at us with interest.

"Do you intend on doing it?"

"We're considering it, Werner. Men, what do you think," I asked them.

Bauer answered first.

"Jurgen, I'm totally sick of seeing the men whittled down in a series of Viet Minh raids. All we ever seem to do is go in to repair the damage after the enemy has disappeared into the jungle. Take out Giap, and we hit them where it really hurts, right in the balls. If it can be done, I'm for it."

Von Kessler spoke up.

"That's true, Jurgen. Taking out Giap could do some real damage, and give them a taste of it."

"Werner," I asked Muller, "strategically, what do you think it would achieve, taking out Giap?"

He thought for a moment.

"Before the Mussolini affair, we had an operation planned, Operation Long Jump. It was the codename for a mission to assassinate Stalin, Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt at their 1943 meeting in Tehran for a conference to discuss plans for dividing up Europe after the War ended."

He grinned. "The arrogant bastards knew even then they were going to win."

The Tehran Conference, codenamed Eureka, was the meeting of Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill between November 28th and December 1st, 1943; most of which was held at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran, Iran. It was the first major conference amongst the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom, in which Stalin was present. The central aim of the Tehran conference was to plan the final strategy for the war against Nazi Germany and its allies. The chief discussion was centred on the opening of a second front in Western Europe. It was a major opportunity for Nazi Germany to strike a fatal blow against the leadership of its principal enemies.

"Hitler was keen for us to do it," Muller continued. "Kaltenbrunner was the mission planner. Our intelligence had learned of the timing of the conference in October 1943, after we broke an American Navy code. The Fuhrer chose Otto Skorzeny, with the agreement of Kaltenbrunner, to lead the mission. I recall at the time wondering about that mission. Remember, the Sixth Amy had been thrown to the Russian animals at Stalingrad, and

Operation Citadelle, the battle of Kursk, had ripped the guts out of what was left of our forces on the Eastern Front. We had to admit it, the Ivans had got us beaten, no question. The only real issue was when would they arrive on the border of the Reich. None of those three, Stalin, Churchill or Eisenhower, was a military genius, and the Fuhrer had by then managed to show what a cock up he could make of making military decisions, so all of those leaders were expendable. But Giap."

He stopped to think.

"That operation at Cao Bang near the Chinese border, was a masterstroke, he really caught the French with their pants down. Since then, he's been attacking our outposts, knocking them down like ninepins. Essentially, he's a whisker away from owning the whole of Indochina north of the Red River. Genius or not, he's a very, very clever leader. It's unlikely they have anyone who could replace him. If we could kidnap or kill him, yes, it could certainly affect the whole course of the war."

He looked at us challengingly. "Will you do it?"

I ignored him.

"Karl-Heinz," I looked at Vogelmann, "what do you think?"

"One thing is for sure," he replied, "if it's going to be done, it will need an SS unit to do it, and in Indochina we're the closest thing to an SS unit they're likely to get. So it's us, or nobody. And yes, I think it's worth doing. I'm in."

"Ok, that leaves you, Paul," I said to Schuster. "What do you think?"

"Definitely," said the former soldier of SS-Totenkopf, "it'll be like old times. Get in, hit them hard, and get out."

I laughed at him. "Paul, that's exactly the tactics Giap himself uses."

"Then perhaps he learned from the SS," he replied, smiling. "But that's the way to do it. Count me in."

"It seems your men are all for it," Muller smiled.

"True, but the final decision will be mine, Werner, and I've got a lot to think about. I'm not convinced it could be done without risking the lives of the whole unit. Could we rely on you for advice and support during the planning and operational stages, start to finish?"

"That's why I'm here," he said, "all the way. I'd go with you, if you decided to go, but Joffre has already turned me down for the operation. He wants me on his staff, not rushing off getting 'my stupid Nazi head blown off,' so he said."

“That’s fine. Any suggestions on unit strength?”

“I understand you’d be going in as Russian advisors?” I nodded.

“Then a small unit, a maximum of twelve men. You’d want to be parachuted in, and as near to Giap’s HQ as possible. That’s the first obstacle, to find the bastard.”

“And the extraction?” I asked him.

“No mountaintop strips to land a Fieseler Storch and take off again, so you’ll need to think of something else.”

The Fieseler Fi 156 Storch, or stork, was a small German liaison aircraft built by Fieseler before and during World War II. The Storch could be found on every front throughout the European and North African operations in World War II. It will probably always be most famous for its role in Skorzeny’s Operation Eiche, the rescue of deposed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini from the boulder-strewn mountaintop near the Gran Sasso, surrounded by Italian troops. Skorzeny dropped with ninety paratroopers onto the peak and quickly captured it, but the problem remained of how to get away. A Focke-Achgelis Fa 223 helicopter was sent, but it broke down en route. Instead, pilot Walter Gerlach flew in a Storch, landed in thirty metres (one hundred feet), took aboard Mussolini and Skorzeny, and took off again in under two hundred and fifty feet, even though the plane was overloaded.

We chatted about the extraction, and the most difficult part of the operation. Giap’s absence would be noticed immediately, and from that moment on, we would be hunted down like dogs. We had two choices, immediate extraction, or find somewhere where we could hide until the hunt died down. After a while, it became obvious that immediate extraction was the only answer. Hiding for any length of time in enemy held territory was virtually impossible.

“What about a ventilator?” Bauer asked.

A good question, we had two Hiller UH-12A helicopters, nicknamed ventilators, here in Hanoi.

United Helicopters began producing the Model 360 as the UH-12. In 1949 the UH-12 became the first helicopter to make a transcontinental flight from California to New York. When Hiller upgraded the engine and the rotor blades, the company designated the new model the UH-12A. It was the UH-12A that would be adopted by both the French and United States militaries, and the helicopter was used in the Indochina battlefield, as much as its limited numbers would allow.

We could use one of the helicopters to take out Giap. After further discussion, we decided our best way out would be east to the sea, the Gulf of Tonkin, where a warship of the French Navy could extract us. All Viet Minh eyes would probably be looking south towards Hanoi, and the obvious place for us to retreat to. That should give us the time to make our escape.

We drank heavily that evening, discussing the possibilities of taking the fight to the enemy for a change. I was still very uneasy. This whole area was a literal sieve when it came to security; the least leak, and we would be going to our deaths. Vogelmann and von Kessler, both roaring drunk, got into a huge argument that quickly developed into a fight as to which as the better outfit, SS-Das Reich or SS-Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler. Bauer and I let them swap a few blows, then separated them and dragged them off to their rooms in the barracks dormitory. Then we all shook hands and wished each other good night. I reeled as I climbed the stairs to my own room and fell into bed. It had been quite an evening, meeting the veteran of Skorzeny's outfit that rescued Mussolini, capped by far more alcohol than was good for me. As I dropped off to sleep, the room seemed to be slowly spinning.

I woke with a start, and the barracks shook to the sound of massive explosions. We were under attack, here in Hanoi. What the hell was going on? I threw on trousers, boots and shirt and dashed down the stairs, checking the magazine on my MP40 as I ran. I bumped into Bauer who had been coming to get me.

"We're taking mortar fire, Jurgen. The Viets have infiltrated the city and set up a ring of heavy mortars all around us. Captain Leforge is calling out the company to mount up, and go and hunt them down."

I acknowledged him and ran on to our vehicle park. It was a chaos of running men, shouts, and vehicle horns sounding as drivers fought to clear a way out of the tangle ready to hit the open road as soon as they were loaded with troops.

I found my men directed by Paul Schuster. They were throwing boxes of ammunition and MG42s into the back of a lorry, the engine running.

"We're all ready, Jurgen. The Captain wants us to split up. We're to turn right out of the barracks, and head south-east to try and find the mortar crew that's operating in that area."

"Let's go," I shouted as I jumped into the front seat. "Hit it, Private, and let's get out of here before one of those mortar rounds finds us."

Our driver was Armand, the sharpshooter. He nodded at me, threw it

into gear, gunned the engine and dropped the clutch. We roared out of the barracks, and I could have sworn we hit the sharp right-hand turn on two wheels. I heard another series of explosions as more mortar rounds hit the area in and around the barracks, then we were on the road, and heading to the possible site of one of the crews.

"Armand, take the next left turn, and we'll skirt around the side of them."

"But, Sergeant Hoffman, that'll take us at least three kilometres out of our way," he protested.

"And out of the way of any possible ambush they have prepared, Private Armand."

He looked thoughtful, "I see. You think they'll be waiting for us, then?"

"I only know we've done this before, many times. If you were the Viet Minh, wouldn't you set an ambush for the enemy you knew were coming to destroy you?"

"The next left turn it is, Sergeant."

The side road was upon us, and Armand swung the lorry into the sharp turn. We began skirting around to the east of our objective. The explosions were still hitting the barracks area, and we could hear them, though more faintly.

Armand drove like a demon, heading for the source of the mortar fire in our sector. Suddenly, there was the soft 'crump' of a heavy mortar being fired, and literally within metres of our position.

"Go, Private, straight for them if you can see them."

He stamped on the accelerator pedal and screeched around the next corner. Suddenly, we were confronted with the enemy, and caught like rabbits in the headlights of our vehicle. A group of ten Viet Minh were clustered around the mortar, a 120mm Soviet heavy mortar. They were startled, bringing their weapons to bear on us. I could see a DP light machine gun being hurriedly moved around to point in our direction. The mortar crew were unmoving. They'd been about to reload the mortar, but were frozen with indecision. Did they need to move their equipment or fire another round?

"Ram them!" I shouted at Armand.

"Hit the machine gun first, and then the mortar. Get as many of the Viets as you can. Men," I called to the back of the lorry, "in the next few seconds, we're about to pass a Viet Minh mortar crew, so send them a calling

card as we go past."

Armand spun the wheel and headed straight at the Viet Minh. Two of them managed to get a shot off at us that went wide. Then the lorry hit, smashing into the machine gun, mangling the gun and the crew beneath the wheels. Expertly, he swerved the lorry at the last moment and managed to catch the mortar a glancing blow. It toppled sideways, and a scream announced that one of the crew had not managed to jump out of the way quickly enough.

We were past, but the misery for the Viet Minh was not over. As we swept past them, twenty legionnaires in the back pointed their guns out of the vehicle and opened up with a roar of submachine gun fire. As the lorry continued, I heard the ripping sound of the MG42 they'd managed to get into action. One man was holding it on the side of the lorry while the gunner swept the Viets with bullets, and the crewman fed in the ammunition. Armand finally brought the vehicle to a stop, and we all jumped out and ran towards the Viets, weapons ready, but there was no need to continue firing.

All of them had been hit in the mad rush, three mortar men and a machine gun crewman run down by the lorry, and the rest by gunfire. One of them was still alive. He was clutching a pistol, which marked him out as some sort of an officer. I lifted his head up, and he winced in pain. He'd taken at least one round to the stomach, an agonising wound.

"How many mortars do you have deployed in Hanoi?" I asked him.

Through his agony he managed to snarl at me.

"Enough to kill all of you French dogs," he hissed at me.

"I am not French, my monkey friend, but still, I do need to know. How many, quickly, or I will make your agony beyond anything you could dream would be possible?"

He looked at me curiously.

"Not French? Where are you from? Why are you here, fighting the Frenchman's war?"

"Not the Frenchman's war, it is a war against you communist filth. We started it in Russia, and this is just the second instalment."

He was obviously educated; he'd picked up the inference immediately.

"So, you are German. You will die here, alongside your French masters."

He tried to summon enough phlegm to spit at me, but he was too weak and had lost too much blood.

“Karl-Heinz, see what you can do with him.”

Vogelmann stepped forward. “With pleasure, Jurgen.”

Although we’d all served in anti-partisan operations, Vogelmann had made it a speciality on the Russian Front, especially when it came to interrogating prisoners. He put out his foot, casually rolled the Viet onto his back, and then put the foot on the wound.

“Now, my friend, tell Karl-Heinz what he needs to know, and I will take my foot off, and maybe even get some medical attention for your wounds.”

The only reply was an agonised scream, almost inhuman to the ears. I walked away and left him to it. That was when I saw the bodies. The Viets had set up the mortar on what had almost certainly been the front yard of a brothel. They were noted for their puritanical attitude to loose sex, regarding prostitutes as little more than criminals; and prostitutes who plied their trade with the enemy, with the French, were traitors and collaborators in their eyes. Perhaps the brothel staff had refused to let the Viet Minh station their mortar on their premises, but whatever, they had been killed in the most horrific way.

There was a line of wooden stakes in the ground, probably part of a fence line forming the boundary of the premises. The owner and staff, eight women and two men, had been impaled on the stakes. Their look of pain-wracked horror was a mute testament to what they must have been forced to suffer. We were not angels, neither in the SS, nor in the Legion, but this went beyond the very pits of inhumanity, opening the very doors of hell itself.

I shouted to Vogelmann.

“Karl-Heinz, look there. What the monkeys did to the people who lived here!” He glanced over, and even in the dim moonlight, I could see him blanche. Then he went to work with a vengeance, and the captive’s screams filled the night air. After a short time, I heard him gasping out to Vogelmann, giving him the details of the operation. Then Karl-Heinz pulled out his pistol, a Luger, which many French troops routinely carried in Indochina.

The Luger was made popular by its use by Germany during World War I. The Pistole Parabellum 1908, known more popularly as the Luger, was a toggle-locked recoil-operated semi-automatic pistol. The design was patented by Georg J. Luger in 1898 and produced by German arms manufacturer Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken (DWM) since 1900. Although since replaced by the Walther P38, our SS troops had used the shorter barrel Parabellum during the war, when it proved to be effective and reliable on the

Easter Front. Many Germans recruited to the Legion carried the Parabellum, perhaps for sentimental reasons, but it was still a useful sidearm.

He put the pistol against the prisoner's head.

"My friend, here is a painkiller to help ease your discomfort."

He smiled at the Viet and pulled the trigger. The man fell back dead, his brains spilling out onto the ground.

"Eleven mortars in all, Jurgen," he shouted.

"I've made a note of their positions. We're looking at about two companies of Viet Minh."

"Right, mount up, let's go. We'll get someone to come back in the day and bury these poor women."

We drove away at speed, heading for the next nearest mortar position. We'd been beaten to it by a squad of French paras who were mopping up the last of the Viet Minh. Without stopping, we carried on to the next one. We screeched to a halt alongside the long, high wall of a large villa. Bauer jumped up to look over the wall, and sure enough the Viet Minh were there in the open courtyard of the villa. They managed to get a shot off at him before he ducked down.

"About twenty of so of them, Jurgen, and they're packing up the mortar to leave by the look of it."

It was a difficult situation. We could take them, and go in with all guns blazing, but we would inevitably take casualties. I decided on an alternative strategy, and one that we had used successfully once in Russia.

"Mount the MG42 on the cab, Paul," I called to Schuster. "The rest of you, dismount."

They all piled out of the vehicle while Paul fixed the machine gun on the mounts that all our lorries had fitted.

"Armand, back off for about fifty metres, then come back and go through the wall. Paul, hit them with the MG42, and the rest of us will be right behind. You'd better take a couple of men with you in the lorry to throw grenades once you're inside the courtyard."

Two legionnaires jumped onto the lorry. Armand reversed back for fifty yards, and I gave him the signal.

We stood to one side, guns ready as the vehicle surged forward, accelerating until it smashed through the wall. Immediately, the searing, ripping racket of the MG42 began as Paul Schuster opened fire. The noise was punctuated by the explosions of grenades thrown from the back of the

lorry. We leapt through the gap in the wall torn by the charging lorry. The Viet Minh were milling around, caught totally unawares by this unexpected attack. At least half of them were down, and the rest were running aimlessly from place to place, unsure whether to shoot back, shelter from our guns or just run away. One by one, our shattering automatic fire picked them off and flung their bodies to the ground, torn apart by the incredible rate of fire we poured into them. Then suddenly I shouted for the ceasefire. The courtyard was a charnel house, a death pit filled with Viet Minh bodies, smashed equipment and the 120mm mortar, now lying destroyed on its side.

"Check out the villa," I called over to Senior Sergeant Bauer.

"Take three men with you. Be careful, there could be more Viet Minh in there or even booby traps."

He nodded and raced away. The men were watchful, but the silence that had descended on the courtyard suggested we'd killed them all. Some of the men lit up cigarettes and stood quietly chatting. Bauer came out of the villa, shaking his head.

"It's awful. The owners of the place are in there, at least, what's left of them. The Viets disembowelled them, literally, the parents, four children and the servants, all of them. They're lying in pools of blood, with their guts strewn around like Christmas decorations. Not pretty, I'm afraid."

I nodded. I felt sickened. Once again, the French had been caught unawares by the Viets. The night had gone quiet, so clearly we had disposed of all the mortar crews.

But they'd won a victory of sorts, although a pyrrhic victory. They were animals, prepared to sacrifice as many men as was needed in order to propagate the party line, which meant, of course, putting themselves in power.

Communist equality was nothing of the sort, but my God, they were good with words. Very good, so much so, that the poor devils believed them. Did the peasants, who took up arms and fought for the Viet Minh, honestly think that when victory came, if it came, the political elite would ever share the spoils with the rest of the population? If so, they should look to the lessons of the Soviet Union, Stalin's Great Purge and the Siberian Gulags.

The Great Purge was a series of campaigns of political repression and persecution in the Soviet Union orchestrated by Joseph Stalin in 1936 to 1938. It involved a large-scale purge of the Communist Party and Government officials, repression of peasants, Red Army leadership and the

persecution of unaffiliated persons. It was characterised by widespread police surveillance, suspicion of saboteurs, imprisonment and executions. Hundreds of thousands of victims were accused of various political crimes (espionage, wrecking, sabotage, anti-Soviet agitation, conspiracies to prepare uprisings and coups) and then executed by shooting, or sent to the Gulag labour camps. Many died at the penal camps due to starvation, disease, exposure and overwork. Other methods of despatching victims were used on an experimental basis. One policeman, for example, gassed people to death in batches in the back of a specially adapted airtight van.

We arrived back at the barracks. Our own company offices and storerooms hadn't been hit, neither had our living quarters. Company C hadn't been so lucky, having sustained a direct hit to the men's sleeping quarters, resulting in about a dozen casualties, some fatal. The medics were carrying the dead and wounded out on stretchers.

I felt angry; a white, hot, blazing anger. Our soldiers should never have been hit in their own barracks. It was sloppy work on behalf of French Army intelligence, as well as the garrison who should have been guarding in and around the approaches to Hanoi. But the civilians, the poor devils murdered in the villa, small children butchered in the name of Father Ho Chi Minh and the prostitutes, suffering untold agony and torment through their impalement on fencing stakes; it was too much. It went too far. Yes, our SS units in Russia had behaved at times with appalling brutality. But not this, this was too much.

I recalled one famous occasion when Himmler, head of the SS, had to admonish Romanian troops for their brutality on the Eastern Front. Was it a perversion to have limits to cruelty and brutality? I hadn't an answer for that question, but I did have an answer for the Viet Minh. I went to find Colonel Joffre.

It was dawn by the time I found him leaning against a Willys jeep, smoking. He was alone.

"Sergeant Hoffmann," he greeted me.

"Colonel Joffre." I saluted him.

"I heard about the brothel. It must have been a distressing sight. Terrible, the way those girls suffered. I imagine that's why you're here, the Giap mission?"

"Yes," I replied. "These animals need to be stopped. Giap is our best hope. Teach them a lesson. We'll be ready as soon as you wish."

“Excellent, Jurgen. I’ve been going over the plans for the assault. Our troops will be mounting a prolonged assault on Viet Minh bases to the north west of Hanoi. Giap has his headquarters to the north east, near Cao Bang, so hopefully the assault will divert attention from your movements. The navy has been briefed. They’ll be landing your party in two inflatable boats, launched from a destroyer currently patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin. The air force has made two helicopters available to lift Giap back to Hanoi, and the navy will be waiting to bring you off of the beach when the job is done. If you run into trouble, the navy also has the carrier Arromanches waiting offshore, with two squadrons of F6F Hellcats permanently ready to offer assistance. That’s about it, a formidable force to support your group, Jurgen.”

I whistled, “Indeed it is Colonel. You must want Giap very badly.”

“We do, yes, the High Command has given your mission the highest possible priority.”

“And if we cannot get him out alive?”

Joffre hesitated. “That’s in your hands, Jurgen. Giap is the man behind the crucifixions, the impaling. Are you prepared to leave that monster loose in Vietnam?”

“No,” I replied quietly. “I am not.”

“Very well. We’re understood. You have more than three weeks before the mission begins, so use it to thoroughly acquaint your men with every aspect of the mission. I will have the orders sent to you later today. You’ll also have every map and piece of intelligence we have delivered to you with the orders. Take a look at it, and report back to me by the end of the day. And Jurgen,” he added.

“Sir?”

“I want you and your men confined to the barracks until you leave for the mission.”

I started to protest, but he held up his hand.

“Jurgen, it’s no good. That comes from the very highest authority.”

“You mean General de Lattre?” I asked him.

“I mean the President, Vincent Auriol, President of France. He’s taken a personal interest in this affair, and it is at his insistence that security must be totally watertight.”

“Yes, Sir.” We exchanged salutes, and I left to tell the men.

The news was an instant success, and they let out a great cheer. At last we were being let loose to do what we did best. A hard-hitting strike force,

partisan hunters, elite troops to hit the enemy where they least expected it. Those were our roles in the SS, and that was our new assignment.

The news about being confined to base didn't go down so well.

"You cannot be serious," Karl-Heinz said incredulously.

"I'm afraid so. Orders from the top, the very top!"

We'd been fighting the Viet Minh incursion all night. I had a drink with the men, and while we were swapping our stories of the night's activities, the messenger brought in a despatch. I opened the slip and read through it. The men watched me intently as I looked up.

"They're sending us all the maps and reports we need later this morning. We'll assemble here at two after we've had some lunch. We can make final decisions about the mission and choices on the men we'll take with us. A maximum of twelve, so think carefully. They're all good men, but we'll want the best of the best, the experts. I'll see you all later."

As I left the canteen, I noticed Mai St Martin and Thien van Hoc sat at a side table talking animatedly, Vogelmann and von Kessler's girlfriends. I cursed for not noticing them before, and they should not have been present while we were talking about our future mission. I resolved to speak to the two men later.

I left them enjoying a celebratory drink, found my bed and within minutes was asleep. By half midday I was being shaken awake by a corporal from Intelligence, with a satchel of maps and debriefing reports. I reluctantly got up, dressed and then spread everything out on the floor, checking the maps. It could be done, yes, but even with the massive support we were being given, it was still a huge risk. We'd all taken risks before, and we hadn't signed on in the SS or the Legion to carry out desk jobs. Taking risks was our trade. I knew, however, that this was more than just a risk. It was striking a blow against the very foundations of a rebel government, and itself supported by the huge resources of both China and Russia.

We could do it, if all went well. But that was the burning question. If!

* * * * *

# CHAPTER FIVE

We spent the following week preparing for the mission. Each day I took

the men out into the jungle for hours of hard, physical endurance training. Petrov managed to blow up several ancient trees, bringing down what had taken probably five hundred years to grow in just a few seconds, but it was good practice for the real thing. Armand set up a variety of targets and practiced his sharpshooting, accurately putting round after round into the bull's eye. I made the others run fully laden along the jungle trails, forcing the pace until they literally fell over gasping for breath. In the evenings, our muscles reminded us of the agony we'd gone through that day. We pored over maps and plans of the operational area, fine-tuning every detail of the mission until we could recite it in our sleep.

Finally, we were ready to go. I had stuck to the idea of a twelve-man unit, enough to hit hard, but not so many as to invite discovery by the Viets. Seven of us were former Waffen-SS, and that was no coincidence. The experience of the Eastern Front had been won in blood, and no amount of training could substitute for the real hell of those dark times. To survive the Eastern Front, you had to become a unique survivor, staying alive in the midst of fierce firefights against overwhelming odds, when you were under attack from thousands of savage Russians anxious to wipe out every German from the face of the earth. You had to possess a rare mix of skills. Those were the kind of skills we would need to come back from this mission alive.

Apart from the former SS men, we had Private Armand, perhaps the most skilled sniper I'd ever encountered, and I had encountered many on the Eastern Front where the Russians made sniping almost a national pastime. Sergeant Petrov, the Ukrainian, was our unit demolitions expert. We also had with us Corporal Bruno Dubois, which was most definitely not his real name. He was a Muslim from Casablanca who had used his knife once too many times on business rivals in his native country. Probably as a result of his numerous smuggling operations, he was an expert with almost every weapon we possessed in the Legion armoury, as well as being a nasty fighter. There were also two other Arabs, Algerians, Privates Laurent and Renaud. Like Corporal Dubois, they were both vicious killers.

I felt as confident as I could be that we were going into this operation with the best possible chance of getting back out. None of my unit was French, a deliberate decision. I had no place for men who might hesitate for a second whilst considering French sensibilities. That also meant no officers, for all our officers were, of course, French. That suited me fine. I needed brutal killers, not latter day Napoleons.

Before we began, the mission almost ended. Our high command in Paris had received orders from the Americans, who seemed to know every move the French made in Indochina almost before it happened. For whatever reason, they expressly forbade the French Navy to carry troops bound on an assassination mission. Apparently, that kind of operation fell ‘outside of the US constitution’. The Americans were supplying us with large quantities of logistical support, everything from infantry rifles to fighter aircraft. In return, they tapped into virtually all the intelligence from our civilian and military agencies, building a future store of information for use in their own projected anti-communist operations.

It normally caused us few problems, but the Americans could be notoriously sensitive where certain matters were concerned. Our operation fell into this category. I suspected at the time that their policy was more of a ‘clean hands’ policy than any real difference of opinion. After all, they’d forbidden our unit being transported in French warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. There was no mention of other means of transport.

I spoke to Colonel Joffre about the problem.

“The thing is, Sergeant Hoffman, we have to be very careful now that the Americans are aware of what we’re doing. Frankly, General Lattre is considering calling the whole thing off.”

“That would be a shame, Sir, just because of a minor difficulty with transportation.”

He smiled. “The problems are anything but minor, I’m afraid. I sometimes think that politics will be the end of us here in Vietnam. Do you have any suggestions? An airdrop, perhaps?”

“No, Sir,” I replied. “Too noisy, and too many chances of things going wrong. We need to travel overland, avoiding the main routes. If necessary, we’ll walk all the way.”

“I see,” Joffre said thoughtfully. “You really want to do this, Jurgen, you want to nail that bastard Giap.”

“I’ve got nothing against him, personally, Sir,” I told him. “But I honestly believe we need to hit the enemy hard, where it hurts. Carry the fight to them. It could shorten the war, and certainly save a lot of French lives. Giap is their main military planner. Some say he’s a genius. I’m not too sure about that, but if we kill him, they could well think seriously about prolonging the war.”

“I agree. Supposing we mount a search and destroy mission to the north

west of Hanoi? At some stage, your unit drops off and goes in a different direction. How would that be? Nothing on paper, of course."

We both smiled.

As we loaded, I noticed Mai St Martin and Thien van Hoc watching again. They saw me look at them. Mai spoke quickly to Thien, and they walked away. I'd still not mentioned my worries about them to the men, but it would have to wait, it was too late now. When we got back, if we got back, I decided to talk it over with Joffre. We needed a serious look into the backgrounds of those ladies. Then I put it out of my mind as we left our Hanoi barracks, part of a larger, battalion-strength column.

A total of six hundred and fifty men, the whole of the Second Battalion, 13th Half Brigade, packed into a long line of trucks heading north west; the opposite direction from Cao Bang which lay to the north east near the Chinese border. Ten kilometres out from Hanoi, one lorry at the back of the column abruptly left the main highway and began to head north east. We were on the way!

Our first destination was Thai Nguyen; from where we intended to abandon the vehicle and head out along a series of little known game trails, pointing in the direction of Cao Bang. Like most of the north east of Indochina this area was in Viet Minh hands. We were very alert to the possibility of enemy ambush. The Viets tended to come out at night, avoiding the daylight as much as possible with the risk of French air strikes. Our plan was to travel the hundred kilometres to Thai Nguyen during daylight and as fast as possible. Several kilometres before the town, we would abandon the lorry and move into the jungle. Corporal Dubois was driving, his foot pressed hard on the accelerator pedal as if he was reliving his old smuggling days in the back streets of Casablanca.

Speed was necessary; this journey carried a high risk, and the faster he drove, the harder our vehicle would be to hit. Every man was watching carefully through the canvas canopy of the lorry. We were thirty kilometres from Thai Nguyen when we hit the first trouble.

We rounded a bend and came upon a group of twelve Viet Minh clustered around an upturned cart. Bullocks pulled the cart, and the two animals had been released and were grazing quietly at the side of the road. Ten of the Viets were unloading crates from the cart, and two more, presumably their officers, were standing nearby. They turned as we swept into sight, astonished at the presence of a French military lorry this far into

communist held territory. We had only one chance and that was to eliminate them immediately. If only one escaped, they would begin hunting for us, which could end any chance of our mission succeeding. I had no need to give orders, and the ten troopers travelling in the back opened fire with an assortment of weapons. Von Kessler had brought along an old British Bren gun, and I heard the stutter of its short bursts first. Then I heard the rest of the unit's weapons begin firing. It was an amazing assortment of ordnance. Bauer, Schuster and Vogelmann had their Soviet made PPShs. Corporal Dubois had an American Thompson gun, making him look like the gangster he had once been. The rest had infantry rifles, the most effective of which was Armand's, each crack almost certainly finding its target. A Viet officer did his best to unsnap a grenade from his belt, but before he could even pull the pin to throw it at us, Armand hit him squarely in the chest, sending him spinning to the dust.

We were lucky that time, and within less than a minute, the dozen Viets were all down, not one had managed to get a shot off. We dismounted and searched the area. There were no more enemy troops to be found, and no evidence that there had been any others to escape and sound the alarm. I heard a shout from one of the men. It was Dubois. He was crouched near the enemy corpses.

"Sergeant, this one's alive. He doesn't look like a Viet to me."

I hurried over. The man had taken at least two bullets to the stomach. He was bleeding badly, and his face screwed up in pain. He was babbling, but not in French, or anything that resembled one of the local dialects. But it sounded familiar.

"Have you checked his papers, Corporal?"

"Yes, Sir, every pocket. No documents, nothing."

I smiled. True to his Arab roots, Bruno Dubois would not fail to check an enemy corpse for loot. Well, they wouldn't need it anymore, so why not? Petrov wandered up, looking dispassionately at the wounded man who was obviously dying.

"He's speaking Chinese, Jurgen."

"Chinese! Are you sure?"

"Definitely. It's a mangled dialect, but I'm certain. He looks Chinese, and one of the advisors that Mao is sending over to Indochina these days."

"Shit."

This mission had been hampered by politics even before it got off of the

ground. First the American refusal to allow the Navy to transport us, and now we had a Chinese national, fallen victim to our gunfire. The implications were not good. Even though he was helping our enemy, there were no overt, declared hostilities with China. The Chinese victim of a Foreign Legion shooting would hand the communist press a real propaganda victory.

"Petrov, I want him to disappear," I said to the Ukrainian. He smiled.

"Into little pieces, Jurgen?"

"Exactly."

"I shall turn him into mouse droppings. That should make identification a problem for his Chinese friends."

Petrov began to drag the body away into the trees. Ten minutes later he strolled out nonchalantly, and we heard a loud explosion. It was time to move. The Viets would most likely assume that their Chinese advisor had been taken prisoner. They could ask for him back, and Hanoi would say quite honestly that they hadn't a clue what they were talking about. It was time to move on. We boarded the lorry, and Dubois revved the engine, put it into gear and let out the clutch, sending us surging forward. We were more alert than ever. The Viets clearly thought they could freely move around in this area, and there could well be more of them along this road.

We met no more Viets before we stopped ten kilometres out from Thai Nguyen. It was as close to the enemy-held town as we dared to go. After we climbed down and unloaded our supplies, Dubois drove the vehicle hard into a dense area of jungle. Four of the troopers followed it in and hacked down foliage and vines, weaving them around the lorry that was barely visible anyway. By the time they'd finished, it was impossible to see where it had been driven in. With any luck, it would be several weeks, or even months, before it was discovered. Petrov clambered through the foliage with his pack of charges, and when he came back, he reported to me.

"The next Viet that goes near that lorry will be the last, Jurgen. I've packed enough explosives to blow them to kingdom come, and destroy the engine and gearbox at the same time. It's all connected to trip wires, so if anyone has left anything behind, it would be best if they forgot about it."

"Well done, Nikolai. Ok, men, lets move out," I shouted.

We marched into the dense jungle, following a tiny game trail that was marked on one of our old maps. I was slightly worried. It was not as overgrown as it should have been, so I made certain we had two men at the point and two bringing up our rear, just in case. We made good time, and

within three hours we had covered almost ten kilometres. Then we came upon the village.

Our point men, Armand and Renaud, came running back down the path.

"It's a small village, Sergeant, about ten or twelve huts, maybe one and a half kilometres up the path. It looks as if it's been taken over by a small Viet Minh unit. We can see eight of them altogether."

"What state are they in? Do you think they heard us?"

"No, they're sitting around listening to one of their people giving a speech, a commissar or an officer probably. No sign of any lookouts, so they're probably not expecting any enemy in such a remote part of the country."

"Very well, go back and keep an eye on them, but stay undercover. We'll have to take them. There's no other way past this village that I can see. It could take us days to cut through the jungle."

They jogged back up the path while I gathered the men around me. I described the way we would attack the village.

"The most important thing to remember is that our mission takes priority. That means no one is to escape and alert the enemy that we're coming. The scrap we had back on the road will be written off to a mobile patrol, or even and air attack. But this is different because the trail leads in only one direction."

I sent the machine gun crews to get in position on each flank of the village. The rest of us prepared with our submachine guns and grenades. We dumped our heavy packs behind a tree and moved off.

The Viet officer was still talking, but screaming would better describe his technique. Whether he was admonishing them for some failure, or whipping them up into a fury to go and fight the enemy, I couldn't be sure. Neither did I care. I was here to kill him, not to listen to him. I looked around. Armand had climbed a tree and was waiting patiently with his rifle. I couldn't see Renaud, but assumed he was similarly ready. Schuster told me that the machine gun crews had reported in ready. I waited for a few minutes, but no other Viets showed themselves, neither were there any civilians in sight. It was not unusual for the communists to kill all the villagers if they didn't get instant obedience when they took over.

I took a final look around and cocked my submachine gun, a German MP38. I took aim at the group of men, but they were too far away for precision shooting, so I selected 'auto' with the selector and held the trigger

down. Almost before the first couple of bullets had left the barrel, the others opened up. Within seconds, hundreds of rounds hammered into the enemy group, knocking them down into bloody ruin, not even realising what had hit them. This was the form of warfare we had practised so many times on the Eastern Front, and where we learned to never let an enemy escape to start shooting back at you from behind cover. Like the French here in Indochina, we were heavily outnumbered in Russia. We simply had to kill the enemy in large numbers before they could overwhelm us with their superior numbers and ordnance. The MG 42s buzzed from the flanks. Armand and Renault fired shot after shot into the group. In less than a minute, I shouted to cease fire. With our ears ringing, we walked carefully into the village to check the bodies. They were all dead, eight more sacrifices to the glory of Father Ho.

"Sergeant Bauer, check the surrounding area, and make sure they're all accounted for."

"Will do, Jurgen. A good shoot, I think."

I nodded at him, a good shoot indeed. Von Kessler and Schuster were already rifling through their packs for signs of any documents we could keep for Headquarters to look at. The Arabs, Dubois, Renaud and Laurent, were rifling the possessions of the dead Viets, continuing a tradition of looting the fallen they'd probably learned at their grandfather's knee.

Bauer walked out of the jungle, with an astonishing sight. A woman, a beautiful, though grimy and shabbily attired, white woman. He also had a couple of dozen other civilians with him who looked to be Viets.

"What the hell is that?" I asked him.

"These are the survivors from the village, Jurgen. The Viets kept them locked in a compound a couple of hundred metres down the path. Apparently used them as servants and porters."

"And the white woman?"

"I can speak for myself, Sergeant. I do speak French," she cut in.

I looked at her. She was about five feet tall, which made her no bigger than the Viet natives who tended to be short in stature. She was very slim, yet the dirty ragged clothes she wore failed to hide her curvy figure. Her dark brown hair was cut short, as was the custom in Indochina for European women. Long hair was difficult to keep clean and tidy. Her eyes, dark brown, looked at me without a trace of diffidence.

"What's your story, mademoiselle?" I asked her.

"My name is Helene Baptiste, Sergeant. I'm a doctor. I work for the

French government carrying out a survey of the diet of the natives in selected parts of Indochina. I was working here when the guerrillas came. They killed most of the men and took the rest of us prisoner."

"How long have you been here?" I asked her.

"I think about eight months, but it's difficult to keep track. We have no clocks or calendars."

It was hard to imagine the suffering of a white woman in this Viet hell. They were hard enough on their own people, so I didn't like to ask how bad it had been for her. I looked around, and four of the men were standing guard. The rest were helping to tend to the natives, who were in a bad way after spending so long at the tender mercies of the communists.

"We've limited medical supplies, but you are welcome to use some of them to take care of the villagers. They look as if they need them. Are you in need of medical attention, or can you give my men a hand?"

"I'm a doctor, Sergeant. I will help out as much as I am able. And no, I'm not in need of anything urgent, apart from a shower and some clean clothes, that is."

She smiled, a smile that seemed to brighten up this dull, decrepit native village.

"Very well, I'll leave you to it."

"Thank you, Sergeant, for rescuing us. What is your name? I cannot call you Sergeant."

"Jurgen."

"Please call me Helene."

She smiled again. My God, she was beautiful. I made a note to warn the other sergeants to watch out for her. Any of the men would have given a year's pay to spend the night with a woman like this.

As I walked away, I wondered what the hell to do with her. I could hardly leave her here; she had suffered enough. Besides, this was Viet Minh territory. They'd be back, sooner or later, and this time thirsting for revenge for the deaths of their comrades. When they turned up, this village had better be empty; the reprisals heaped upon the heads of anyone still here would be beyond contemplation. The villagers could simply melt into the jungle. This was, after all, their territory before the Viet Minh came. But Helene could not, a white woman would soon become known to the communists, and they would come searching for her. I could radio for a helicopter evacuation, but the noise would bring in every Viet Minh fighter within a hundred square

kilometres, sounding the death knell of our mission. I could hardly spare any men to escort her back to Hanoi, so that left only one option, and an option I was loathe to take. She would come with us. After all, she was a trained medic.

I called my sergeants, Bauer, Schuster and Petrov, to one side. We all lit cigarettes, and I quietly explained it to them.

"Damn, Jurgen, that's a great idea. A beautiful doctor along with us, what more could we ask for?" Petrov exclaimed.

"It's not ideal, Nikolai, and she could hold us up. She's a doctor, not a soldier.

But I simply can't see any alternative."

"True, Jurgen," Bauer nodded thoughtfully.

"But if that's the only option open to us, we'll need to make the best of it. She's survived this long in a Viet Minh hell hole, so she's probably a lot tougher than she looks."

"I thought you were Frenchmen," a voice said behind me.

It was Helene, who had come up quietly to our little group. We'd been speaking in German, as we often did by habit in this French-speaking country. It gave us a small degree of anonymity.

"France is our adopted country, Helene," I replied. "We were speaking German. Did you understand what we were saying?"

"No, I don't speak German. So are you all Germans?"

"Before we joined the Legion, yes, except for Nikolai, who is Ukrainian," I replied in French.

"So you fought in the war. Were you Nazis?"

"We were Waffen-SS. After the war, we joined the Legion and took French citizenship."

"SS, I see, so you were Nazis."

"It's complicated," I replied. "Helene, we were soldiers, and we fought for our country just like Frenchmen, Americans and Englishmen. There was no difference."

"Except for the atrocities you committed, millions killed, the Jews, gassed and exterminated."

Her eyes were fiery, and I wondered what she'd suffered at the hands of the Germans during World War II. I didn't have to wonder for long.

"Both of my parents were killed by the Nazis, Sergeant. For me they were a gang of brutes and thugs."

“I’m sorry for that, Helene, but I assure you I have never attacked anyone who wasn’t carrying a gun and ready to shoot at me. Isn’t it ironic that you have been rescued by the very Germans you hate so much?”

She stared at me and abruptly stormed off. We could debate the rights and wrongs of war endlessly, but we were here to do a job. Hers was to heal the sick, and mine was to kill the enemy. Soldiering was a job like any other, there were good soldiers, and there were bad soldiers; as there were good and bad doctors.

I carried on with my job, organising and checking supplies and munitions; and making sure the sentries were alert. I came across Helene. She was sitting on a tree stump, weeping.

“I’m sorry for being so rude, Jurgen,” she murmured. “You’re right, of course you didn’t kill my parents, and I was wrong to blame you. War has been unkind to me, both the war in Europe and now this one in Indochina.”

“War is an unkind business, I’m afraid. Soldiers just go where they’re ordered, and if you don’t like the war, you must take it up with the politicians. Now, we need to discuss what we can do with you.”

“Can you not get me back to Hanoi?”

I explained that we were on a high level, secret mission, and that I couldn’t spare men to escort her, or alert the enemy by calling in a helicopter evacuation.

“So, I’m offering you a job, cherie, as unit medic. You can come with us, and we’ll see you safely back to Hanoi afterwards. Or you could stay here, but the Viet Minh will, of course, return.”

She thought for a moment.

“This mission, is it dangerous?”

“We’re fighting the Viet Minh, Helene. You have seen it here for yourself. Yes, it’ll be dangerous.”

“Very well, I understand, Sergeant Hoffman. I will come with you in my capacity as a doctor, nothing more.”

She looked me in the eye, then abruptly turned to the villagers and began helping my men tend to their wounds and injuries. Most of them were covered in sores as a result of untreated cuts and grazes, together with the effects of the poor diet. We could help them, but the Viet Minh would return, and then God help them if they were still in the area.

We eventually resumed our march. Armand and Renaud took the point as usual. Sergeant Schuster and Private Fassbinder covered our rear. I was

pleasantly surprised that Helene Baptiste kept up, so clearly her imprisonment had not affected her too badly. I afterwards discovered she'd been a successful sportswoman in France, a keen skier, tennis player, marksman and at one time a middle distance athlete, narrowly missing selection for the Olympic Games.

She walked beside me and chatted about her life. Born in Lyon in 1924, her parents had moved to Paris shortly afterwards. At school when the Germans invaded, she had returned home one day to discover her parents had been imprisoned and shot by the Gestapo; after her father, also a doctor, treated a wounded resistance fighter and was executed together with his wife. Helene had decided that all Germans were the lowest form of life, and dedicated her life to becoming the kind of daughter her parents would have wanted her to be. She graduated from medical school and immediately volunteered to serve in war-torn areas where she felt her talents would be most needed. She was twenty-eight years old and had worked in a variety of places, including Algeria, and even a brief visit to Devil's Island, the notorious French penal colony. Eventually, she wound up in Indochina, touring remote villages to assess the health problems that needed to be addressed by the government. She'd travelled with a native guide, who'd been promptly killed for collaborating when the Viet Minh arrived in the village.

As dusk fell over the jungle, we made camp in a clearing. A stream bubbled nearby, and we thankfully refilled all our water bottles with the cool, clear water. We shared out our rations and sat contentedly chatting and smoking after we'd eaten.

"Tell me about yourself, Jurgen," she said suddenly. "I've given you my life history, but how did you end up in Indochina?"

The others laughed, and von Kessler said, "Yes, go on, Jurgen. Tell the young lady how a Waffen-SS killer wound up in this stinking hell."

"Shut up, Manfred," I replied. "It's not a pretty story, and I can't think anyone would want to hear it."

"I want to hear it," she said. "Please, tell me what brought you here."

I thought for a moment. Then I told her of the riots in Berlin, following Germany's collapse in 1918, and the endless violence, rocks thrown, and shots fired. The Stalhlhelm, The SA, The Freikorps, mainly right wing civilian irregulars, and recruited from former soldiers, fighting the rising tide of communism that threatened the whole country. Many of my friends and

family members were caught up in the violence, and two cousins had been executed by the communists, when Munich was briefly declared a Soviet Republic. The depression, the chronic inflation that wiped out people's savings, the hunger and desperation that all seemed to be answered by the miracle of Adolf Hitler.

Hitler rose to high office in 1923, mainly as a result of his considerable skills in oratory, organisation and promotion. He was aided, in part, by his willingness to use violence in advancing his political objectives and to recruit party members who were willing to be equally violent, or more so. The Beer Hall putsch in 1923 and the release of his book, Mein Kampf, introduced Hitler to a wider audience. In the mid-twenties, the party engaged in electoral battles in which Hitler increasingly participated as a speaker and organiser, as well as in street battles and violence between the Communists and the Nazi's Stormtroopers, the SA. Through the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Nazis gathered enough electoral support to become the largest political party in the Reichstag; and Hitler's blend of political acuity, deceptiveness and cunning converted the party's non-majority, but popular status, into effective governing power in the failing Weimar Republic of 1933. The Russian Front finally put an end to Hitler's ambitions, as the German people realised too late that he had let them to utter defeat and catastrophe.

I had joined the Waffen-SS and fought most of the war on the Russian Front, fighting the communists. When the war ended, I'd risen to the rank of Sturmbannfuhrer, or Major. After so many years of serving my country as a loyal soldier, I returned home to find myself a hunted criminal.

Losing the war, and the subsequent treatment of the Waffen-SS, had left most of us embittered, poverty stricken, jobless and homeless. It was just a short step to joining the Foreign Legion, where I quickly found myself, like many other former members of the SS, once again fighting the communists. It was a different country, a different climate, and a different foe. But the rhetoric was the same, the cruelty no different, and the fighting no less bloodthirsty.

"But surely, Jurgen, the Waffen-SS was no less cruel in the countries it occupied, especially Russia," she commented.

"Helene, I cannot answer for the Gestapo, or the SS-Einsatzgruppen that hunted down and murdered Jews on the Eastern Front. They disgusted me, and most of my comrades, just as much as they did you and the rest of the civilised world. But we were soldiers, and we fought against enemy soldiers.

The communists will kill anyone who disagrees with them. You have seen their methods in that village."

"It is so confusing," she said. "After my parents were killed, I hated all Germans, and I couldn't bear to be near them. If I knew who'd killed them, I would have shot them myself. But now, here I am rescued and being helped by those self same Germans."

"Not the same, Helene, by no means. As I said, we despised the excesses of cruelty carried out in the name of Germany. Those brutes were the exception, not the rule. That's the difference between the communists and us. Cruelty is their 'modus operandi', and the very foundation of their philosophy. You either agree with them, or they kill you, as you have witnessed."

Bauer came and joined our little group. He handed out cigarettes, topping up our mugs of coffee with a flask of schnapps he'd taken out of his pack.

"I was in France, training the SS-Freiwillegen units, French volunteers. They were keen, those lads. Sometimes I thought they were too keen. They seemed to be trying to outdo the German SS units by displaying more bravery under fire, more cruelty, too. Did you ever see the Milice units, Miss Baptiste? French paramilitary police, nasty bunch."

Helene nodded. "I understand the point you're making, Sergeant. That it's not just Germans who are cruel, the French can be just as bad."

"No," Bauer shook his head, "not at all. I think that humankind is capable of the most extreme acts of cruelty, and it's nothing to do with nationality. It's more to do with politics, with beliefs. We found that out in Russia, the home of communism. They would kill anyone there, soldier or civilian, man, woman or child, just for the crime of not agreeing with them. It's a bit like religion really, like the Medieval Inquisition. One day we'll get another religion go just as crazy, and just as bloodthirsty. Maybe they can fight the communists, or they could kill each other, and save us the trouble."

"Enough of the philosophy," I called. "We need to make an early start, so let's turn in."

The meeting broke up. I checked the sentries and set a watch rota. Then I climbed under a blanket and went to sleep. Helene Baptiste was in the middle of us. I had loaned her my bedroll that occasioned a stream of taunts from the men.

In the morning, we refilled our water bottles from the stream, as it could be the last chance for some time. Then we set off. As before, Armand and Renaud took the point, and Schuster and Fassbinder were the rear guard. We left at seven o'clock and walked all morning. By midday, I was ready to call a halt for lunch when we found ourselves on a well-kept trail. It had recently been widened and was obviously well used. The men needed no orders, and everyone cocked their weapon and held it ready for instant action. We scanned the surrounding trees and foliage, but there was no sign of any enemy ambush. Then we walked out of the jungle into an amazing sight, rows and rows of neatly planted rubber trees either side of an avenue that stretched way in the distance to a house. No ordinary house, it was more of a mansion, and built in classic French style. As we got nearer, I could see that it was not as imposing close up as it had been from a distance. Much of it was in need of repair, but it was still a startling contrast to the mean little huts the natives built in these rural areas.

Plantation workers were tapping the trees, and we saw five of them as we marched up to the house. They were all young men, probably between eighteen and thirty, which was enough to make us even more vigilant. At that age, in this part of Indochina controlled by the communists, and that invariably meant Viet Minh. I looked at Bauer, and he nodded. He'd come to the same conclusion. We reached the house and halted. He detailed Renaud and Armand to take post somewhere they could keep watch. The two men disappeared with their rifles, and I last saw them climbing a couple of high trees. The front door opened, and a man walked out. He was dressed in a soiled white linen suit.

"Gentlemen, this is a surprise. Welcome to my home. Please join me for some refreshments."

* * * * *

# CHAPTER SIX

I was so surprised that I didn't reply for a few moments. The man was white, probably about fifty years old, and his accent indicated he was French. Yet for several years, this area had been under the control of the Viet Minh, and it seemed strange that they'd left one of the hated French colonialists

unmolested.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked him abruptly.

"My name is Joseph Deville, Sergeant. And you are?"

"Sergeant Hoffman, Monsieur. French Foreign Legion, and we are on a routine patrol of this area."

"They don't send many French soldiers around here," he commented.

"Really," I commented innocently. "This is a French colony, so why should there not be French soldiers here?"

He realised instantly that he'd made a mistake and immediately tried to cover it.

"Of course, as a citizen of France, I'm always happy to welcome our soldiers to my home. Please, come to the veranda at the back of the house. It is cooler.

"Trinh," he shouted. A Viet girl came out of the house. She was about eighteen, and her pretty face marred with a set of buck teeth. She looked at us coldly, and clearly unhappy at the presence of soldiers here.

"Trinh, would you serve cold lemonade and some sandwiches on the veranda, please," Deville said.

She murmured something and disappeared back into the house.

"Come, gentlemen," Deville indicated a path at the side of the house.

We followed him to a shaded patio, arranged with tables and chairs, and sat down. Trinh came out after a few minutes with a large tray of glasses and jugs of lemonade. Deville served us all with cold drinks while Trinh went back into the house for food. We sat down enjoying our unexpected refreshments, while I tried to find out more about this puzzling set up in the middle of the communist dominated jungle of Northern Indochina.

"How on earth were the materials brought here to build this house, Monsieur Deville?"

"Ah, we have a waterway on the northern side of the plantation," he replied. "It was a small river but was widened during the twenties when the rubber trade was expanding. Since the war, of course, it's beginning to revert to its individual state. But it was wide enough then to allow small boats to come up river, bringing the masonry and materials to construct the house and some of the surrounding buildings."

"So the rubber business is still profitable?" I asked him.

"A shadow of its former self, I'm afraid, but I get by. You haven't introduced yourselves or the young lady, Sergeant. You are all French? Your

accent is unusual."

"Ah, yes, this is Doctor Helene Baptiste." Helene shook hands with him.

"Enchante, Mam'selle," he said.

"Monsieur Deville, thank you for your hospitality," she replied.

"The rest of us are not French," I interrupted. "We are mainly Germans, some North Africans." I was interested to see his reaction.

"Germans? But I thought that the SS…"

He stopped speaking, realising that he was about to give himself away.

"How did you know we were SS? French policy is that SS are not recruited into the Legion."

"I heard it somewhere, but I can't remember who told me that former SS men were serving in the Legion," he stammered.

"That's interesting. You can't get much news in this remote part of the country," I replied.

"No, that's true, but I have a short wave radio, and I do keep up with most things. Let me get you some cakes, Sergeant. I know that Trinh has just baked some."

He got up and almost ran into the house. I nodded to von Kessler.

"Follow him, Manfred. I don't trust him at all."

"No, I can smell Viet Minh all over this place. I'll go check him out," he said, disappearing quietly into the house.

I signalled to the men to be ready, but the atmosphere was sufficiently tense that they were already checking their weapons ready for action. As Manfred had said, the whole place reeked of Viet Minh.

A few minutes later, we heard shouting, and a loud commotion coming from inside the house. Before we could check it out, Manfred re-emerged, holding Trinh by the throat, and his other arm pointing his pistol; the Luger he'd carried all through the Eastern Front campaign, at Deville.

"Poison, Jurgen. The bitch was sprinkling it all over the pretty little cakes she was preparing for us."

Trinh was struggling but was no match for von Kessler's strength. Her eyes blazed with hate. She spat at me, and I moved to one side to let it fly past my face.

"You colonialist scum! We will drive you and your masters back into the sea, every last one of you. If you stay here, you will die."

"Is that so?" I answered her.

"Corporal Dubois, take her back into the house, and find out how many

Viet Minh are in the immediate locality. It's pointless just asking her, so you can use your usual methods. Laurent, go with him, and give him a hand. I think she's a bit of a firebrand."

They took hold of the girl and dragged her back into the house. We heard her screaming her message of hate and death as they went. Then there was silence.

"What are they doing to her?" Helene asked me.

"Asking her some questions, that's all," I replied.

"Do you think she'll tell them anything?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

There was a scream, long, agonised and chilling.

"Jurgen, for God's sake, they're torturing her. Stop them!"

"Do you want to leave here and walk into a Viet Minh ambush," I asked her, "get captured and raped by a horde of communist savages, and then beaten to death for the crime of being white and French?"

She shook her head.

"Fine!" I snapped.

"In order to avoid that happening to any of us, we need to know their strength, disposition of forces, communications and anything else that will help us. I suggest you leave us to do our job, which in part is keeping you alive, Mademoiselle Baptiste."

She glared at me then stormed off.

"Friedrich," I said to Sergeant Bauer, "follow her, and make sure she doesn't get into trouble."

He nodded and strolled after the very angry, but beautiful young Frenchwoman. I turned to Deville.

"I think you have some explaining to do, Deville."

He smiled and spread his hands ingratiatingly.

"You must understand, Sergeant…"

He was interrupted by more piercing screams of agony from inside the house. Clearly, Trinh was making Bruno Dubois work hard for the information.

"No, you must understand," I told him. "I know that you're collaborating with the Viet Minh, and I know you were helping Trinh to poison my men. Now, quickly, how many Viet Minh are there in this area?"

"Sergeant, how would I know? They don't tell me anything."

"Manfred, go and tell them to bring out the girl."

“Yes, Jurgen. Right away.”

A few minutes later, he came back with Laurent and Renaud, carrying the girl Trinh between them. She was not a pretty sight, covered in blood, and one arm hanging limply from its socket and several of her teeth missing. One of her eyes was closed, and her face black and blue. Deville went even whiter than before.

“Any luck?” I asked Dubois. He shook his head, “No, Jurgen, she’s a stubborn one.”

“Right then, shoot her,” I told him.

He pulled out his pistol, a MAC Mle 1950. It was a gun he had acquired recently and was very proud of.

The MAC-50, also known as the MAC 1950, PA modèle 1950, was a standard semi-automatic pistol popular in the French army and the Legion. Adopted in 1950, it replaced the previous series of French pistols, the Modèle 1935A & Modèle 1935S, and was produced between 1950 and 1970. It used the Browning system with an integral barrel feed ramp, a single-action trigger with slide mounted safety that locks the firing pin so that the hammer could be lowered by pressing the trigger with safety engaged.

A useful gun, I thought, as I looked on. I doubted that Trinh was much interested in the details of our standard issue sidearm.

He held it to Trinh’s head and looked at me. I nodded. He pulled the trigger; there was a loud report, and a spout of blood shot out of the girl’s head. She crashed to the ground, lying in a mess of brains and blood. I turned back to Deville.

“Now, my friend, you were telling me about the Viet Minh in this area. How many are there working on this plantation, first of all?”

Within minutes, we had all the information that he knew. There were ten Viets working on the rubber plantation, as well as the newly deceased Trinh. They were all working on the trees, seven men and three women. Normally, they didn’t carry weapons while they were at work, but they would all be well aware of our arrival and may have armed themselves in the meantime.

I sent Schuster out with four men to notify our sentries, Armand and Renaud, to hunt them down. The rest of us moved into the house and took up position by the windows.

“Sergeant, I’ve done everything I could to help you, but you know how difficult my position is here, living and working with these savages,” Deville said to me.

“Indeed I do understand,” I replied.

“Dubois,” I nodded at the Arab then gazed at Deville. “Finish him.”

“No,” he screamed. His scream was cut off as Dubois’s pistol blew half his head away.

“I think that’ll ease his difficulties,” I said to them.

I saw Bauer rushing towards the house, propelling Helene along. There was a fusillade of shots from within the trees, and the steady crack, crack, as the sniper rifles opened up. Bauer dashed in with the girl, who gasped at the sight of Deville’s body.

“Viet Minh, Jurgen, ten of them. They’ve armed themselves with Mosin Nagants and were taking pot shots at us, but Armand and Renaud have already knocked down half of them. Schuster’s got them pinned down in a wooden hut, but I think they can take care of them. The last thing I saw was them setting up an MG 42.”

“That should do it, Friedrich. Would you take care of Mam’selle Baptiste. The rest of you, come with me.”

We went quickly towards the sound of the firing. Through a group of trees there were several wooden huts, undoubtedly accommodation for the plantation workers. Bullets buzzed around us as the Viets were shooting at anything they thought might be a target, but they weren’t trained soldiers, not a single shot came even close. Schuster’s men were in cover behind what looked like a storage shed.  Nearer the hut occupied by the enemy was a stone wall, and I could see two of our people, Fuchs and Fassbinder, setting up the MG 42 ready to go into action. They snapped in the belt, Fassbinder lay at the side of the gun ready to feed in the ammunition and Fuchs lay behind it, looking around for the order. They were ready, and Schuster shouted to them.

“Kill the bastards, Klaus, every last one of them!”

I was surprised at his vehemence. Normally, he wasn’t so emotional. He noticed my expression.

“They nearly had us, Jurgen, the bastards were waiting in ambush. If they were any good, they could have done a lot of damage.”

“You must be getting old, Paul,” I laughed. Then the machine gun opened up, and the familiar ‘buzz saw’ sound shattered the last vestiges of peace from the day. Birds flew into the air as the rounds poured out of the gun. The hut was shredded by thousands of the steel jacketed bullets so that we began to see sunlight streaming through the holes. One by one, the enemy

ceased fire until there was only silence from inside the hut. I shouted for the ceasefire, and we walked forward to inspect the damage, but there was no need to enter the hut. The MG 42 had torn huge holes in the woodwork through which we could see inside. There were ten bodies, seven men and three women as Deville had said. It was difficult to separate the sexes as the bodies were so destroyed by the massive firepower of the German-made medium machine gun.

"They may as well have sheltered behind a table cloth," Schuster said drily.

"True," I replied. "Did we take any casualties?"

"None," he told me. "But it was a close thing."

He was still shaken, and I wondered was he perhaps truly getting too old for this game, or maybe we were too old. We'd been fighting since 1939, nearly fourteen years. For twelve of those years, we'd been fighting the communists. We were no longer the optimistic young men we once were, ready to leap into action at the least provocation, and ever ready to defend the honour of our unit as well as our comrades' lives. We were getting older, and most soldiers would have been retired from active service long before now.

It was ironic; the Third Reich had treated the Jews as non-persons, untermensch. Now we were the pariahs of Europe, and exiled to this jungle hell to endlessly fight the communists. We were almost like the ghost crew of the fabled Flying Dutchman, condemned to roam the world's battlegrounds for all eternity. But we were not ghosts. We were men. In truth, most of us were getting tired, and tired men made mistakes. I wondered how long we would be able to continue this lethal game of death before eventually the game itself took us as its prize. I shrugged off the morbid thought; I was a soldier, and I had a job to do.

We regrouped at the house, and all of us still intact, together with Helene Baptiste who continued smarting at the bloodshed. She'd seen the Viet Minh at first hand in the village where we found her. I wondered what it would take to open her eyes to the realities of war, or perhaps she preferred to remain blind to the brutal excesses of the battlefield. She refused to meet my eyes, but just stood waiting in the middle of the column. I sent out Armand and Renaud to the point. After ten minutes, I gave the signal, and we moved off. Petrov came up to me.

"Jurgen, I found some plastique in one of the store rooms, and it looked like the Viets were in the business of making explosive booby traps. I moved

a box of the stuff into the house and rigged it to go up when someone goes in to investigate."

"Excellent, Nikolai. That should take care of a few of them. Well done."

We pressed on towards Dong Khe, a major town that had been held by the Viet Minh for more than two years. Our intelligence reported that one of the Chu Luc units was stationed there.

The Chu Luc were the Viet Minh main force units. According to our reports, they were becoming larger and better trained. Their combined strength comprised roughly a hundred thousand combatants in seventy battalions, with another thirty-three battalions of regional forces. This totalled forty thousand men as well as sixty thousand local support personnel. Giap had been using these Chu Luc main force units to harass French positions along the main routes in northern Indochina, together with mines and ambushes.

We weren't equipped to take on a Viet Minh company, let alone a Chu Luc main force. Our only chance was to keep our heads down and veer to the west of the town to avoid being seen. Already, we had made too much noise with the destruction of the unit on the Thai Nguyen road, as well as the plantation we'd just left. I could only hope the enemy would put it all down to a search and destroy mission, and attach no special importance to it. By nightfall, we were already skirting the town and keeping ten kilometres to the west. There was no sign of the enemy, and we made camp in the middle of a dense patch of jungle.

The humidity was very high, and in the morning we were soaking wet; and then discovered the leeches. We were covered in them. Their presence was made known by a shriek from Helene.

"Help, please, I'm covered in them! They're disgusting, Jurgen. Get them off of me!"

SS to the rescue once more, I thought; but wisely didn't voice my sentiment. I lit up a cigarette and began burning off the leeches as she cringed with horror and disgust.

"Aren't you covered in them?" she asked me.

"Certainly I am."

"Well, why not get yours removed?"

"Ladies first," I smiled.

She smiled back. Thank God she was beginning to thaw. Her next words confirmed it.

“Jurgen, I’m sorry, I behaved like a stupid girl back there. You’ve saved my life on more than one occasion. I will try and understand that warfare is not a pleasant business. Why are the communists so brutal?”

I thought for a moment.

“Their warlord, Ho Chi Minh, was quoted as saying ‘You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.’. That’s the problem, you see. Their philosophy is that communism is everything, and people are nothing. The communists brutally execute hundreds of French officials, teachers, Buddhist monks and Catholic priests in their drive to bring the people around to their way of thinking. Clearly marked hospitals have been blown away by Viet Minh artillery fire, in the name of the cause. Massacre after massacre; they use rockets against densely populated areas, including refugee centres. Their execution procedure is nauseating. A Viet Minh unit rounds up citizens of a village for a "people's court" trial. Village chiefs, their deputies and anyone determined as connected with the French government, are shot.”

I looked at her, saw the horror in her eyes and decided to drive home the realities of war in Indochina.

“Other prisoners are labelled with tags, just as the Jews were marked with the Star of David in Hitler's concentration camps. Those Viets considered friendly to the communist cause get green tags; neutrals, yellow; and pro-French, red. Some of the red-tagged are given dirty jobs to perform, and if they get out of line, they’re immediately shot. Next of kin can also be executed. The wife of a deputy subsector commander was condemned for "crimes against the people". She was publicly butchered, and her body cut into three pieces by the Communists. They have become the Nazis of Indochina, killing and butchering as they wage war and retreat. And no, before you mention it, I was never in fact a Nazi.”

She made no reply, and I decided enough was enough. I finished removing her leeches then went and found a discreet bush where I could strip and remove my own. The other men were doing the same. I smiled at their discretion where a pretty girl was concerned. Then we were ready. Armand and Renaud moved off, and shortly afterwards, we formed up and followed. Within two hours, Renaud came running back down the path.

“Viet Minh, Sergeant, Armand is watching them. It seems to be some sort of a prison camp.”

“Right, I’ll come and take a look. Friedrich, take over. Renaud, come

with me.  The rest of you wait here, and keep out of sight."

We went quietly up the path for about a kilometre, turned into a smaller path and the camp came into view. It was a dismal collection of wooden huts, hidden beneath the jungle canopy, and about a hundred metres off of the main path. It was so well concealed that if Armand and Renaud hadn't heard voices coming from the camp, they could have walked straight past it.

The camp was surrounded by barbed wire strung on poles. The wire had even been woven over the roof of the camp, making it impossible to climb over and out of the camp without cutting through the wire. There were four guards lined up in a central square of hard packed earth, all armed with Soviet Mosin Nagant rifles. An officer was supervising them all; a short, fat Viet armed with a pistol that he used to emphasise his shouted commands. He seemed to have got out of bed the wrong side. Renaud confirmed it was his shouting that had alerted them first to the presence of the camp. The windows to the huts were enclosed with what looked like iron bars. There were no prisoners in evidence, but certainly they were not too far away. The barbed wire was there for a purpose. The officer stopped shouting, and the soldiers ran to a low-lying structure in the centre of the square. They slid back some huge bolts, and two of them lifted the heavy hatch that covered what appeared to be a hole in the ground. One of them, presumably an NCO, began screaming orders. Almost immediately, men began appearing; ragged, emaciated scarecrows, climbing out of the hatch and standing to some semblance of attention in the square. There were nine of them altogether, all white men, and obviously French prisoners. I got out my binoculars and looked more closely. It was possible to make out the badges on their uniforms. They were all officers.

There was more shouting, and the poor devils were marched away to a store, where they picked up tools and went off into the jungle. It looked as if they were on a wood cutting detail. Three of the guards accompanied them, and one stayed to stand guard at the gate.

The prisoners were in a terrible state, covered in sores, ragged and filthy dirty. All of them looked as if they were suffering from several of the common ailments the jungle inflicted on soldiers of all armies, and which untreated meant lingering painful misery, often resulting in death. The officer went into the guard hut, and we heard him shouting at someone, presumably a further soldier, probably his clerk. So there were six of the enemy in total, the officer, his clerk and four others. We went quietly back down the track,

leaving Renaud to watch the camp, and I described the scene to the men.

"Common sense dictates that we leave them there, but somehow it goes against the grain to do that. I've never left a man in the hands of the savages before, and I don't intend to start now. The question is, how do we organise this without alerting the Viet Minh?"

After a brief silence, Schuster spoke.

"Suppose they were to desert, or at least simply disappear? If we can leave everything tidy, the Viets will just think their men disappeared, or maybe had orders to move the prisoners elsewhere."

I thought about it for a few moments.

"Excellent, that's probably our best shot. At the very least it will leave an element of doubt."

"What about the prisoners?" Bauer asked.

"They're in no shape to come with us, Friedrich. The best we can do is tend to their wounds. Helene, can you do anything with them?"

"Of course," she said.

"That's it then. We'll leave the prisoners with our spare radio and as much food and supplies as we can spare. We'll ask them to give us a day's start, and then they can radio for an evacuation. I suggest we attack the camp after dark. Remember, we need to be very careful not to leave any evidence of a firefight. Corporal Dubois, you can take out the gate guard first."

The Arab smiled. "With pleasure, Sergeant."

"Right, that's it then. We'll use the rest of the daylight to move into position. Friedrich." I said to Bauer.

"Take four men and one of the MG 42s. Make your way around to the north of the camp. Paul, bring three men and the other machine gun, and come with me. We'll close in ready to take out the guards. Try to avoid using the machine guns unless it's absolutely necessary. Private Fuchs, stay here with Mam'selle Baptiste, and make sure she's safe."

We got up and left, and within an hour were safely under cover, watching the camp. Just before dark the prisoners were marched back and herded into one of the barred huts. A guard took one of the prisoners into another hut, presumably the kitchen, and he came out shortly afterwards carrying a full bucket. The evening meal, no doubt! He went to the prisoners' hut, and when he came out the door was locked solidly behind him. The guards seemed to relax now that their charges were safely locked away for the night, and they stood around smoking and chatting. One of them brought

out a bottle, and they cheerfully passed it around. The officer came out of his hut, together with a young soldier who was carrying his boots and sat down to begin polishing them. One of the soldiers ran to get a chair for the officer, who sat down and pulled a letter out of his pocket that he began to read carefully. I assumed it was a letter from home. It would be the last one he ever received.

We waited quietly as dusk crept over the jungle. The camp wasn't equipped with electricity. One of the guards went around lighting oil lamps and rejoined his comrades, drinking and smoking. The officer went inside with his clerk, and the men pulled out more bottles and began drinking heavily. Inside of an hour, they were all semi-comatose, and it was time. I signalled to Dubois who crept down to the gate. I could just make him out through the gloom. There was a 'clink' as he threw a stone that hit the ground just outside of the fence, near to the guard. His head whipped around, and he peered into the darkness. Seeing nothing, he opened the gate and walked to the source of the noise, his rifle at the ready. I saw a shadow move, and the guard struggled briefly and was lowered to the ground. Dubois reappeared shortly afterwards.

"All clear, Sergeant. He's dead."

"Ok. Men, let's move in quietly and dispose of the rest of them."

We crept down to the camp through the open gate and moved from hut to hut until we were close to the three guards.

"Dubois, you lead. The rest of you use your bayonets, and no shooting if you can avoid it."

Dubois looked around the end of the hut and turned to us.

"They're looking away, so we can take them now if we're quick."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, he sped around the corner. I followed and saw him run up to the first soldier and slice the man's throat. I had my bayonet out, grabbed the next man around the mouth to stop him crying out, stabbing the point into the man's heart. Almost immediately he slumped, dead. Two of my men had taken the third guard. One held him while the other, imitating Dubois, pulled a knife across his throat. There was a sigh of escaping air, and the last of the three dropped dead at our feet.

Paul Schuster was watching the officer's hut carefully, and his submachine gun, a MAT 49, cocked and ready to open fire if the man or his clerk appeared. All was quiet, however, and we were shortly joined by Friedrich Bauer and his men, as they crept noiselessly into the camp. I

walked up to the door and tried the handle. It was unlocked. I gently opened it into an office in semi-darkness. There was a half-opened door on the opposite side of the room, through which a soft light was shining through sufficiently for us to see inside, presumably the sleeping quarters. We crept quietly across the office, and I looked cautiously into the next room. Sure enough, it was a bedroom. The tubby little Viet officer was naked on the bed, vigorously sodomising the naked man, his clerk, who lay on the bed below him.

I walked boldly into the room. There was no real need for stealth as these two were totally preoccupied with what they were doing. I reversed my MP38 and hit the fat man on the head, knocking him out cold. Dubois came up next to me, took the clerk's neck in his hands and began to squeeze, tighter and tighter. He struggled, and tried to call out, trying to prise the Arab's hands away, but gradually he became weaker as his air supply was cut off. He finally fell dead.

"Paul, tie up the fat one, and you can fasten him to the chair in the office. The prisoners may want a word with him. Bruno, a good job, and well done. Get some of the men, and release the prisoners."

Bauer came up to me.

"I've sent a man to bring in Mam'selle Baptiste and Private Fuchs. Armand and Renaud are guarding the gate."

"Thank you, Friedrich."

Karl-Heinz and Manfred had already broken off the padlocks from the huts, and the prisoners were coming out into the gloomy night. Even in the dark, they looked far, far worse than when I'd watched them earlier through the binoculars. Two of them had legs that were crooked, broken at some stage and never properly set. They stank of faeces, urine, vomit and filth. Nonetheless, we embraced them warmly, our fellow soldiers. It turned out they were officers of the Colonial Infantry, captured when the Viet Minh had overrun their posts. Their men had been killed horrifically, even after laying down their arms in surrender. The officers were kept for possible future use as hostages and spent their days, alternating between manual labour, and hours spent locked in the hole in the square as punishment for any infraction dreamed up by their Viet Minh captors. When they found out we had the officer captive, they were overjoyed. Two of them rushed away to find him and pay him back for some of the extreme cruelty they'd suffered. It was going to be an interesting session.

We checked around the camp and managed to replenish some of our supplies of food and ammunition from the stores. The screams had already started, and they went on for what seemed like an eternity, but was probably no more than fifteen minutes. Abruptly, they stopped. The prisoners came out of the hut and walked across to us.

"My name is Michel Bellaire. I am the senior French officer in this camp, and my rank is Colonel. On behalf of my men, I want to extend my deepest thanks to you for rescuing us from this hell. Including myself, there are only nine of us left. Originally, I commanded three companies on a search and destroy mission, but the Viet Minh ambushed us. I was in charge of a March Battalion, and my men were mainly Algerian riflemen, all regulars. They took a hundred and ninety three of us into captivity, but we are all that's left."

"What happened to the rest of you?" I asked the Colonel.

"Executions, starvation, disease, and all of it avoidable. They treated us worse than animals. Even now, some of my survivors are in bad shape. Have you come from Hanoi to rescue us? How did you find out we were here?"

I had to explain that we were on a mission and had only chanced on the camp by accident.

"I'm sorry, Colonel, much as I am concerned to get you back to Hanoi as quickly and safely as possible, the mission we're on is of immense importance to our war effort. I'm afraid we're going to have to find somewhere for you to wait for a rescue. Staying in the camp is obviously out of the question. We have no idea when the Viet Minh may arrive to check that everything is in order."

The Colonel was obviously taken aback, but still overwhelmed with joy at being rescued from the Viets.

"No," he said, "staying here is definitely not an option. They come through about twice a week with supplies and check the number of survivors. They were here yesterday, so we have a couple of days start on them before their next visit. But when they do come back, we need to be as far away as possible."

I called Friedrich Bauer, and we went over the maps. Eventually, we found a trail close by that would lead the Frenchmen in a westerly direction; away from the camp and the line of march that we were taking to Cao Bang. I pointed it out to Colonel Bellaire, and he examined the map carefully while he munched on some of the food Vogelmann and Kessler had given him and

the rest of the prisoners. Helene was going round with our rapidly diminishing medical supplies. She tended to some of the wounds and running sores while giving all the prisoners antibiotic injections to ward off the worst of the infections they were all suffering from.

"Yes, that definitely looks like a possibility," the Colonel murmured.

"Exactly how far do you want us to travel before we attempt to make contact with Hanoi? The Viets captured some of our field radios when they took us, and occasionally they get them out to listen for broadcasts from any units in the area. We can take one of those with us and call in an evacuation as soon as we're sufficiently far away."

I would have liked them to travel at least fifty kilometres before they started to broadcast on the open airwaves. It was inevitable that as soon as they did broadcast, the Viet Minh would pick it up and would go and check the source of the radio message. At the same time, there was no way these men were going to walk that far and still be alive to make the call.

"Do you think you can manage twenty kilometres, Colonel?"

Bellaire thought for a moment.

"I think so. It will take us a couple of days, but yes, we can manage it. I intend to travel as far as possible at first light and get away from here, just in case the Viets do return. We can rest and eat some of the food, then see how much progress we can make. Yes, we can do it."

I left the Colonel and went around the camp supervising the hiding of any evidence that we'd been there. The men carried each of the bodies into the jungle and buried them, where it was unlikely they would be discovered in the near future. In the morning, we double-checked to make certain there was no evidence of our being at the camp. We said our goodbyes to the Frenchmen left them with one of our maps and as many of our dwindling supplies that we could manage, and got back on the trail to Cao Bang.

We fell into the usual order of march; two men on the point, a further two covering our rear, and Helene Baptiste in the middle of the column. There was little to say. The very idea of an entire March Battalion being reduced to the nine pitiful men we had released was hard to swallow, yet it was by no means unusual. Since the fall of China, when Mao Tse Tung had begun supplying arms and equipment to the communists in Indochina, the French had been suffering increasing losses. Colonel Bellaire's Battalion was by no means unique in being virtually wiped out by a clever and well-equipped enemy.

It was certainly something to ponder, and seeing more evidence of Viet Minh savagery, combined with their increasing military successes, amounted to a solid argument for an early end to the war in Indochina. I discussed it with Paul Schuster, who walked alongside me.

“We've been here before, Jurgen. It's not so long ago that the Fuhrer totally underestimated the communists in Russia and sent hundreds of thousands of our soldiers to their deaths. It was reckless stupidity. I thought I would never live to see it again, yet I wonder is this not history repeating itself?”

“We’re all beginning to think along the same lines, Paul. It makes this mission to assassinate Giap that much more important. If we can take the bastard out of the equation, it may make things a lot easier for us.”

“Will it? Do you honestly think that, Jurgen?”

“I have to,” I told him. “I have to take responsibility for the men and for the mission, and I need something to believe in. It may not win the war, but yes, it will give us much more of a chance of bringing them to the negotiating table. That in itself would at least shorten the war.”

“I hope so, Jurgen,” he said. “I truly hope so.”

* * * * *

# CHAPTER SEVEN

We picked up the pace, trying to reach Cao Bang before the Viets started to investigate our activities. I firmly believed the rescue at the prison camp could be the final piece in the jigsaw that an intelligent Viet commander could put together, and work out that a French force was engaged on some kind of mission in the area. We soon left the Viet tribal area that constituted the largest ethnic group in Northern Indochina, entering the area of the Nung people.

The group was the sixth largest of Vietnam’s fifty-three minority groups, and with a population of nearly nine hundred thousand. It had local groups, Nung Xuong, Nung Giang, Nung An, Nung Phan Sinh, Nung Loi, Nung Tung Slin, Nung Chao and many others. They were considered to have retained more of their traditional culture and were less open to outside influences. Large numbers of the Nung had, in fact, recently fled across the

border from China when Mao Tse Tung overran the country with his communist revolution. Many had fled further south to the region around Saigon, but even more had settled in Northern Indochina, especially around the area of Cao Bang.

There was no question that we could trust the Nung any more than the Vietnamese. The whole area had been totally subjugated by the communists. However, the communists, like any other people, had strong tribal instincts. The largest ethnic group were the Vietnamese and who would, of course, favour their own people where the distribution of resources was concerned. This would mean that the Nung tribe may not be fully in the pay of the communists, and I hoped to be able to gain some kind of intelligence about the current situation at Giap's HQ.

We were soon to find out, as our point men reported we were approaching the outskirts of Dong Khe, the largest town before we reached Cao Bang itself. We left the track and moved into the jungle. Within two hundred metres, we found ourselves on the edge of a lake. It was a natural point to make camp, well screened from passing traffic, and we could obviously replenish our water supplies. The men gratefully shrugged off their packs and sat down, dragging out rations and preparing a meal while they had the chance. Before I could decide on my next move, Helene Baptiste came up to me and offered to help.

“Jurgen, I know this area. I was in Dong Khe on my previous assignment. I still have contacts there. If you wish, I can see what I can find out.”

It was a tempting offer, but Dong Khe would inevitably have a strong Viet Minh presence, and the idea of Helene Baptiste walking in to have a friendly word with one of her contacts was not very attractive. I explained this to her, but she was insistent.

“The thing is, I was very friendly with an old Buddhist priest who helped to run the hospital on the southern outskirts of the town. I got to know him well. I'm certain I could reach him, and he would be happy to help us. He was certainly no friend of the communists, that I can assure you.”

I thought about this, and any local knowledge would be of tremendous value to us. One of our overriding concerns was the consistently out of date intelligence our own people supplied. It was no substitute for having a man with his ear to the ground. I eventually relented, provided that she was escorted. I assigned Corporal Vogelmann and Private Fuchs to accompany

her.

“A little further along the track there’s a path that branches off and leads to the hospital,” Helene told me. “There shouldn't be any problem getting in there unseen.”

“I hope so,” I replied.

“Karl-Heinz, Private Fuchs, leave your heavy weapons here. It's pistols only, I'm afraid. I don't want any of the locals to see heavily armed troops in the area, so try and be discreet.”

“We're always discreet, Jurgen,” Vogelmann laughed.

“Keep it that way then,” I told him. “Good luck, men.”

They set off back to the main track and headed in the direction of Dong Khe. We sat around and chatted quietly. There was little else to do until they came back, and hopefully with some useful information that would help us to reach Cao Bang safely and complete our mission. In the distance, I could see the hills that led to the Chinese border, less than fifty kilometres away. It was a beautiful area. The Nung people were horticulturalists, and the regions around Dong Khe and Cao Bang were covered in the evidence of their rural lives. The terraces were carefully tended with a variety of crops and unusually, hundreds of ponds they used for a fairly advanced form of fish farming.

The importance to the Viet Minh of this area could not be underestimated. There was no doubt they would be imposing heavy taxes on foodstuffs to the local people, which they would in turn use to sustain their guerrilla armies.

The more I thought about it, the more anxious I became. They wouldn’t leave such an important strategic reserve without strong defences. As the hours dragged by, I wondered if I should send a couple of men to find out what had happened to them. I went to speak to Manfred Kessler, but before I could order him to get ready to leave, Helene returned with her two escorts. They also had with them a young woman, wearing traditional Nung costume, resplendent with the silver jewellery that they loved to display.

“Good news,” Vogelmann said.

“The old priest was a veritable mine of information. It seems that the Viet Minh have turned the whole population into virtual slaves. Their property has been confiscated and turned over to the party for feeding the troops. In return, the Nung are allowed to live on the land and continue to work it. They absolutely detest the communists and can't wait to see the

French impose some sort of order on the place."

"Who is the girl?" I asked him.

"Her name's Pham, and she's related to the priest. She occasionally goes to Cao Bang to buy jewellery and knows the area very well. She's volunteered to come with us."

"Manfred, why the hell would she offer to come with us on a military mission? She could get killed."

"She knows the risks, Jurgen. Her brother was conscripted by the Viet Minh to help them carry their supplies. When he refused to go, they made him kneel down and then put a bullet through his head in front of the whole family. She wants to do something to hit back at them. Believe me, Pham is totally committed to us."

I wasn't happy about taking an unknown civilian with us. It was enough that we had Helene Baptiste with us, but at least she was French and had been held captive by the Viet Minh. We had no doubts about her loyalty. Pham may well be the genuine article, but there was really no way of knowing.

"Does she speak any French?"

"Pham speaks French fluently," Helene said to me. "She also, of course, speaks the native Nung language, so she'll be very valuable to us."

I looked at her. She was a pretty enough girl of about twenty. Helene was quite correct. With her local knowledge and ability to speak Nung, she could indeed prove to be very valuable. If, on the other hand, she was not genuine, she could be the instrument of our deaths. In the end, I agreed she should come with us but told Friedrich Bauer to put the word around that she was to be watched very carefully and not trusted, at least for the time being.

"Pham," I called to her. "How long will it take us to reach Cao Bang, and do you know of a route we can take that'll keep us off of the main track?"

"If we take the path over the hillside, we can reach Cao Bang in about two hours, Sergeant."

"Are we likely to meet anyone on that path?"

"No, no, I don't think there'll be any Viet Minh in that area."

"What about civilians?" I continued.

"I don't think so, no, no civilians."

I wasn't totally convinced by her replies. Dong Khe and Cao Bang were big areas and surrounded by a large number of farms and settlements. Still, I accepted that we had to give it a try on the basis of what she said. I gave the

orders, and we put on our packs, picked up our weapons and left for the final stage of our journey.

We'd only travelled for a few hundred metres along the track towards Dong Khe before Pham directed us to yet another small path that led into the hills. I kept up a hard pace, wanting to arrive at Cao Bang before nightfall. Within three hours, just as dusk was falling, we were approaching the outskirts of the town. The path ran past a waterfall, a natural beauty spot Pham assured us was rarely visited by the Viets. We made camp there by the side of the lake, just under the waterfalls and out of sight of any casual passerby. I set out pickets and then sat to eat an evening meal.

The food was fairly unappetising, consisting of the last of our dried food, supplemented by some rice and pickled vegetables we'd taken from the prison camp. I asked Pham what she knew about Cao Bang.

Certainly the whole area had been central to the communist uprising, and in 1950, Ho Chi Minh and Giap managed to gather enough forces in the area to defeat the French and take control. Outside Cao Bang, there were several cave systems, many of which had been used by the communists as barracks in which to keep troops hidden from the French.

"The communists are in full control of the town, Sergeant. For the peasants, there is no life. They force us to work for them, and everything that we make or grow is heavily taxed. If anyone protests, like my brother, they are killed."

I didn't want to give her any idea why we were in the area. It would be best if she thought we were purely on a reconnaissance mission.

"Do you know where the communists have their headquarters?" I asked.

"Certainly, they've taken over a building in the town, but the men in command stay in a villa which is outside of the town. It has been overgrown by the jungle since it was abandoned by the French many years ago, so it's impossible to see from the air, but everyone in the village knows where it is. Many of us have to go and work there for the communists, and I've been there to clean and to take food for the kitchens."

I was itching to ask her the million-dollar question. Was Giap there? But it was impossible without giving away the object of our mission. I finally drifted off to sleep, lulled into a relaxed state by the sound of the water cascading down the waterfall.

I woke up before dawn and gathered the men to prepare for the final stage of the journey. We were about to enter the tiger's lair, the holy of holies

of Ho Chi Minh's chief executioner, Nguyen Giap; the supposedly military genius and certainly the architect of the Viet Minh victories over the French the year before. Not only that, our mission was to either kidnap him if that was possible, or as seemed more likely, assassinate him and then escape with our lives.

What had seemed like a distinct possibility in the safety of the barracks in Hanoi now seemed to be virtually impossible. We had no idea how many troops were stationed in the area, but it was known to be a training and supply centre for several of the Viet Minh chu lucs, the main battle formations that Giap sent against us in set piece attacks. I asked Pham if it would be at all possible to approach the villa where the senior officers lived without being seen.

“Yes, Sergeant, I think it should be possible, but it depends on the number of patrols the communists have out. Sometimes the soldiers go away, and the area is fairly quiet. At other times there are many soldiers, and we hear much shooting around the hills and the jungle. I think they must be training. Although I live in Dong Khe, I haven’t seen many soldiers there lately. So yes, there is a good chance. I can definitely lead you on a path through the jungle that will avoid the checkpoints.”

“Tell me about these checkpoints, how many soldiers guard them, and what sort of weapons do they carry?”

Pham looked perplexed.

“I'm sorry, Sergeant, I don't understand. They carry rifles like you do, and there are usually three or four soldiers at each checkpoint.”

“And how many checkpoints are there likely to be around the villa?” I asked her.

“I honestly don't know,” she said.

“I don't usually look around when I go to the villa. I just do my work and leave as quickly as possible. Would you like me to go and find out?”

“How on earth could you do that? If you were caught, you would be killed.”

She looked me straight in the eye.

“What you need to understand, Sergeant, is that these vermin killed my brother just because he wouldn’t help them. I would do anything, anything at all, to drive them out of my country. The communists have already driven the Nung people out of China, and many of us settled here hoping to live a normal life. Now they have come here too. Many of our people have fled

once more to the south of the country around Saigon, but there are still many more of us who would just like to be left in peace. Anything I can do that will strike a blow against the communists will help bring about the time when we can once more live normal lives."

It was an impressive speech. I began to have more confidence in her and to understand the horrors that had driven her to want to take such chances. Certainly, Mao Tse Tung's communists had treated the Nung harshly after the revolution, and now they seemed to be suffering the same fate here in their new home of Indochina. Perhaps with a few more like Pham, the communists would think twice before they tried to take over the whole country.

"What excuse would you have to go there?"

"That's not a problem, Sergeant. Apart from food and weapons, one of their main requirements is a supply of whores. If I pretend to be going there as one, they will not question me."

It was a fearful dilemma. On the one hand, the intelligence she could gain from going to the villa would be priceless and could make all the difference between success or failure of our mission. On the other hand, if they caught her, she would be killed. But if she was a traitor... well, that would be the end of us. She could sell us out to the communists and earn a substantial reward for her treachery.

I called Friedrich Bauer over, and we walked off to discuss it. In the end, I agreed that she would go and pose as a whore to find out what kind of odds we would be up against. We also decided, in the interests of our safety, to move our camp once she'd left so that if she did sell us out to the Viets, they would only find an empty camp when they came looking for us.

Pham departed for the officers' villa. We gave her ten minutes then packed up the camp, clearing the area as best we could to hide any evidence of our being there, and moved off over the hill where we could wait for her. Armand and Renaud took up a position where they could keep an eye on our old camp and watch for Pham returning. Our new camp was in a deep bamboo thicket and difficult to approach, except for a narrow channel we'd hacked through. The insects gave us hell, and we spent three miserable hours covering ourselves with ointment and using every means possible to drive them away. Even so, by the time we heard a quiet call from Armand to announce their return, we were covered in insect bites and more than pleased to be able to move out. Pham was with them, but her appearance was terrible.

Her face was covered in bruises, her clothes ripped, and her eyes wide with fear. Helene rushed out to her.

"My dear, what happened to you?" she asked her.

"Pham, did they catch you?" I added.

"No," she replied bitterly.

"They didn't catch me. I offered myself to them as a whore for money. At least, that's what I told them. But they weren't interested in paying. They took me to the villa and held me down while they took turns raping me."

We were all silent. War was brutal, and this particular war in Indochina seemed to be characterised by far more brutality than most. Even on the Eastern Front, where the behaviour of the troops took barbarism to new levels of depravity, I couldn't envisage our senior officers kidnapping and then gang raping a young girl; some of the ordinary troops of both armies, perhaps, but the senior officers? No, never. It was a sober reminder to us all that the enemy we were dealing with was like nothing we had dealt with before.

I spent some time questioning Pham about the route to the villa and the layout inside. It was a typical French plantation villa on two floors. There was a huge lounge in the downstairs area that the occupants used as a kind of officers' mess. There were also kitchens and other staff quarters on the ground floor. Upstairs were the bedrooms, and apparently, there were about ten of them for the senior officers.

"If you go now, Sergeant, you would certainly find them unprepared. Most of them are currently entertaining their whores," she said bitterly.

It was time to ask the only question that really mattered.

"Pham, do you know if Comrade Giap is at the villa? Do you know who I mean?"

"Yes, I know him," Pham replied. "He's a very cruel man, and he treats us worse than any of the others. When I was leaving, one of the guards was dragging two girls into the house, and I overheard him say that they were to entertain Comrade Giap," she shuddered.

It was the best possible news we could hear. If we could grab Giap, or kill him as a last resort, everything else would be worthwhile.

"How many guards are there around the villa, inside and out?" I asked.

She thought for a moment.

"I think there are about eight of the Nung people acting as servants to the Viets, but as for soldiers, I would think about fifteen to twenty. I'm sorry I

cannot be precise."

"No, no, you've done very well, Pham. While we make the attack on the villa, you must stay here with Helene."

"I wish to come with you, Sergeant. I want to have vengeance for my brother. If I can kill some Viet Minh, it would be as much as I could ask from this life."

"Have you ever killed a man, Pham? Killed a man close-up, with a knife, when you can look him in the eyes and see him breathe his last breath? Is that what you want?"

"Yes, Sergeant, that's what I want."

She took out a knife, a wicked looking knife that she had probably used recently for finely chopping vegetables and slicing fish.

"I have my knife. Please take me with you so that I can use it."

She was adamant that nothing less than payment in blood would be sufficient revenge for the execution of her brother. I decided to let her come with us. She could kick up a fuss if I tried to make her stay behind, and besides she could be very useful as a guide to take us on the last stage of our journey. The villa was only a thirty-minute hike away, so we prepared our weapons as best we could and waited for dusk. We all rubbed charcoal over our faces to make it more difficult for the Viets to see us coming, but I hoped to catch them all unawares.

Finally, dusk came down, and Pham led the way towards the villa. I ordered Helene to walk near the back of the group. I would have preferred not to take her with us, but leaving her alone was not an option. For the first time, I began to regret my decision at allowing her to come along.

We all had our weapons ready, but I made certain they weren't cocked. It only needed one random shot to bring a division of Viet Minh troops down upon our heads. I called for Corporal Dubois to come to the front.

"Corporal, you're the best man in the Foreign Legion with a knife. You know what needs to be done?"

"Yes, Sergeant Hoffman. You want me to go ahead and dispose of the sentries without making any noise."

"Good man," I acknowledged him. "Wait for my order."

There was some light coming through the jungle canopy. It was almost a full moon, but luckily the sky was very cloudy, so we didn't have to worry about bright moonlight betraying our positions. But it was enough light for us to see where we were going. Pham held up her hand, and we all came to a

stop and crouched down. I edged forward and could clearly see the Viet Minh house through the trees. It was an isolated structure surrounded by several outhouses and a wire fence. There was a gatehouse at the entrance to the compound with a lifting barrier across it. Next to the barrier, a guard was standing quietly smoking, talking to someone else who was just out of sight.

The men crouched down, waiting in the darkness. Apart from the usual jungle noises, everything seemed quite. A little music was coming from the villa, and someone had a radio or a gramophone playing. I turned to Corporal Dubois.

"Dubois, you can take Renaud with you, go now. Remember, no noise."

"Yes, Sergeant. Xavier, come here."

Renaud came forward, another North African who was as familiar with using a knife as blowing his nose.

"Yes, Corporal."

"You take the guard standing by the barrier, and I'll go for the other one that we can't see. Keep it quiet, there may be others in the guard hut, and we'll need to deal with them too."

The two men crept quietly forward, and soon they were lost in the gloom. Suddenly, a figure appeared next to the guard I could see. There was a slight movement, and the Viet guard was dragged into the guard hut. I heard the beginnings of a cry that was quickly stifled, and then silence. After a few minutes, Dubois and Renaud came out of the hut and reported back.

"All clear, Sergeant. There was just one other guard in the hut, but he was half asleep, so we put him out of his misery. The bodies are all out of sight."

"Well done. You all know what to do, let's go."

We slipped into the grounds of the villa and past the now deserted guard hut. I posted two guards to watch for any new arrivals, and the men followed me into the building. Pham was with me, together with Vogelmann. A door opened in the hall, and a Viet servant came out. He opened his mouth to shout but dropped to the floor as Dubois' knife whistled across the room, burying itself in his throat. I nodded to the Arab corporal who grinned back. I signalled at four of the men to take the ground floor rooms, and the rest of us crept quietly up the stairs. We found ourselves on a long, spacious landing, with a dozen doors leading off of it. Friedrich Bauer and Dubois silently entered the first room. There was a slight sound, and they came out.

"One Viet, asleep in bed. Permanently," he added.

“Did you recognise him?” I whispered.

He shook his head. I went with Vogelmann to the end of the landing and opened a bedroom door.

We walked in and found ourselves face to face with Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the communist forces, second in the hierarchy of the people’s revolution, after Ho Chi Minh. He was naked, lying on the bed, and next to him was a girl who looked to be no more than twelve years old. She saw his eyes widen, and he whirled around, startled.

Vogelmann walked over and effortlessly lifted the girl off of the bed, dumping her on the floor. I put my finger to my lips, pointed my MP38 at him, and walked over to the bed.

“Comrade Giap, if you make any noise, this gentleman will slit your throat so that you never make a noise ever again. Not one word, clear?”

He nodded, watching me carefully. He looked at Vogelmann, and his eyes darted around the room. Without a doubt, until we either killed him or got him away from here, we were in a very dangerous position. Silent, watchful, and ready to take advantage of the tiniest opportunity to turn the tables, he tried, without success, to hide the face of the Viet Minh military genius behind the archetypal mask of oriental inscrutability.

“Giap, get your clothes on,” I ordered him. “Remember, dead or alive, it makes no difference.  Make a sound, and we’ll leave your body here for your men to cry over.”

He made no reply, just got slowly off of the bed and began dressing. As soon as he was ready, I tied his hands behind his back and whispered to Vogelmann to go and check the passage outside the door. As his hand was on the doorknob, we heard a shouted command from downstairs, then the beginning of an altercation.

Obviously someone from the Viet Minh guard knew we were here, and things were about to warm up. Giap was doing his best not to smile, but his face betrayed him; a mixture of fear that he may be killed, combined with pleasure that his captors were probably about to suffer the same fate.

I wondered how true he was to his cause. Would he practice what he preached, would he be happy to die to see the hated French colonisers destroyed? Or was that a sentiment reserved for other, lesser mortals. I suspected that like most military leaders, the latter would be the case. Brave, certainly, but dying in battle was for others to suffer.

Vogelmann peered out through the door. As he did so, there was a

strangled cry of agony, then silence again. I whispered urgently to him.

"Karl-Heinz, go and see what's happening. I'll cover Giap."

He slipped quietly through the door. The racket downstairs was building. Clearly, some of the Viet Minh were alerted to our presence. Giap was doing his best to look inscrutable but couldn't totally hide the triumph in his eyes, now that he thought we were discovered. Vogelmann came back.

"Jurgen, we've got trouble. About a dozen Viet Minh, some sort of a guard patrol. Four of them came into the house, and we've finished them off, but the rest are outside waiting to hit us when we leave."

"And they will have called for reinforcements," I added.

He nodded. "Within ten minutes, this place will be crawling with the bastards."

"Who will be reluctant to shoot at their commander. We have Giap, so we'll use him to get out of here. Let's get moving. Comrade Giap, get downstairs."

We followed the Viet leader along the passage. Through open bedroom doors I could glimpse bodies lying on bloodied sheets, testifying to the death and terror we'd brought to this remote part of Indochina; an area where the enemy thought it was totally safe. At least we'd changed all of that.

The men were gathered in the hallway, waiting. Pham was holding a bloodied knife, so obviously some of the victims in the bedrooms had been hers. Helene was bandaging a wound. I afterwards found out that the man went into the kitchen to investigate and got stabbed in the back for his pains.

Their eyes widened as they recognised Giap, the bogeyman of the French colonialists for the past ten years. I pulled Giap to the front door.

"Comrade, we're leaving now. Tell your men to hold their fire, or we'll put a bullet in your head. You will speak only in French, now do it."

I opened the door and pushed him out first onto the veranda. A small group of hostile looking Viets stood nearby, their weapons raised. As they saw Giap walk out of the door, their officer shouted a command, and they lowered their guns. He kept his pistol trained on us, until I shouted at him.

"Lower your pistol. Your men will not shoot. We have taken Giap prisoner and are keeping him with us until we can escape. When we are clear, we will release him. Men," I shouted to my troops, "come out now, we are leaving."

The men came out of the house, weapons raised, cocked, and ready to fire. The air crackled with tension. I was well aware that the slightest spark

would ignite the tinderbox, and the shooting would start. If hate could kill, the compound would be littered with bodies. I could sense both sides itching to start shooting, which would be the end of us all.

We were deep in the heart of Viet Minh territory, surrounded by tens of thousands of enemy soldiers. Our only hope was to get out of here as quickly as possible before they had time to work out a way to kill us, and without killing Giap.

There was a sudden cry, and Pham rushed forward, her bloody knife raised. She'd recognised the officer as one who had brutalised her earlier in the day. He was still holding his pistol, and as she reached him, he raised it and shot her in the chest. Her body jerked with the impact of the bullet, but her momentum carried her forward enough to plunge her knife into his groin. He collapsed on the ground, screaming in agony, blood spurting out of him in torrents. Pham fell backwards, dead, her mission of revenge over. Giap snapped out a command, and one of his men went up to the fallen officer, put his rifle to the man's head and pulled the trigger. The bullet killed him instantly, and silence once again descended on the compound. We were no strangers to killing, but Giap's casual order to silence the wounded officer, made under the guns of his French captors, was a powerful illustration of the unlimited strength and resolve of this man.

"Giap, we're leaving. Tell them to stay back. If we see a single weapon raised, you'll be shot."

"Men," I called.

"If one of them points a weapon our way, you will shoot Giap without further orders. Right, let's go. Helene, stay in the middle of the group."

We edged away from the house towards the gate. Vogelmann kept a hand on Giap, the other with his pistol held tight against the communist leader's head so that they didn't mistake the message. As we reached the gate, I spoke to Giap.

"Tell them not to follow or you will be killed."

He shouted to the Viets, who stood sullenly watching us leave. We went through the gate and found the path at the rear of the compound.

"We need to move very fast. There's no doubt they'll be following us. Friedrich, cover our rear with Fassbinder, and make sure they don't get too close. The rest of you, double time, we need to be away from here before they bring up an entire regiment."

Bauer and Fassbinder dropped to the rear. I picked up the pace so that

we were almost running along the jungle path.

We kept going for the next hour, dashing along the path, propelling our prisoner with us. We heard shooting in the rear, and I sent Petrov to investigate, but he reported back that it was only the Viets getting too near. Bauer and Fassbinder had fired a burst that hit two of them and convinced the others that we were serious.

As we ran, I contemplated the options. There was no way we would lose our pursuers. Giap was far too valuable for them to lose sight of him. There was only one option, so I spoke to Petrov and explained the problem. He saw the solution instantly.

"Certainly, Jurgen, you want me to leave a nice present for our friends."

"I do, but there's no time for anything sophisticated. Can you do something on the run, without stopping to prepare?"

He thought for a moment.

"A remote detonation, the communists' favourite method. I'll prepare a charge, if you would take the wire and move fifty metres into the jungle while I'm hiding it. Find some cover, and as soon as it's ready, I'll join you. When our friends reach the charge, just trigger it. I'll keep an eye out for a good spot."

"Fine, I'll send Schuster back to let Bauer and Fassbinder know what we're doing."

We kept running, and within half a kilometre, we found the right place; where the track narrowed and would funnel the Viets into a tight group. Petrov had prepared a rough and ready charge. He stopped and began to bury it in a tangle of foliage. I hurtled into the jungle, laying out the cable as I ran. After about fifty metres, I found a fallen tree trunk which made good enough cover. I saw Bauer, Schuster and Fassbinder run past, and then Petrov came scrambling through the undergrowth to join me behind the tree trunk. Within minutes, we heard the sound of the pursuit. The Viets were keeping up the fast pace, and their equipment rattling as they ran gave them away. I saw them come into view, a group of about ten. They were bunched up, not expecting any kind of an ambush. I let them come abreast of the charge, and I pressed the switch on the detonator. There was a blinding flash, the crash of the explosion, and a massive shockwave surged through the jungle, battering everything around us. Leaves and greenery were tossed high into the air, mixing with smoke and dust to obliterate our view of the blast site.

As the dust began to settle, I heard firing, and the rest of our men came

into view, hitting the surviving Viets hard before they had time to recover. They poured a withering fire on the survivors, but it was no contest. In less than half a minute, the Viets were all dead. I noticed Helene standing next to a tree where she'd been sheltering from the gunfire. She came over to look at the bodies, but they were beyond her help. She shook her head despairingly, crossed herself and said a silent prayer.

"We need to get moving," I shouted. "We've only won ourselves a small lead on the enemy. They'll know the direction we're headed in, so if we don't keep moving, they'll be back on our tails again soon. Move out."

We continued our dash though the jungle, following the track that Pham had shown us when she brought us in. We approached Dong Khe carefully, but there was no sign of any increased activity. We pushed on, skirting the town and continued heading south.

Every hour, I stopped them for a short break, but time was not on our side. We pushed on late into the night until it was so dark, we couldn't even follow the track. I ordered a stop, and we made camp.

Giap had managed to keep up. He was much fitter than I would have imagined most army commanders would be. Perhaps it was his life organising and controlling a guerrilla army that kept him in shape. He spent every day undercover, moving from place to place, in fear of discovery by the French. Now his worst fears were realised. I made sure he was secured for the night, and two troopers were assigned to watch him. His hands were still tied, and in addition I made them link his bound hands to a tree, so that escape was all but impossible.

During the night, we heard the sound of engines moving down the main track that led from Dong Khe. There was the unmistakable equipment rattle of troops moving, the urgent commands of officers, and the sounds of the beginnings of a huge search operation. The Viets could call on several divisions to scour the countryside. I wondered if one hostage, even one so prominent as Giap, would be enough to keep us alive.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER EIGHT

In the morning, we ate a hasty breakfast and prepared to move out.

There was no question of using the direct route south as the whole area was crawling with Viet Minh troops searching for Giap. I called the men for a meeting to discuss our options.

"We are here, about thirty kilometres south of Dong Khe," I said, pointing to a spot on the map. "Here's the prison camp we visited on the way in, and here's the plantation. The main track is obviously out of the question, and as far as I can see, the only alternative is to travel through the swamps."

They groaned. The Indochinese swamps were notorious. The hazards were endless, malaria mosquitoes, snakes, poisonous insects and constant flies that made life an unending hell. Then, of course, there were the leeches. Even the locals avoided the swamps, and there were many tales, some probably apocryphal, of groups of people entering the swamps never to be seen again.

"I know, I know, but we don't have a choice. It's the swamps or Giap's people, and they'll be a damn sight nastier than the swamps. Let's get moving."

We picked up our packs and weapons and moved east. Would the Viets work out where we were? Certainly they would consider that we'd tried for the swamps, but finding us there would be another matter.

They could search for us with ten divisions of troops before they got on our trail. Then again, they probably would search for us with ten divisions of troops. It was a sobering thought.

We travelled for five kilometres before we reached the edge of the swamps. Then the going became really hard, and before long we were wading through waist-deep water. We all kept a look out for snakes and any other nasty creatures that could be a threat, but really there was little we could do, other than hope that the passage of a large group of people would be enough to make them keep well away.

We kept water out of our gun barrels by using condoms stretched over the end. Petrov carried his pack of explosives on top of his head, careful to keep it well away from the water. As usual, we used a point and rear guard formation. This time Schuster went with Armand to check the route through the damp, green hell. Schuster had found a long sapling, broken out of the ground, which he used to probe in front of him, checking that the water did not unexpectedly become too deep. I estimated we were making barely a kilometre an hour. At this rate, it would be several days before we even managed to escape the main search area and move back onto a jungle track

that would enable us to push a faster pace. At one rest stop, I talked to Bauer and Schuster about the supply situation.

"Jurgen, we have supplies for another day, no more. We can't hang around here for too long, even assuming that the men don't begin to fall ill."

Schuster had checked every pack and inventoried the supplies of food. We were running dangerously low. We'd planned the mission on the basis of being able to replenish food supplies from local villages. The problem was that there were no villages in the swamps.

I checked the map.

"Very well, we need to head slightly north. I know, it's taking us in the wrong direction, but it will confuse the Viets, and more importantly, take us out of the swamps."

We checked out the map thoroughly, but it was the only sensible alternative. Staying in the swamp much longer, and hunger and illness would be certain to hit us, sooner rather than later. I needed to lead a fighting force back to Hanoi, not a troop of the halt and the lame.

I told the men what we were planning, which cheered them up. The effect of the swamp was depressing, and a constant wait to see what would strike first, snakes, leeches, or the deadly bouts of malarial attack that reduced men to quivering invalids. By the early evening, we were getting to higher ground, and soon we were out of the swamp and able to make camp on dry ground.

We slumped down exhausted, and I went to check on Giap. His hands were still tied, and I carefully untied them so that he could revive the circulation in his arms. He flexed his muscles with some relief.

"Thank you, Sergeant," he said.

"I don't think you have anywhere to run, Comrade Giap."

"Do you think you'll ever get me to Hanoi?" he asked.

I looked him in the eyes, and he stared back.

"I think we both know that getting you to Hanoi is not much of an option, Giap. There are about ten of your divisions searching for you, so we'll be lucky to get halfway.

"So what do you plan to do with me, shoot me? Is that it? I know that you never intended to give me back to my men. That was just a way for you to escape."

I nodded. "Yes, that's true. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

"Of course, this is a war. A guerrilla war without rules, like the Chinese

fought against Chiang Kai Chek, Lenin's revolution in Russia, even your French Revolution."

"I am not French."

"Where do you come from, then?"

"I am German, what your people might call a Nazi."

"German?" He looked at me with new interest. "So you fought in the Great Patriotic War?"

I smiled. The Russians had given it that name, but we just called it the Eastern Front.

"Yes, I fought in Russia."

"And lost in Russia, Sergeant. You found the Russians more than a match, did you not?"

"We certainly lost," I agreed.

"But no, not because the Russians were better fighters. They were tough, yes, and they often fought on when lesser men would have given up. But man for man, we gave them a hammering. We were beaten by politics, my friend, politics in the shape of a madman who was in charge."

"Hitler," he said. "The greatest war criminal the world has ever known."

I laughed. "He was certainly bad, but Comrade Stalin was far worse."

"Stalin?" he said abruptly. "Stalin was a hero, a great leader of the people."

"He was a butchering war criminal," I told him. "Ready to butcher his own people, men, women and children, if it might help the war effort. Sometimes just because he felt like it."

He shook his head in disbelief.

"Comrade Stalin saved a whole nation from defeat at the hands of your leader, Hitler. He was one of the greatest men who ever lived."

I was intrigued to hear him defending Stalin. Giap was an educated man, very, very clever. He knew very well how evil Stalin had been, and certainly the equal of Hitler in bloodletting. Or did he?

I wondered just how much he did know, and how much was just the party line that he fed to poor peasants. The peasants who hoped that following the communists would give them freedom, land, food, a job, all the things that made people's lives bearable the world over. All of the things that once they gained power the communists turned their backs on.

I told him what I'd seen in Russia, of Stalin's NKVD and commissars ordering civilians to walk over minefields to clear the way for their troops. Of

women and children shot for fleeing embattled cities, even when as civilians they were just trying to save their lives when Stalin had failed them. Of the Gulags, of the ‘Stalin Terror’ purges of the late 1930’s.

“Well, of course, some things are necessary. Revolution is a messy business, and sometimes it is necessary to lose a few lives in the process of building a new and great nation.” Giap said.

“Women, children, the old and sick, the wounded and disabled?” I said, appalled.

“Of course. They’re all part of the revolution, and no one has the right to stand idly by while someone fights for their freedom.”

“Freedom?” I laughed. “The people of Russia are anything but free. They’re just inmates in Stalin’s great prison camp. Or do you mean freedom for the members of the Politburo, for people like yourself?”

He looked angry, but I knew I’d hit a nerve. Giap was not used to arguing against someone who had seen the outside world, and had seen what communism had done to an entire nation, enslaved it, turning whole countries into police states.

“Before Stalin,” he retorted angrily, “the Russian peasant was just a slave of the landowner. Most spent their entire lives in total, abject poverty, fighting each day to just get enough to eat.”

I nodded. “You’re right. The Russian Tsars, the aristocracy, treated them like chattels, slaves to buy and sell, to spend their entire lives working for the benefit of the rich. But the communists were not the answer. They gave the peasants a few benefits, and some were able to get enough to eat, somewhere to live. Many did not, you know about the famines, the mass killings, and the forced emigrations? Sure, Russia was a hell for the peasants before the communists, but it’s still a hell. I know you won’t believe it, but I can assure you that many of them greeted the German armies with garlands of flowers when we invaded. They were happy to accept anything that would remove them from the enslavement of communism.”

“So why did they fight so hard to beat the Germans?” he asked.

“They fought for a lot of reasons, and because they were ordered to and threatened with being shot if they didn’t. And Hitler stupidly decreed that they should be treated as ‘untermensch’, sub-humans, so that they quickly learned to hate us. If we’d treated the Russians as allies, instead of killing and enslaving them, we could have beaten Stalin in a month.”

He was thoughtful after that. Obviously, he was already aware of the

worst of Stalin's excesses, and his murderous rule over the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin. But somehow, I thought he was still trying to fit this new knowledge of the war into his scheming, into his political philosophy, so that he could twist it to his advantage.

I left him then and went back to join the others. Corporal Dubois and Private Laurent were guarding Giap, and with orders to kill him if he made any attempt to escape. Helene was waiting for me.

"You've been talking to Giap?" she asked me.

"That's right," I replied.

"Did you get anything out of him?"

I suddenly realised she thought I'd been interrogating him, and probably torturing him. Women!

"I gagged him and then sliced all his fingers off, the way the Gestapo showed me. One at a time!"

Her eyes widened.

"My God, that is terrible, you're, a …" she tried to think of the worst thing possible. "You're an animal. You disgust me."

I smiled and couldn't resist laughing.

"What are you laughing about?" she asked.

Then realisation hit her.

"You're pulling my leg! Jurgen, you swine," she began laughing too. "I didn't believe you, you know."

"I'm not too sure about that," I grinned. "For one moment, I thought you were about to have my men arrest me for war crimes."

"I still might," she pouted. "What are you going to do about him? Giap, I mean. How can you get him back to Hanoi when most of the Viet Minh are scouring the country for him?"

"I don't know, Helene. You're right. Getting him back would be impossible. At the start of the mission, we were getting help from the Navy. The plan was that they would send a helicopter to take him away, and we were to head for the coast and pick up a ride on a Naval destroyer."

"So why can't you do that?"

"Politics, my dear. Certain people wouldn't allow it, and who knows what pressures were brought to bear? But the end result was that we were left on our own."

"So what will you do with him?"

I didn't answer.

We sat for a while longer, just enjoying each other's company. Then we turned in to get a night's sleep, away from the festering flies and insects of the swamp. I checked the sentry roster and lay down, promptly falling asleep. I woke quickly, grabbing for my pistol, but a finger was pushed against my lips.

"Schh," Helene said.

She was crouched over me with a blanket wrapped around her. She crawled under my own blanket and pulled her own off. She was naked. I felt myself becoming aroused at the unusual and totally unexpected prospect of having a beautiful, naked young woman in bed with me in the midst of the Indochinese jungle, and with Ho Chi Minh's hordes hunting us down like dogs. She kissed me, a long, lingering, passionate kiss that sent a tingle through my whole body.

"Don't say anything, please, Jurgen. Just love me," she whispered.

So I did. I caressed her body, kissed her all over, felt the warm, smooth curves, her delicious breasts, smelled the overpowering scent of woman on her, exaggerated by the long, hot day we had spent fleeing from the Viets. I felt between her legs, where she was already wet, and her body arching up inviting me to join her. I pulled down my trousers I always slept in when in the field, and already my organ was rock hard, ready to enter her. She pulled me towards her, and we made passionate love. Not only the hot sex of two souls thousands of miles from home and desperate for the warmth of human contact, but the most basic and primeval form of human contact. But I felt more, and I was sure that she did too. The sex was wonderful, although conducted in as muted and discrete a fashion as possible. The last thing we needed was for the whole camp to know that we had become lovers. I fell asleep again and was roughly awakened by the sentry. She had already gone back to her own bedroll.

It wasn't quite dawn. The whole camp was coming to. I quickly pulled on my jacket and equipment, picked up my submachine gun and went to find Giap. Helene noticed my going, and I could tell by the way she looked, the fear and sadness in her eyes; she understood that her lover of the night before was about to become an executioner. I ignored her and approached Giap, still fastened to a tree out of sight of the camp and guarded by two of the men. I told them to leave and then spoke to Giap. He knew what was coming but, as far as I could tell, was not afraid.

"So, Sergeant. You have come to kill me?"

“Wouldn’t you, Giap, if you were in my place?”

“Probably, if it was necessary, yes, I would kill you. Or me, as it happens,” he acknowledged.

I got out my knife, a sharpened combat knife. For the first time, he showed fear but quickly got himself under control. I reached behind him and cut his bonds, freeing his arms.

“I am releasing you, Comrade Giap, unharmed. You can go back to your people.”

He was stunned.

“Why?”

“Why not?” I said to him. “I’m a soldier, not an assassin. If the High Command wants you dead, they can come and do it themselves.”

“The SS were famous for killing their prisoners, were they not?” he said, perplexed.

“Some were, yes, but most of us didn’t kill prisoners. We didn’t treat them well either, but we weren’t murderers. We were German soldiers, and the best in the world, my friend, no more, no less. Now, get going before I change my mind.”

I gave him a bottle of water.

“That will have to be enough, I’m afraid.”

“So what was it all for, Sergeant? Why did you come on the mission in the first place?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I said, surprising myself in the realisation that I really didn’t know. “Perhaps it was like climbing a mountain, because it was there. Perhaps at the time it seemed the right thing to do.”

“Very well, Sergeant. It is ironic, is it not, that if you had arrived two days later, we would have taken you?”

I raised my eyebrows. “You think so?”

“Of course,” he smiled, “we were preparing a suitable welcome for you…” he trailed off.

“You were saying?” I said curtly.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Now I will leave.”

He held out his hand. “Until we meet again, Sergeant.”

I shook his hand. “If I meet you in battle, I’ll kill you.”

He smiled. “No doubt. I don’t suppose you would consider joining me? I could offer you a senior command.”

“Change sides? Absolutely not.”

He shrugged. “Then I wish you a safe journey back. Goodbye, Sergeant.”

He set out on the path back to Cao Bang, walking calmly away from me, a man who knew where his fate would lead him. I wondered what he’d meant by preparing a welcome for us. It seemed we had a traitor in Hanoi, and that was something to be investigated. I turned and went back to the men, who erupted when I told them what I’d done.

“Jurgen, for God’s sake, all this effort, for nothing. Why the hell did you do it?”

Karl-Heinz Vogelmann glared at me, his face red with anger. The rest of them were no happier. It was time to explain the tactical realities.

“Look men, here is the situation. As long as we had Giap, there would be upwards of ten thousand hostile Viet Minh hunting us down. There are twelve of us, and we still have a hundred and fifty kilometres to travel to get back to Hanoi. We’re in the middle of Viet held territory, so our only hope is to call off the hunt. How long do you think we would last with that many Viet Minh soldiers hunting us? Let alone the civilians, who would have been alerted to keep watch. Our own High Command has told us that they will not send in air support, or any other support, for fear of upsetting the Americans. Giap will be back with his people within hours, and you know how communications work in the jungle, that means the heat will be off. It was a simple choice, keep Giap, and we were looking at fighting off thousands of Viet Minh, an impossibility. There is no question we all would have died. I had to release him to give us a chance of getting back to Hanoi.”

“There was another choice, Jurgen.”

“Really,” I replied to Vogelmann, still red faced and angry. “What was that?”

“Kill him, finish the bastard off!”

I nodded.

“That was an option, of course, but two problems there, Karl-Heinz. Firstly, how would that take off the pressure of the Viet Minh searching for him, and eventually getting into a firefight with us that we couldn’t win?”

He was silent.

“The second problem is this. Who was going to kill him, who is the executioner, you, Karl-Heinz? Is that what you’re fighting for, to execute a brave man who has only ever done his duty? You want us to turn into an Einsatzgruppe?”

He looked way, embarrassed.

The Einsatzgruppen were our SS paramilitary death squads, and responsible for mass killings, of Jews in particular, but also significant numbers of other population groups and political categories in the countries overrun by the German armed forces. The Einsatzgruppen followed the German invasions of Poland, in September 1939, and later, of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Einsatzgruppen carried out operations ranging from the murder of a few people to those lasting over two or more days, such as the massacres at Babi Yar where 33,471 were killed in two days and Rumbula, where 25,000 died in two days.

The Einsatzgruppens were responsible for the murders of over a million people, and they were the first Nazi organisations to commence mass killing of Jews as an organised policy. Their activities sickened both Waffen-SS and regular army alike. Many of their members were recruited from occupied countries, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Latvia amongst others.

None of us had ever served in such a unit, but their methods were well known and despised by the rest of the army.

There was a visible relaxing of the tension as they realised that despite the impossible dilemma we had been in, we had not chosen to become outright murderers.

“Look, it was a good try, but I now realise that when the High Command refused any help, we were dead in the water. Maybe we shouldn’t have come, but it’s too late to worry about that now. Besides, the prisoners we released in that camp were worth the trip, as well as Helene and the villagers, so we’ve hit the Viets pretty hard. What we need to do is move away from this area. As soon as Giap is picked up, he’ll send them here to hunt for us. We’ll move south east, away from Hanoi, and cut back to the west when things have gone quiet.”

“How long do you estimate they’ll keep searching for us,” Bauer asked.

“I’d give them twelve hours maximum to locate Giap, Friedrich, and at least a couple of days before the search scales down, so we need to lay low for about three days. Let’s get going now. We’ll find somewhere to make camp and sit it out.”

“I’ll get them moving, then,” he replied.

He began giving orders, and the men picked up their weapons and packs ready to move out. Within minutes, we were once more picking our way through the jungle, but this time moving at a tangent from our original

direction to throw off the enemy.

We travelled all day, twice stopping when we heard large numbers of Viet Minh troops moving nearby. It was obvious the search was still going on, as I expected. We would need to hide deep in the jungle to stay hidden. By the evening, we'd found the perfect place. Von Kessler had stopped to relieve himself, moving off the path to spare Helene's blushes. He came back out grinning.

"Ok, you lot, I've found where can make camp. Come and take a look."

We followed him through a narrow gap between two trees, almost invisible from the path. We found ourselves in a narrow tunnel, surrounded by thick foliage. This ran for three or four metres, opening up into a natural clearing with, of all things, a small stream running along one side.

"I've checked the water, and it's fresh and clear, so no natives pissing in it upstream."

"You're right, Manfred. This will be perfect. We'll make camp here for three days, and then we can get back on our return journey to Hanoi."

I called over to Sergeant Schuster.

"Paul, take a couple of men and check the trail. Make sure that you cover our traces. It might be worth laying a false trail, about a kilometre or so past this place, in case the Viet trackers get onto us."

"I'll get right on it, Jurgen," he said, calling to Nikolai Petrov and Private Armand.

Petrov, especially, was a master of disguise; a skill he'd perfected when laying his various charges and booby traps.

The rest of us threw off our packs, put down our weapons, and gratefully filled up our water bottles from the stream. The water was delicious, cold and clear, and there was indeed no sign of any 'native piss' in it. I posted sentries on the entrance to the clearing, and their orders were simple. Keep totally silent and report any movement nearby.

Then I went to find a good spot to rest. It had been a tense, hard day's hike through the jungle, with the constant threat of Giap's men hitting us with an ambush. Several of the men were covered in sores, and others had bites. I took off my jacket and shirt. My arms were covered in red blotches and jungle sores; a result of salt in my perspiration and bites from innumerable insects. Helene came up to me.

"Jurgen, that looks bad, allow me to fix you up."

I waited gratefully while she delved into her pack and got out a tube of

salve, which she began daubing over my skin. It was cool and soothing, even more so perhaps because of the beautiful young woman who was applying it. It was a very arousing experience. If she noticed the lump in my trousers, she tactfully avoided mentioning it. Finally, she applied some bandages to the worst affected places. It felt wonderful, and I thanked her.

"You're welcome Jurgen, but I must leave you now. I need to check the other men. I'll be back when I've finished."

She moved off, and the men visibly brightened as she reached each of them and checked them over. It took her almost an hour to patch everyone up. She came back, and we shared some of the cold rations. There would be no more hot food until we got back into friendly territory. The smell of a fire would bring Viet Minh from miles around.

"Tell me, Jurgen," she said, as we sat comfortably spooning down some sort of a stew out of tin cans. "Why didn't you kill Giap?"

"I thought I made it clear. It wouldn't have helped us. The Viets would have kept looking."

"Would you have killed him, if they ordered you to?" she persisted.

"Those were my orders, in fact, to bring him back if possible, but to kill him if it wasn't."

"You disobeyed an order?" She was astonished.

"Of course. You thought I'd commit murder?"

"If you were ordered to, yes. I honestly thought you would. But I'm pleased you didn't," she added.

"It seems the reputation of the SS killers is hard to shake off," I said ruefully.

"Listen, Helene, I'm a soldier. That means I sometimes have to kill people, and usually when they are trying to kill me. Occasionally, I kill civilians when they are unfortunate enough to get caught in crossfire. But murdering a man in cold blood is not something I've ever done, nor contemplated. Oh sure, it went on in Russia. I saw it happen many times. On more than one occasion, I have made my feelings known to a senior officer. So murder, no, it's not my style."

She smiled. "I apologise. I have misjudged you."

I smiled back at her.

"In any case, killing Giap wouldn't have called off the hunt for him, would it?"

She leaned over and punched me on the arm.

“Damn you, Jurgen. Just when I think you’re a nice person, you go and ruin it. What am I to make of you?”

“Whatever you want, my dear. What would you like to make of me?”

She looked me directly in the eyes. “Is that an invitation?”

“Absolutely, Helene, an open invitation. Shall we say tonight, and you can make of me as you will.”

“Tonight, then,” she said with a serious look on her face.

“Seriously, Jurgen, this war looks as if it will drag on forever. Do you see any future for us, for you and me?”

“I would like that, Helene, yes, I think I would. We’re a long way from Hanoi. I think we have much to discuss when we get back.”

“I would like that too,” she replied.

We both sat silently, reflecting on what had just been said, and unsaid. Could I, formerly an SS officer, veteran of the Russian Front, Foreign Legion soldier and scourge of the Viet Minh, ever settle down to married life? With all the baggage that it carried with it, a home, children maybe, a regular job that didn’t mean people shooting at you, and you shooting at them? I realised then that yes, I could look forward to life with this beautiful, brave, fascinating woman. My God, how I was changing.

Helene came to me that night. I’d made my bed in the remotest part of the clearing. She said that she hoped no one would notice. I didn’t tell her that in a tight unit like this one, they noticed everything. You couldn’t even sneeze without half the men finding it amusing.

We made love, silently, passionately, and the bond between us even stronger now that we both knew this relationship planned to become permanent, if we got back to Hanoi, of course. She was naked underneath my blanket, her skin smooth and elastic. The smell of her, the musky smell of a fit young woman, and even more prominent after the hot, sweaty forced march through the jungle, was especially arousing. That evening, I knew in my mind that this was the woman for me. The one I wanted to be my mate for the rest of my life. Once again, in the morning, she was gone. We spent three days in that jungle clearing. Three glorious days in which we relaxed, recuperated and generally got ourselves back to fitness, while the Viet Minh hunt died down. Each day, there were alarms as the sentries ran into the clearing to report the approach of a group of men. We kept still and quiet while they went past. We were not using anything that they could smell, like soap, toothpaste, aftershave, any of the things that beginners to jungle

warfare gave themselves away with.

We were one with the jungle, no unfamiliar noise or smells, just an isolated universe, of no threat to the armed groups, nor them to us, as long as we remained undiscovered.

After the three days, the numbers of passing hunters had almost dropped to zero. It was time to move, and I gave the orders. We picked up our packs and weapons and left our jungle haven. We travelled, as usual, with two scouts well to the front, as well as two men in the rear to watch for any unexpected pursuit. It took us six days to get back to Hanoi, six days of hacking and slashing our way through isolated, often abandoned jungle trails.

Despite my freeing Giap, I knew he would not let up until he had exhausted every possibility to capture, and if necessary, wipe out my group; which had come so close to upsetting the communist plans in Indochina. So we carefully avoided any tracks or trails that looked well used. It was hard going, blazing trails where probably no human being had passed in several years. The paths were overgrown with bushes and vines. Often, the trails themselves became impossible to identify, and we had to navigate by compass.

But our caution paid off, and in six days, we only came close to enemy contact twice, and on both occasions we had sufficient warning from our scouts to give us time to get into cover. On the evening of the sixth day, we came out onto a French military road, and in less than an hour had hitched a lift on an empty supply lorry returning to Hanoi after supplying one of the outlying forts. Just before dark, we drove through the barracks gates. We were home.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER NINE

I reported in, found quarters for Helene and went back to my own room where I did my best to shower off the sweat and filth. I opened a bottle of Schnapps, drank a half of it and fell into bed, exhausted as the stress and tension of the mission drained out of me. I awoke suddenly to a knock on the door. Friedrich Bauer stood there.

“Its Joffre, Jurgen. He wants to speak with the Sergeants. Petrov and

Schuster are already there. We need to report as soon as possible."

"He knows, Friedrich? About Giap?"

He nodded. "The word's got around that we had Giap, and you let him go. My guess is he's not too happy."

"Ok, thanks Friedrich. I'll be there in twenty minutes. I need time for another shower."

"What will you tell him?" he asked.

"Tell Joffre? Fuck Joffre, I really don't give a damn. If he wants to murder Giap, he can go and do it himself. I'll see you there shortly," I said, dismissing him.

It was thirty minutes before I reported to Joffre, feeling belligerent and annoyed. Without doubt, he could see it in my face. I lined up with Schuster, Bauer and Petrov in front of his desk.

"Sergeant Hoffman," he greeted me. "I will ask you later for a full report on the mission. In the meantime, I am disturbed at the suggestion that you had Giap and let him go. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Colonel, that is correct."

"I see," he responded heavily. "Would you tell me why you did it?"

I explained about the impossibility of returning safely to Hanoi through enemy territory with ten divisions of Viet Minh hunting us down.

"Very well, I understand all of that. Yes, you are quite correct. We already knew that the Viets threw a ring of troops around the approaches to Hanoi. Even if you had escaped the immediate area, they would have blocked your return. I imagine you anticipated that?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied.

"And the other option?"

"You mean murder, Colonel Joffre?"

He flinched.

"This is war, Sergeant Hoffman. There is a thin line between what we are forced to do and murder."

"Colonel, if we'd killed Giap, that wouldn't have called off the Viets. They would have kept hunting us."

"Yes, of course. So that is why you released him?"

"No, Colonel. I released him because I was never an executioner for the SS, neither will I become one for the French Foreign Legion."

He paused for a moment, and his expression was angry.

"Sergeant, by letting Giap go, you have made a grave mistake. I must

report this to my superiors."

I felt my anger boil over.

"Colonel, I suggest you report it to the same superiors who were too cowardly to offer us the support we needed. If they had had the guts to send in helicopters for an air evacuation, we could have been back here a week ago, complete with Comrade Giap. As it is, I wasn't prepared to be a murderer, nor to be party to the effective murder of my men, which would have happened if we hadn't released him. Now, if you want my sergeant's stripes, you can have them. And if you want me to resign from the Legion, you can have that, too. Sir!" I shouted.

The others looked at me, astonished. I was not always the most obedient of soldiers, but I rarely lost my temper, and never with a senior officer. I saluted, turned on my heel and stormed out of the office.

An hour later the sergeants came to my room.

"Well," I asked them, "who is to take over the unit?"

"You're still in charge, Jurgen. Now that Joffre has the full facts, he can see your point of view. On top of that, the senior officer we released from the prison camp has just been on the phone, and he wants to recommend you for a medal. When he put the phone down, Helene came to the office and told him her side of the story, about the freeing of those villagers. Putting it all together, we scored pretty well, even returning without Giap. We certainly had more success against the Viets than the whole of the French Army has had in the past year," Petrov said.

"Helene? Where is she now?" I asked them.

"She's gone to report to the Medical Administrator for Indochina, the guy who runs the charity she works for. She'll be back some time this afternoon," Bauer said.

"Thanks, Friedrich. In that case, as I'm still in charge, I've got something to do. Before I let him go, Giap let slip that someone fed the Viets information about our mission."

"That would explain a lot. There were far too many Viets in the area, and many more than we expected."

"So who was it? Anyone got any ideas about who ratted us out?"

They shook their heads.

I told them of my suspicions, of my chats with the men on the way back, and especially with Manfred von Kessler.

Von Kessler had been seeing a Viet girl for some time. I'd had my

suspicions aroused when I caught her one day outside the room where we were discussing our forthcoming mission.

"It would be best to speak to Manfred," Paul Schuster said. "Thien is a sweet girl. I've met her on several occasions when she has been here with Manfred. But if there is any question about her being a spy, well…"

He tailed off. Well, indeed, if Manfred's girl was a spy, she would need to be dealt with.

"I'll go and find him now and have a chat. Friedrich, Joffre is waiting for the mission report, would you do me a favour and make a start? I have a feeling that this business with Thien won't wait."

"Ok, Jurgen, no problem."

I left the room and went to find Manfred. He was in the armoury, supervising the checking and refitting of our heavy weapons. Von Kessler was a dedicated soldier that was obvious. In this war, it paid to always be ready for the next mission, and no matter how recently the last one had finished.

"Manfred, I need a word," I greeted him.

"Jurgen, you look serious. A problem?"

"Let's go outside for a chat."

We found the canteen empty and sat down with a couple of cold beers.

"It's about Thien," I told him.

"What about her? Has she done anything wrong?"

I went over the various scraps of information we'd gathered together, the listening at doors, the hint that Giap had dropped, as well as other suspicions that had surfaced over the past few weeks.

"Taken one by one, these reports could be ignored, but together, they all point to Thien being involved with the Viets, Manfred."

He had gone red in the face. I hadn't realised how close he was to the girl.

"Jurgen, I'd stake my life on Thien being clean. Damnit, anyone could be a spy. What about Mai?"

Mai was Karl-Heinz Vogelmann's girlfriend. I had to agree that it was also possible, although less likely. She didn't hang around the barracks like Thien, and seemed less likely a candidate.

"Look, we need to get the girls in for questioning, Manfred. Just a friendly chat, no rough stuff, perhaps they are both innocent. Would you find Karl-Heinz, and both of you go and find your girlfriends and bring them back

here?"

"I'll get onto it right away. The sooner we can clear this up the better. I'll let you know when we get back with the girls."

We finished our beers, and he walked away to find Vogelmann and locate the girls. An hour later, they both came back, red-faced.

"They've gone, Jurgen."

"Gone? Both of them?"

"We checked everywhere, their homes, the bars, the usual places. Thien's mother said that she hasn't been home for two days, and Mai's parents said she hasn't been home either," von Kessler said hurriedly.

"Maybe they were both up to something, and perhaps they got word from the Viets that we might suspect them," I said.

"Or perhaps they refused to help the Viets and were kidnapped. At this stage, we don't know anything until we can locate them," Vogelmann added.

"Either way, we need to find out what has happened to them. Jurgen, we could do with some help to start searching," said von Kessler.

"Of course. It's a security matter now, not just a couple of lost girlfriends, so I'll clear it with Joffre. I think six of us should do it. Hopefully there'll be a simple explanation, and we can put this behind us," I replied.

In the event, Joffre needed no convincing.

"I'm concerned that you all need a rest after that last mission, Jurgen, but I do agree that finding out if these girls are a security leak is a priority concern."

I thanked him and left. We spent the rest of the afternoon hunting for the girls, questioning the locals and checking every known haunt where they might be holed up. We came up with nothing, and as afternoon turned into evening, found a bar that offered decent food and sat down for a meal and to discuss our strategy. The waitress brought out steaming plates of Banh Chung, sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves and stuffed with mung bean paste, lean pork and black pepper, together with fresh glasses of ice-cold beer. We were wolfing down the food, the first really good meal we'd eaten in a long time, when Petrov suddenly leapt out of his seat, picked up his MP40 submachine gun and dashed out of the restaurant. We heard the sounds of a struggle, raised voices, shouting, screams of pain, and then a massive explosion. We dived to the floor and crawled over to the window. All of us had our weapons out and ready to fire. Nikolai was standing over the prostrate form of a Viet, and nearby, the explosion had smashed apart a palm

tree, which had crashed to the ground, riddled with metal fragments. There was no obvious threat, so we cautiously left the restaurant and went over to Petrov.

"Sorry about the fuss, Jurgen. I saw this bastard," he indicated to the body of the Viet on the ground with a kick, "sneaking past with something in his hand. I thought it might be a grenade, so I rushed out and grabbed him. He'd already pulled out the pin, so I had to chuck it somewhere safe. Pity about the tree," he said ruefully.

"What about him?" I asked, nodding towards the body on the ground.

"Knocked out. I hit him pretty hard, I think," he grinned.

I turned over the body. The man was still breathing and looked to be a typical northern Viet. I guessed his age at about twenty. He was well dressed, and not one of the usual peasants who mounted isolated and sporadic attacks on us at the command of their Viet Minh slave masters. This one looked like a student, possibly from Hanoi University. He began groaning and looked up at his captors. There was strangely no fear in his eyes, just hatred, vicious and intense.

"Now, my friend, who are you?" I asked him.

He just stared, so I repeated the question. There was still no response.

"We'll take him back to the barracks. We need to question him. Maybe he can throw some light on the whereabouts of Thien and Mai."

As I said the names, I saw his eyes react. Got you, you bastard, I thought. He definitely knew something about them. We just needed to get it out of him. We tied his hands with some twine that Petrov had in his pocket and marched our captive back to barracks. When we got there, I sent for Corporal Dubois and Private Laurent, the two Arabs. They arrived within minutes. Bruno's eyes lit up when he saw the Viet trussed and ready for a 'talk'.

"Corporal, this prisoner tried to kill us with a hand grenade. I want him interrogated, especially with regards to the whereabouts of Thien and Mai, von Kessler and Vogelmann's girlfriends. They went missing a couple of days ago. I want to know why, and where they are at present. You have a free hand, so do whatever is necessary. But keep it quiet," I said, looking at him meaningfully.

"I don't want some bleeding heart in the barracks whining about torture and mistreating prisoners."

"Understood, Sergeant.  I'll make sure he's as quiet as a sleeping baby,"

Dubois grinned.

"Report to me when you have something, and remember, whatever it takes, provided it makes no noise."

Dubois left with the prisoner. We went over to the canteen, and I bought another round of beers to replace the ones we'd left in the restaurant when the grenade went off. We chatted quietly, waiting for Dubois to get results. Vogelmann and von Kessler especially were edgy. It was their girlfriends that may be in trouble. Either they were spying for the Viets, or they had been kidnapped for consorting with a French soldier. Either way, it meant trouble.

Two hours went by, and I was about to go and ask Dubois about progress when he entered the canteen. He wore a broad smile on his face.

"We have the information you wanted, Sergeant. The man's name is Trinh Van Dung, and he's a student at the University. In his spare time, he works as an agent of the local Viet Minh cadre. The attack was his own idea. Apparently, he saw you in the bar and thought it would be easy to throw the grenade and get away."

"And the girls, any information on them?" I asked.

"He knows the names. He heard the local girls are girlfriends of two of our soldiers and that one of the girls was working for the Viets. The other one found out and was going to report it to us, but the Viets got to her first."

"Does he know which was which, who was informing?"

He shook his head.

"Sorry, no. I pressed him hard, but he doesn't know. He gave me an address where we can find them, though."

He handed me a scrap of paper with a local address written on it. It was a brothel in the Ba Vi District, a good place to hide out, and also to get information on French troop movements. I knew that some of our legionnaires were occasional visitors to that brothel.

I thanked Dubois. He'd done a good job. The prisoner would be handed over now to our intelligence people, who would perhaps extract more information from him. Some of our interrogators were good and not too fussy about human rights and Geneva conventions. Others were sticklers for the rules, and unlikely to get even the time of day from an enemy prisoner. Then I headed for Joffre.

"The thing is, Sir, I believe this brothel in Ba Vi District is almost certainly a Viet Minh operation. It's a perfect cover, and they'll have the police bribed so as to keep away. They have somewhere they can lay low, get

information from our troops through the whores, and probably they'll have arms stashed there as well. I would suggest a full scale operation, clear the place out and finish off any Viets who are hiding out there."

Joffre eyed me sceptically. "And release these two girlfriends at the same time, I suppose?"

"Colonel," I replied. "One of the two is certainly a traitor, giving away information to the Viets. So yes, we'll get them out, but one of them has a lot of questions to answer. The other is undoubtedly innocent."

He thought for a moment.

"Show me on the map, Sergeant."

We went over to the large-scale map on his office wall, showing Hanoi and the surrounding districts. Ba Vi was about eight kilometres outside the town, and reached by a French made road that guaranteed plenty of trade for the brothel.

"Very well, I'll agree to it, but we don't know what we're getting into, Sergeant Hoffman. I'm sending the whole company, so call Captain Leforge, we'll need to get him briefed."

As I walked out of the office to find Leforge, he added.

"You'd better pass on my order to get the company prepared for action, and I want them ready to go by two o'clock. We'll stage the raid for the early hours of the morning."

By one, the company was assembled in full battle order on the main parade ground. We were deployed between five trucks, with Leforge and myself in a command jeep, an American made Willys. The two of us went along the line of vehicles, making last minute checks. Colonel Joffre was standing by our jeep when we finished, and he shook hands with both of us.

"Good luck, my friends. In the last couple of hours, we've been rechecking intelligence reports, and it seems that the information you got from the prisoner was the last part of a jigsaw. The brothel at Ba Vi is, without doubt, a Viet Minh operation. Your brief is to destroy it utterly, and with as many of the Viets as possible. Keep a lookout for any of our men, they may be inside," he smiled.

"As for the two women, we need them alive, one is possibly innocent, the other certainly guilty. We need to know which is which, and interrogate the guilty one." We both nodded our acknowledgment, boarded the jeep and departed, with the heavily laden lorries following. We drove towards the outskirts of the city, turned onto the Ba Vi road, and then ran headlong into a

roadblock.

Bullets began smashing into the vehicles, and there was the chatter of a heavy machine gun. The road was blocked with logs that had been dragged all the way across the road, preventing the passage of anything larger than a bicycle. Leforge was shouting orders.

“Abandon the vehicles. Take cover in the trees! Get the machine guns working, and start giving covering fire!”

We leapt out of the jeep and rolled into the side of the road, away from the muzzle flashes of the ambushers’ guns. The troops in the other vehicles did the same, and inside of a minute, our veteran legionnaires had started returning fire. The MG42s belched out their torrent of death with the familiar sound of tearing cloth, caused by the high rate of fire. The troops poured in more fire from their submachine guns and rifles, so that the enemy fire was quickly overwhelmed by our own fusillade. Although their machine gun was still firing, making movement difficult for us without being cut down by the spray of bullets. Leforge lay next to me, firing his MP40 in short bursts, and he twisted around to speak to me.

“Sergeant, we need to take out that machine gun. Any suggestions? Can you do anything?”

“Yes, Captain, I’ll get on to it.”

I crawled over to where Petrov and several of our troopers were huddled and firing aimed bursts at the areas where the enemy muzzle flashes gave away their positions.

“Nikolai, the machine gun. Can you make up a charge to throw at it? A grenade won’t be enough to penetrate their cover.”

“Sure, I’ve got something that should do the trick.”

He foraged in his backpack and came out with a charge the size of a house brick.

“This should do it. The timer is set for five seconds. Just flick the switch here,” he pointed at the trigger. “Then throw it and run. Who’s going to deliver this little present?”

“I’ll do it, Jurgen, give it to me.” It was Vogelmann.

“Quite honestly, I’ve had enough tonight. The bastards kidnapped my girlfriend, now this. It’s time to hit them back.”

Vogelmann had something of a reputation as a thrower. In the 1936 Olympics, basketball had been added for the first time. Although mostly the exclusive preserve of the Americans and Canadians, many children in Nazi

Germany were sufficiently impressed to practice hard for the time when it became a national sport. The war had stopped any chance of that, but not before Vogelmann had become a formidable competitor. I didn't doubt his ability to throw accurately.

He took the charge and crawled away. I ordered the men to increase their rate of fire to cover him, and I crawled back to Leforge.

"Any moment now," I told him.

Vogelmann stood up in a position almost on top of the Viet machine gun. He threw the charge, but as he did so, the brilliant flash of a grenade burst lit up the scene. A dozen Viets must have seen him clearly, and they quickly switched aim. With a sick feeling, I saw his body jerk as round after round from the enemy guns smashed into him, and the whole scene lit by a further grenade flash and the muzzle flashes of the gunfire. He was flung to the ground, a broken, lifeless, bloody ruin where seconds before he had been one of the finest NCOs in the Legion.

He was one of the bravest and most successful officers of the Waffen-SS Das Reich Division, with service in Russia, Italy and France. It had all ended for him here, in the damp, steaming jungles of Indochina whilst we were on a mission to attack a whorehouse. But it was no time for sentiment, and his courageous attack had silenced the Viet machine gun, leaving their ambush strategy in tatters. Captain Leforge blew his whistle, and the company rose as one man, charging the enemy positions and firing on the run.

I ran towards the most recent muzzle flash I had seen and went into the jungle. I immediately came upon a huddle of Viets, four of them, crouched behind their rifles and firing into my men. I emptied my MP40 into them, saw them all fall and never to rise again, changed clips and ran on.

All along the Viet position, our troopers were doing the same thing, a high speed rush into the enemy, submachine guns, rifles and pistols blazing their message of death. I overran another position, taking out two more Viets. All around me, I could hear the cries of agony as men were ripped to shreds by the high intensity of gunfire. The Viets stood no chance.

By our quick action, and Vogelmann's bravery, we had turned the tables, and had turned a possible defeat into victory. As the guns fell silent, we began taking a roll call of our men. It took nearly twenty minutes to get the final tally, during which sporadic shots rang out as Viet wounded were despatched. I was talking to Captain Leforge when a man rose up in front of

us and took aim with his rifle. Both Leforge and I cut him down instantly with pistol and submachine gun fire. A legionnaire came up to us.

"I have the numbers for you, Sir. We lost six dead."

Leforge was quiet for a moment. It was a heavy tally, yet inevitable in this war of phantoms and shadows when a straightforward manoeuvre could turn instantly into a vicious firefight, costing the lives of countless numbers of our men.

"Thank you, Private. What about the enemy?"

"We killed sixty-seven of them, Sir. Some got away, but probably no more than five of them, looking at the cartridge cases and other signs around where they were positioned."

"Very well."

He looked at me.

"Any ideas, Jurgen? They seemed to know we were coming, so how the hell did they manage it?"

Since I saw the roadblock, I'd thought of nothing else. I thought I had the answer.

"I think that the whole thing was a set up, I'm sorry, Captain. I suspect the Viet we caught with the hand grenade outside the bar, was meant to be caught and 'forced' to give information, sending us down this road. We just fell into it."

"And the brothel? You think it wasn't a Viet operation?"

"I suspect it was, Captain, but I very much doubt it is now. Even if they'd wiped us all out, once our people knew about it, they would have pulled out. No, they've moved somewhere else."

"Agreed, but how do we find out where that somewhere else is?"

"We need to talk to the prisoner again, Sir. At least, Corporal Dubois needs to talk to him. A very serious talk, I would suggest."

"But the prisoner has been handed over to our intelligence people, and there is no way they would hand a valuable prisoner back," Leforge mused.

"In that case, we'd better retrieve him. Might I suggest a jailbreak?"

"It may come to that, Jurgen," he smiled.

"We'll head back to barracks. It's time to hit them where it hurts. We'll get that prisoner out, never fear. You can tell your Corporal Dubois that the gloves are off. I want to know where the Viets are hiding out, and this time, we'll wipe the evil bastards off of the face of the earth!"

I smiled at the deadly intensity with which Leforge said those words. In

truth, he'd been badly shocked, one moment dashing to raid a Viet Minh stronghold, and the next returning to barracks with six of his men dead.

One of the trucks was unroadworthy, so we distributed the men and equipment amongst the remaining vehicles. Petrov set booby-trapped charges to take out a few more of the enemy when they tried to strip it. Then we boarded and left for the road back. It was a sombre journey, knowing that in the back of one of the lorries there were the bodies of six of our comrades, but it did serve to give us the determination to finish off this particular nest of Viet Minh vipers, once and for all.

We drove in silence, finally entering the barracks gate around three thirty. It was a sobering thought that less than two hours ago, we had charged out with such optimism and enthusiasm. Joffre was waiting for us just inside the gate, alerted by the heavy firing which they'd heard clearly in the barracks. Leforge ordered the driver to stop, and he got out and spoke to the Colonel. I went over to join them in time to hear Joffre speaking.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I cannot order the release into your custody of that prisoner. It is outside of my jurisdiction."

"Colonel, excuse me," I said, interrupting.

"If you would just agree to turn a blind eye, we'll take care of the rest of it ourselves."

He looked at me.

"I couldn't agree to the use of violence against our own men, Sergeant."

"Absolutely not, Sir."

"So how will you manage it, then?"

"I was thinking that the Viets might try and stage a rescue, Colonel. No violence, and there will only be one sentry on duty at the cell block at this time of night. Threaten him to hand over the keys, take out the prisoner and perhaps leave the sentry tied up."

"I'll agree, on condition that your weapons are not loaded. Captain, I would want your word on that."

"This is Sergeant Hoffmann's operation, Sir, but I will give you that assurance. No guns to be loaded," Leforge replied.

"In that case, there's nothing more to be said. Goodnight, gentlemen."

"Good night, Sir."

We exchanged salutes, and Joffre went off to his quarters.

"You'd better get on with it, Sergeant," Leforge said. "It'll be light soon, and you need to be in and out before then."

“Yes, Sir. I’ll let you know when we have the prisoner.”

I left him and went to find the men, who were unloading equipment from the lorries.

“I want von Kessler, Dubois and Laurent to report to me in the company office,” I told Friedrich Bauer.

“Send them to me on the double. Don’t unload any more from the lorries. We might be going out again tonight.”

He smiled. “What’s going on, Jurgen?”

“I’ll tell you later, Friedrich. I have a mission to plan. Get those men to me now.”

I went over to the office, found the key to the storeroom and rummaged around in there for items of Viet clothing. I heard the legionnaires enter the office and called out to them.

“You three, come in here and get dressed.”

They came into the storeroom and stopped, open-mouthed.

“Jurgen,” von Kessler said, “what the hell is going on?”

“You three are going to rescue the Viet prisoner,” I told him, “disguised as Viet Minh.”

He smiled understanding.

“I like the sound of that. You two, let’s get dressed.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were creeping along the outside wall of the cell block. The plan went without a hitch. I waited outside to cover them, while Dubois, looking like a Viet Minh guerrilla, threatened the guard and made him lay down his rifle. They took his key, unlocked Trinh’s cell and came out with the prisoner. They tied and gagged the guard and put him in the cell, locking him in. Then we left with Trinh. In the dark, he didn’t realise that his rescuers were not Viet Minh. As we left the cell block, he smiled his relief, but his face fell as he caught sight of me.

“Good evening, Comrade Trinh. I’m sorry about the inconvenience, but we haven’t yet joined the communists.”

“What do you want?” he asked, nervously.

“Just a chat, my friend, just a little chat.”

He looked around in panic as he recognised Dubois and opened his mouth to scream. The Algerian corporal clamped his hand over the man’s mouth and punched hard on the side of his head. He went down like a sack of potatoes.

“You haven’t injured him, Dubois? We need to interrogate him soon,” I

said.

"Just a tap, Sergeant. He'll be back with us in a few minutes," he smiled. "I've done this a few times, and I know exactly how hard to hit."

Ten minutes later, Trinh was in the company office, tied to a chair, and his mouth firmly gagged.

"Comrade Trinh," I said to him quietly. "Your ambush failed, you know, but I lost six men."

I saw the smile in his eyes. It was almost enough for me to want to kill him there and then. But we needed him alive.

The torture was not pretty, nor was the sight of Dubois so obviously enjoying the horrific pain that he forced the prisoner to suffer. Within a quarter of an hour, Trinh was a bloody mass of pain and blood, parts of his body literally shredded, and even his eyelids had been cut away. But he told us what we wanted to know.

Twenty minutes later, we were mounted in the lorries, most of them still bearing the scars, dents and bullet holes of their recent action, heading out to the Viet hideout. It was located in the Dong Anh district, a rural area. The Viets had taken over a Buddhist temple and used it as their headquarters. The monks had been killed, and the temple now staffed by their own people masquerading as Buddhist priests. Trinh told us that the main headquarters was in a series of tunnels built underneath the eastern side of the temple, and approached through a hidden trapdoor underneath a particularly ornate statue of Buddha.

I decided to take him with us. He couldn't be left for our intelligence people to find out what we'd done to him. He was a brave man, training to be a commissar in the new Indochina, and he'd almost died before he gave out the information. But the violence was necessary. We had to have the information. We roared out of the barrack gates; this time confident that we had a real, live target to hit.

* * * * *

# CHAPTER TEN

This time we were taking no chances. Leforge led the way as before in his Willys jeep. We'd replaced the destroyed truck and were back to our

compliment of five vehicles, each with twenty men and equipment. The US built Willys was fitted with a Browning .30 calibre medium machine gun, and the gunner hung on grimly to the mount as the jeep swerved around the corners. I rode in the lead truck, alongside the driver and machine gunner. Our trucks, American-made two and a half tonners, known as the 'deuce and a half', had a hatch over the cab with its own machine gun mount. We had mounted our MG42s, so we packed a great deal of firepower. The rear canvases were rolled halfway up so that ten men could observe each side for any signs of the enemy. If we ran into an ambush this time, we intended to meet it head on with French firepower. Or German firepower, as von Kessler jokingly reminded me on occasions.

It was true, as much of our ordnance was former Wehrmacht equipment that was confiscated when Germany surrendered in May 1945. Along with the MG42s, we carried MP40 and MP38 submachine guns as well as KAR 98 rifles. Some of our Foreign Legion units even used the Kubelwagen jeeps, a variant of the Volkswagen car, but they were not as popular as the Willys, being only two-wheel drive and less reliable than their American counterpart.

The journey to Dong Anh took us twenty-five minutes. We had already pre-planned our arrival; essentially, drive up, shoot everything that moved, and then begin to look around. It was a simple plan, but one we had used effectively many times before. The problem with this kind of war was that there was no way of knowing who was on the enemy side. A simple shopkeeper could suddenly become a Viet Minh fighter, reporting military movements to their commanders. They could pick up a rifle or submachine gun and start blazing away at our troops. The next minute, they were an 'innocent non-combatant', difficult to spot and almost impossible to eradicate.

So we found the best method was to strike like lightning before the enemy had time to pass the warning down the line. Hit them hard with everything we had before they even had time to finish a meal. It was, of course, a variant of the 'Blitzkrieg' principle we Germans had used in the Second World War.

Blitzkrieg, or lightning war, was a term that described the force concentration of tanks, infantry, artillery and air power. Concentrating overwhelming force and rapid speed to break through enemy lines, and once the latter is broken, proceeding without regard to its flank. Through constant motion, the Blitzkrieg attempts to keep its enemy off balance, making it

difficult to respond effectively at any given point before the front has already moved on.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Western journalists had adopted the term Blitzkrieg to describe this form of armoured warfare. The operations were very effective during the early Blitzkrieg campaigns of 1939 to 1941. They were dependent on surprise penetrations; like the penetration of the Ardennes forest region, general enemy unpreparedness and an inability to react swiftly enough to the attacker's offensive operations. During the Battle of France, French attempts to re-form defensive lines along rivers were constantly frustrated when our German forces arrived there first and pressed on.

The gunner tapped me on the shoulder. He also served as the radio operator.

“Message from the Captain to all vehicles, contact in five minutes.”

I acknowledged the message and signalled to the men in the back. They nodded their understanding. They had each prepared their own firing position, with boxes and kitbags piled into protective emplacements. They crouched in readiness, weapons cocked, and grenades ready for instant use. The machine gunners constantly traversed around, checking for the smallest sign that would indicate an enemy target. Von Kessler was nearest to me in the back of the lorry, and he leaned over to speak to me.

“Jurgen, I’m worried about Thien. If she’s a Viet Minh spy, then she can go to hell, but if not, I don’t want her shot out of hand,” he said.

I looked at him carefully. The worry on his face would have been amusing in any other circumstances, the happy-go-lucky von Kessler showing concern for a native girl.

“Look, Manfred, the girls will almost certainly be locked away somewhere. If one or both of them is wandering around freely, you know what that means, surely? If they’re given free run of their headquarters, it could only be because they are trusted members of the Viet Minh.”

“Yes, but..”

“No buts,” I interrupted him. “If that’s the case, they’re fair targets for our guns. If they’re locked away, they won’t get caught in any crossfire.”

“I see, yes, I suppose you’re right. Dammit, Jurgen, I’m really attached to Thien. We made plans, you know, after the war,” he replied.

I was surprised. “Plans, with a native girl? What kind of plans?”

“We wanted to get married. We’d talked about settling down here, and

perhaps buying a small plantation in the south, near Saigon, after my service was completed."

I looked at him. "Quite the romantic, Corporal? Don't worry, it may never happen. Either way, you'll know soon enough."

He looked downcast. "That's what I'm worried about, Jurgen. Just, be careful, in case it's not her."

"The men have all been briefed, Manfred, so if she's innocent, there's nothing to worry about."

I checked my watch. "About a minute to go, stand by. Tell the men to be ready." He passed the word along, but there really was little need. They were all tense, waiting for the moment when we hit the enemy HQ. There was a bend in the road about a hundred metres ahead. I saw the Willys disappear around it and heard the distinctive clattering sound of the Browning .30 calibre as it opened fire. Then we were into the bend, and almost immediately, I could see our objective. It was a Buddhist temple, sure enough, quite a small one, but still it seemed sacrilegious to pervert it to the cause of war. The area around the building was occupied by dozens of Viets, most in uniform and carrying a weapon. I cursed our intelligence people. Not only had the cheeky bastards set up an HQ this close to Hanoi, but they were using it openly, perhaps daring the French to do anything about it.

We called their dare. One by one, our trucks came into sight of the temple. The heavy machine guns opened fire, spraying thousands of rounds in a matter of less than a minute. Some of the Viets were running for cover. Others, too shocked to respond, just stood open-mouthed as our bullets took them, hurling them to the ground with the sheer weight of lead. The enemy went down as if scythed, and by the time we drew up to the temple, they were strewn all over the ground. I estimated over a hundred people dead. We dismounted from the vehicles and began deploying.

It was a good plan, decided before we had left the barracks. The machine gunners stayed in their vantage points in the trucks. The rest of us split into groups of twenty, two groups taking the front and back of the temple, two groups checked the outbuildings and surrounding area, while the fifth group, my own with von Kessler, located the statue of Buddha. It stood at the side of the temple, looking solid and heavy, immovable. No wonder our troops had never found it in one of their searches.

Thanks to Trinh, we knew that the appearance was deceptive. Von Kessler went straight to the hidden lever, moved it sideways and two of the

men pushed hard on the statue. It tilted over smoothly and lay on the ground on its side, leaving an exposed hatchway. I looked in, and there were steps leading down. I signalled for the men to follow, then started on down. Von Kessler followed behind me.

Almost immediately, we heard two voices, speaking in a fairly normal, relaxed tone of voice. It seemed that they were unaware of the attack above ground. Obviously, sound did not penetrate this subterranean complex.

Corporal Dubois and Private Laurent, our experts with knives, were behind us. I whispered for them to come forward, and sent them to deal with the owners of the voices. If we could eliminate them silently, we would have a good chance of overrunning the underground HQ before they had time to destroy their papers and maps, and make a getaway. It was inevitable that they would have more than one escape hatch from this place. The two Arabs slipped forward, and there was the sound of a muffled cry, then silence. Dubois came back.

"Both dealt with, Sergeant."

"Well done, Dubois."

I carried on down the stairway and around the corner into the softly lit gloom of the main passage. Laurent was dragging the second of the dead Viets into an opened out space at the side of the tunnel. It was probably used for storage. We were using it for storage too, but perhaps of a different kind than its original constructors envisaged. I took the lead again, and we pushed on down the tunnel. The rest of the men were close behind.

We came across another open doorway in the side of the tunnel. Peering around the gap, I could see it was an armoury; rack upon rack of rifles and submachine guns. I recognised several of the weapons we used, MP40s, Kar 98s, and there were Russian made DP28 light machine guns. I even noticed what looked like a British Vickers Machine gun. Two Viets were busy at a bench. One was filing away at a piece of metal held in a vice, and the other was stripping a Kar 98, wiping it with an oily rag. I nodded at Dubois and Laurent and held up two fingers, two men to be exterminated. The Arabs edged forward and stepped quietly into the underground chamber, knives drawn. Both had almost reached their targets, slipping forward in a long, fluid movement, before the Viets even noticed them. I watched them operate; gracefully swaying forward with their knives held low at their sides, almost as if they were performing a ritual dance. The grace of the movements concealed the speed of their approach. Before the enemy even thought to

respond, they were collapsing with their throats slit from side to side, blood gushing onto the armoury floor.

I sent one of the men with a message to bring Petrov here. There was only one way to deal with this huge amount of ordnance; which was with his unique brand of explosives. Then we moved on, and we came to a side room lined with bunk beds. It was a huge space. There must have been as many as thirty double bunk beds in there, all occupied, sixty of the enemy in all.

Manfred and I covered the further reaches of the tunnel while the rest of the men went quietly in, their knives and sharpened bayonets drawn. The blades rose and fell. There was the occasional grunt, a muffled cry, or a sigh. It was surreal; a shadow dance of death played out in this gloomy cavern concealed beneath the jungles of Indochina. The men filed out, their grisly work done, and we moved on. We were nearly at the end of the tunnel, and just ahead we could see it opened out into a room that was brightly lit. We could hear voices. It was a miracle we had got so far undetected, but now it was time for a direct assault before the rats began to leave their lair. I checked behind me, and the men were all ready. I led them forward in a rush, and we surged into the main room.

It was a more spacious than we had imagined, and about ten metres square. There were three doors, all closed. I signalled some of the men to go and cover them. Then I returned my attention to the occupants of the room. There were ten of them, Viets, and all uniformed except for one, who was clearly the leader. He recovered first from the shock and looked at me with ice in his stare. Some of the others started to grab for weapons, but at a word from him, they stopped and held up their hands. Except one, a young lieutenant, grabbed for his holstered pistol. Before he could even remove it from the holster several shots rang out, and he fell down, his body split open with the force of the bullets. The sound of the shots was massive in the enclosed space, and our ears rang for several minutes afterwards. Then it all went quite again.

I gave orders for the men to secure the prisoners, and they were quickly tied with strong twine we carried with this for the purpose. The table in the middle of the room was covered in papers and maps, and there was one chair nearby. I ordered one of the men to gather up the papers, and I sat down, pointing at the man in civilian clothes.

“You, what is your name, comrade?”

He walked calmly over to me, his eyes watchful, but there was no fear

displayed there. Even tied, it was obvious he was searching for any way to turn events to his advantage.

"I am Trinh Ca Tam, Sergeant. I see you are Foreign Legion, from the local barracks in Hanoi, no doubt?"

The bastard was even fishing for information as he answered me. I ignored him.

"You are the Commissar of this outfit, I assume, Comrade Trinh?"

He inclined his head gravely.

"I see. Trinh, any relation to Trinh Van Dung?"

He stood silently, but I could see his eyes change slightly at the mention of the name.

"Or should I say, the unfortunate Trinh Van Dung?"

That got to him. "You have killed Dung?"

I smiled. "Who are you, his father, uncle, some other relation? No matter. We're looking for two women, Thien and Mai, are you holding them here?"

Again, Trinh gave no answer, but his eyes gave him away as they glanced in the direction of one of the doors.

"Manfred, check that door, and be careful. See if the girls are inside, but remember, one of them is a traitor. Get some of the men to check inside the other doors. There may be other enemy troops that we haven't accounted for."

Two men took each of the doorways, covering each other as they opened them and leapt though. One was a storeroom, filled with foodstuffs, clothing and ammunition. In the corner there was a simple hand operated printing press, a duplicator. I had seen the leaflets and newspapers that they produced on these primitive devices, and they were excellent propaganda tools for the Viet Minh. It would be good to put this one out of use. Another doorway led to a narrow tunnel. The troopers reported back that it led to the surface. Good, that was their escape route uncovered.

Von Kessler rattled on the handle of the last doorway. It was locked.

"The key, Comrade Trinh," I said to the Commissar. He ignored me.

"Corporal Dubois, kill the man standing next to the Commissar."

Dubois looked at me, surprised, then shrugged his shoulders, drew his knife and walked across to the man standing next to Trinh. A quick slash and the man lay dying on the ground, his blood leaving him as the spark of life departed from his body.

“The key, Comrade Trinh,” I said again to the Commissar.

“I can keep this up until they’re all dead, and then we’ll start on you.”

He silently glanced down at the left hand pocket of his jacket. I reached in, found the key and gave it to Manfred. He opened the door cautiously, and with a cry, rushed forward. It was a radio room, clearly serving as a holding cell as well.

Thien was lying on the floor, unconscious. Mai was sat next to her on the ground, her hands tied in front of her. Von Kessler rushed in and untied Mai, who painfully got to her feet. He called for a medic, picked Thien up and carried her into the main room, putting her gently on the table. The medic began checking out her wounds. She was covered in bruises and looked as if she has been systematically tortured for some time.

I looked around the room for several minutes, noting that the radio was fairly modern and powerful with an aerial cable that led out of the room. Presumably, it was rigged in a tree somewhere up on the surface. Then I drew my pistol. A few minutes later, I went back into the main room.

“Does that answer any questions about them?” Manfred asked me angrily.

“Look at the state of them. There’s no way they are traitors. They’ve been badly abused.”

“It does look that way,” I said to him.

“Jurgen, thank God you got here,” Mai said suddenly. She was massaging her arms where they had been bound.

“What happened, Mai?” I asked her.

“They came to a bar where Thien and I were having a drink. We were just sitting there chatting when the Viet Minh, eight of them, burst into the bar and kidnapped us. They brought us here to question us about the Foreign Legion, and then they planned to kill us for being collaborators.”

“It looks as if Thien has had a bad time of it. Why did they treat her so badly, and not you?”

I looked at her eyes. Was that evasion I could see in there, or just fear after spending so much time waiting for torture and execution in this Viet Minh dungeon?

She shook her head. “I honestly don’t know. I think that I would have been next, I suppose.”

“You’d better take it easy for a bit,” I said to her, indicating the chair.

“Just sit down while we have a little chat with Comrade Trinh. We’re

clearing out anything of value while we're waiting for Sergeant Petrov to arrive with his demolition charges, and then we can see about getting you home."

She sat down, near to Trinh.

"Thank you, Jurgen, you're very kind."

"Now, Trinh, how many underground bases do you have in the Hanoi area?"

He smiled and said nothing. I showed him my pistol.

"Comrade, I really don't have time for this," I shouted at him. I slashed the barrel of my gun across his face, drawing blood.

"I need information, Trinh, so how many bases around Hanoi? Do you want me to introduce you to Corporal Dubois? Dubois, show this swine your knife."

The Arab produced his knife and flourished it at the Commissar, smiling.

"He'll take your ears off, then your toes, your fingers. He'll cut you into tiny pieces, and you'll still be alive to feel it all happening, Trinh. Now talk!"

Trinh just stared back at me, silent. I slammed the gun down on the table, grabbing him by the lapels, and head butting him in the face. More blood streamed out of his smashed and broken lips, and several teeth had fallen out to the floor. I punched him in the face, the stomach, kneed him in the balls, and then gave him several more good uppercuts to the face. He grunted with the pain and almost fell, but two of my men held him on his feet. Von Kessler looked at me quizzically. I didn't normally beat up bound prisoners, wondering what was so important about getting this information out of Trinh now. I hoped it would be worth it.

I slammed my fist into Trinh's stomach again and two more blows to his face. His appearance was ghastly, covered in blood, both eyes closed, and his skin beginning to go dark where my blows had landed.

"Talk to me, you bastard!" I shouted. "I want a number. How many bases are there?"

Then I felt an arm around my neck, and the unmistakable pressure of a gun barrel against the small of my back.

"Stop, Sergeant, leave him alone. You men, get back, or I'll kill him!"

It was Mai. She had grabbed my pistol from the table and had manoeuvred me around so that I was between her and my men.

"Manfred, untie the Commissar, now, or Jurgen will be killed."

He looked desperately at me.

“Don’t do it, Manfred. Mai, why are you doing this? Was it all a sham, you and Karl-Heinz Vogelmann?”

She laughed.

“Vogelmann? He was just another French killer, sent here to enslave the Viet people. Sure, I slept with him, but inside he made me sick. I was always waiting for the time when we could kill him and all of the French colonialists like him. Manfred, untie Commissar Trinh now, or Jurgen gets it. Hurry!”

“What do I do, Jurgen?” Manfred asked, despair in his voice.

“You do nothing,” I told him.

“So Mai, you have always been Viet Minh. What about Thien?”

“Her?” she laughed again. “A French whore, that’s all, the stupid cow. I used to pump her about the Legion’s operations on the pretext of concern about Karl-Heinz. She never even realised, but she soon will when she gets what’s coming to all collaborators, a bullet in the back of the neck. This is the last time, Manfred. Untie the Commissar, or Jurgen dies. Jurgen, order him to untie comrade Trinh, immediately!”

“Go fuck yourself, Mai,” I replied calmly.

“Very well, Jurgen, we will all die here together.”

She pulled the trigger. There was a loud click, then another, and another. I turned around and gently took the pistol from her hands. She was too shocked to resist.

“What happened?” she whispered.

“While I was in the radio room, I took the bullets out of my gun. I suspected something was badly wrong. Why would the Viets leave two prisoners alone in a room where they could damage a valuable radio transmitter? It was obvious to me that one of you was with the Viets, and the only question was, which one? You have helped me immensely, Mai, thank you.”

“You bloody Nazi bastard, you, you…” she started beating me with her fists.

“Corporal Dubois,” I called, “take her back into the radio room, and make sure she never betrays us ever again.”

“No, no!” she screamed. “Jurgen, please no, don’t let him kill me!”

I nodded to Dubois. “Make it quick.”

He put a meaty hand over her mouth to silence the screams as he dragged her into the radio room. He kicked the door shut, and we waited in

silence. After less than a minute, he came back out and looked at me meaningfully.

"So you're going to kill us all?" Trinh asked me. His eyes blazed with hate, but still no fear was apparent on his bloody and bruised face.

"We're taking you back, Trinh, you and your men. Our intelligence people will be happy to chat with you."

Just then, Petrov arrived.

"You need a big bang, Jurgen?"

"Big as you can make it, Nikolai. Men, start moving these prisoners away. We'll take them back to Hanoi. Watch they don't try any funny business. Two of you carry Thien out, and be careful, she's had a hard time. I smiled as Manfred carefully supervised the stretcher party with his girlfriend. We made our way to the surface, leaving Petrov to set his charges.

Outside we met one of our men.

"Did you find Mai as well?" he asked.

I looked at him stone faced. "She's dead."

I told him what happened.

"There was no doubt then, she was working for the enemy?"

"No doubt at all."

"Fucking Viets," he spat out.

He gave me a scathing look and stalked off to help supervise loading the prisoners on the lorries. With the survivors on the surface, we had twenty-three in all. We were going to be packed in, but our masters in Hanoi would be delighted at the haul. A major Viet Minh base operating under our noses completely destroyed and a bunch of prisoners, including at least one high-ranking Commissar, to be interrogated.

Their information would be priceless, providing the right people handled the interrogation. People who would value the lives of thousands of French soldiers higher than their repugnance at having to beat up a few Viet Minh, to prise out the information they needed to save the lives of those French soldiers.

"The Captain says we're ready to move out," Sergeant Bauer came to inform me.

"Leforge is deliriously happy with the success of the operation. I think he wants some kind of a triumphal entry into the Hanoi barracks, hail the conquering hero." he grinned.

"I don't think Karl-Heinz would have been impressed, Friedrich. Does

Leforge know the full story about Mai?"

His expression changed. "I see what you mean. I'll go and tell him."

We finished off loading our truck, drove a short distance and stopped. Petrov dismounted and walked back to observe the former Buddhist temple. There was not long to wait before the shattering roar as the underground structure exploded, hurling smoke and flames high into the sky. The temple shook and it literally imploded on itself, falling into the ground and utterly obliterating the Viet Minh tunnel complex.

There was a loud cheer from the men. The distasteful business about Mai aside, it was a great success, and a mission to be proud of. An hour later, we were sitting in Colonel Joffre's office, where he had opened a bottle of Cognac.

"It's not just good, men, it's unbelievable. We've been under a lot of pressure to get results, especially against the local insurgents. This will certainly give them something to think about."

"Do you mean the Viet Minh, Sir, or our High Command?"

Joffre laughed. "Good point, Sergeant Hoffman, truly a good point. I would say both, wouldn't you?"

He raised his glass. "Damnation to the Viet Minh, gentlemen."

"And to the High Command," I added.

We touched glasses. Damnation indeed, to all of them. I had another drink and then made an excuse to leave. I went to the infirmary and found Manfred sat at the side of Thien's bed. She was awake.

"This is progress, Manfred. She looks much better."

Thien looked up at me.

"Thank you, Jurgen, for all you have done. They would have killed me, you know."

"But they didn't, Thien, so you can put that behind you."

I bid them goodnight and went back to my quarters. I stripped off, took a shower and lay on my bed, nursing a bottle of Scotch whisky that I kept for these occasions. I lit a cigarette and lay there smoking, thinking about all that had happened. Was I wrong to let Giap go?

On reflection, I would have done the same thing again. These people were beasts, animals, and not fit to inhabit the world of men. To slaughter men indiscriminately, as they did, would reduce me to their level. Certainly, I had killed other men, probably hundreds of them, directly or indirectly. But there has to be a sound reason, other than pure sadism or following orders;

the excuse that our concentration camp guards and Einsatzgruppen gave for murdering countless numbers of Jews and Gypsies. There has to be a moral imperative, otherwise I might just as well put a gun to my head and shoot myself.

I lay there drinking and lighting one cigarette after the other. Then there was a soft knock at the door.

"Enter," I called.

The door opened. It was Helene. I saw a smile on her face, looked down and realised I was still naked.

"Damn, I'll find something to put on, Helene."

"No, I like you just as you are, Jurgen. Stay right there."

She turned the key in the door and came to me. She bent down and kissed me long and passionately. Then she stood up and began to undress.

"You're not too tired, my brave Sergeant?" she asked, amusement in her voice.

"Try me and see, Helene. You can be the judge."

"Certainly, Sergeant, I will obey your order."

She laughed out loud and pulled off the last of her underwear. Then she came to me, and our bodies melted together.

I felt the tension, the wretchedness of the whole Indochina war slowly seep out of me as we made slow, sensuous love. Afterwards, we both lit cigarettes.

"Have you thought any more, Helene," I asked her, "about the future for us?"

She looked up at me.

"Not really, my darling. I want us to always be together, but marriage?" She shook her head.

"I will be yours forever, Jurgen. But I will not marry you while you're fighting this war. Ask me when it's over, or you have left the Legion. For now, let's just enjoy what we have, each and every day."

Two weeks after the mission, I received a long letter. I was sitting in a bar with Friedrich and Nikolai Petrov when a young Viet came in, carrying a package. We were immediately wary, and our hands dropped to our guns, but we relaxed when he asked for Sergeant Hoffmann. He handed me the package, which contained a letter, and disappeared out of the door. I looked at the package.

"It's too thin to be a bomb," I remarked.

“For God’s sake, Jurgen, open it. It’s just a letter,” said Nikolai.

I opened the package and read the letter. It was from Vo Nguyen Giap. The letter was simple, a message from one soldier to another. He thanked me for sparing his life. The letter was quite simply to repeat his offer of a job, on his staff.

“I say, honestly, Sergeant Hoffmann, that you are one of the most resourceful soldiers I have ever encountered. If you will join me, and my struggle for freedom for the peoples of Indochina, I can offer you the immediate rank of Senior Colonel, with enhanced pay of $750 per month. You would be able to bring Miss Baptiste with you, and we can give you a substantial villa for both of you to live in. In the event that Miss Baptiste accepts your proposal of marriage, you would find a good career and a prosperous and happy life working for the next People’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam.”

How the hell did the cunning sod know so much about my personal life? I wondered. The letter went on.

“Should you decline my offer, and I do understand the loyalties you have expressed to me, the same sum of money will be placed as a bounty on your head. You are a soldier, and you know the rules of the game. I would prefer you to fight on my side, but if not, I will do my utmost to have you killed. Think carefully, Sergeant Hoffmann. You know that the French occupation is doomed. It would be better to avoid being on the losing side for the second time in your life. You will be contacted during the next four weeks for a reply. Giap.”

I showed the letter to the others. They laughed. “Better take it to Colonel Joffre, Jurgen, and tell him you want a rise, or else,” Friedrich said.

“Or they’ll put a bullet in your head to prevent you joining the enemy,” Nikolai warned.

There was a candle burning on our table. I used it to set fire to the letter and burnt it in the ashtray. For a brief moment, I thought about it. Colonel Hoffman, aide to Vo Nguyen Giap, second in command to Ho Chi Minh; and the Colonel’s lady, Helene. It was some fantasy. I must have been dreaming, because I suddenly heard Friedrich shouting.

“Jurgen, what happened? You went into a trance. Thinking about all that money?”

I shook my head.

“Sorry Friedrich, what did you say?”

“I asked you about Giap’s comment, that we would lose the war,” he said, puzzlement in his voice.

“Do you remember Russia, the communists, and the way they fought, with no regard for human life? The sheer numbers of them, we could kill a thousand, and ten thousand would come to take their place. Do you remember all of that?”

“Yes, of course I do,” he replied.

“So what’s different here, the fight against the Viet Minh?”

He thought for fully a minute. Then he replied.

“Nothing.”

THE END

# DEVIL'S GUARD VIETNAM

By Eric Meyer

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# DEVIL'S GUARD VIETNAM

## Foreword

Vietnam – a name that conjures up so many things to so many people. To the Americans, it was a horrific war that saw a great many of their people dead and wounded, brave soldiers whose lives sometimes seemed to be callously thrown away for little or no gain, their incredible courage sacrificed in the name of political expediency. To the world at large it was perhaps the first war of truly modern technology, from the weapons used to fight it, the complex fighter and bomber aircraft used to wage war on the communists to the broadcast media that brought it to our television screens as it happened. And to the Vietnamese people, a war of liberation or a war of enslavement, depending on your fate after the last bullet had been fired in 1975.

Yet this is not a story of nations, it is a story about one man, a personal story of a man who hacked his way through the slaughter of the Eastern Front during World War II, through the jungles of Indochina during the first French Indochina war, only to be sucked into the killing machine again when he thought his fighting days were over. As in my previous book Devil's Guard – The Real Story, some might ask the question 'did this really happen?' The answer would have to be yes and no, unfortunately. The main characters certainly existed, although some of the names have been changed to protect their identities. I have told Hoffman's story as it was given to me, with certain alterations and a few literary enhancements to make it read more fluently.

Yet essentially most of the events in the story did happen, as they are described. After the end of the French Indochina war many civilians and combatants stayed on in the Republic of South Vietnam. Some did get caught up in the American war, having so much local knowledge to offer of both North and South Vietnam. And the American approach to war is just as depicted, the bravery of the soldiers on the ground often merely a tool to be used in the name of Realpolitik and government expediency, whether for the benefit of the US, the Republic of South Vietnam, The People's Republic of North Vietnam, the Soviet Union or China.

That the French government welcomed former SS veterans of the Eastern Front to the ranks of the Foreign Legion is a matter of public record,

at least until 1947. So is the nickname 'Devil's Guard', as it was applied to the Foreign Legion Units that some of these men fought in, although contrary to popular belief, there never were Foreign Legion units comprised only of former SS and German soldiers. All foreign legion units were a mix of nationalities, without exception, led by French officers. The records of French nationals who stayed on in Vietnam are fragmented at best. Hoffman was one of those who did stay behind and make his home there and common sense dictates that anyone who had fought and survived the bitter savagery of the Eastern Front and the endless jungle warfare in Indochina would quickly find their fighting knowledge of the communist enemy becoming highly valued by the new arrivals, the Americans.

How much of this story is true and how much exaggerated will never be known. What is known is that it all happened, almost every bomb, every bullet, every death, and every deceit. What is also known is the indisputable bravery of those soldiers of all sides who fought in the Vietnam War. The world will never be the same again after their sacrifice.

Eric Meyer

* * * * *

# Introduction

It was a long journey from the hell of the Russian Front during World War II, through the jungles of Indochina fighting for the Foreign Legion to the modern reality of the Vietnam War. Yet it was a journey that Jurgen Hoffman had survived. With his beautiful wife Helene and his partner, former SS-Totenkopf Sturmbannfuhrer Paul Schuster, they set up a ramshackle civilian airline to serve the fledgling Republic of South Vietnam.

The arrival of the Americans and the inevitable escalation of the war as the communists infiltrated more and more fighters into the South meant that they would not be left in peace. The services of the two men, experienced, skilful and brutal fighters in every theatre of warfare are increasingly called upon by the American military. Once more their SS training and toughness is needed to survive the risky charter contracts they are forced to accept by the American military and their shadowy counterparts, the CIA.

An innocent charter to carry two Americans to Hue develops into a full blown clandestine rescue mission into the North. A combination of bureaucratic stupidity and CIA treachery results in a debacle that can only be unravelled by once more unleashing the vicious, cold killing skills of the SS. Even in peace, the Devil's Guard are once more at war. This is their story.

* * * * *

# Chapter One

*'The confidence of the Kennedy team prevailed through the early months of 1963, even after South Vietnamese Army units, supported by US helicopters, had failed to destroy a far smaller Viet Cong force in the ARVN's first pitched battle, at Ap Bac.'*

*CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers*

We were in serious trouble even before our wheels left the runway. Heavily loaded with a mixed cargo of military equipment and various boxes and crates we were transporting for a civilian contractor, we had only just begun our take-off roll when the starboard engine started to misfire. Normally I would just abort the take-off and taxi back to the terminal so that we could take the time to remedy the problem. Paul had already reached forward to cut power, anticipating my command, when the first mortar shell hit the tarmac yards away, showering us with debris and shell fragments. We both looked out of the windows but there was nothing else to see, no sign of any attacking force.

"Do we abort or go?" Paul asked.

Calm as ever, it was as if he was asking me the time of day. Schuster was a veteran of the French Indochina War and before that the Eastern Front during World War Two, an officer in the Waffen-SS. A survivor.

It was my decision as pilot in charge, and a tricky one at that. We could abort and become sitting targets for another mortar strike, or we could continue and find ourselves having to crash land the aircraft with a faulty engine. We were approaching take off speed and I had only seconds to decide. In the event, the decision was taken from us, two more mortar shells hit the runway one hundred yards ahead of us and we had to swerve away to

avoid our wheels falling into the shell holes or the tyres being shredded by debris.

"Reduce power to both engines," I ordered as I wrestled to hold the aircraft straight, bumping as we hit the first of the debris from the two explosions. "We'll go around again, I want to get out of here, this could be the start of a major attack."

I threaded the C-47 carefully around the fragments and shell holes and cut across the grass to the taxiway, heading back for our take off point. Another explosion hit the runway and then two more shells fell directly on a fuel dump, causing a vast pillar of smoke and flame to jet up into the sky. Behind the roiling black smoke I could see armed men rushing through a gap in the perimeter wire, Viet Cong, brightly illuminated by the burning fuel. We both worked calmly to keep the aircraft headed towards the end of the runway, we'd both been under fire enough times to ignore any threat that wasn't immediate and concentrate on getting out of trouble. We were taxiing at high speed, a hazardous activity on the bumpy taxiway, but the alternative was even more hazardous. Eventually we arrived back at our start point and I put on the brakes. Paul got out his binoculars and scanned the runway ahead of us.

"There's debris scattered halfway along the tarmac, it covers the whole width of the runway, we can't avoid it. We'll shred our tyres if we try and go over it."

"Could you clear it by hand?" I asked him.

As I said it, another mortar shell struck the grass strip, hurling up earth mixed in with a hail of metal fragments.

He looked thoughtful. "It'll only take a few minutes, but I'll be out there without any cover."

"It's the only way, Paul. I'll taxi up there and try to take the Viets' minds off you while you're doing it."

He nodded and I opened the throttles, released the brakes and began taxiing towards the debris. Then I swung the aircraft off the tarmac onto the grass strip, if any mortar shells landed the soft earth would absorb the worst of the blast and resultant shrapnel. I slowed to let him jump down to the tarmac, and then I opened the throttles and headed towards the Viet Cong, who by now were moving steadily across the airfield, putting the aircraft between them and Paul.

They'd lost interest in us for a few moments but when they heard and

then saw the aircraft taxiing towards them at speed they transferred their fire towards us. I felt the impact of bullets striking the fuselage, ducked as a round went straight through the windscreen leaving it shattered, a gaping hole in the front of the cockpit. Then I swung the aircraft right around and began heading back, there was no percentage in being killed by charging them head on with an unarmed plane. Paul had finished clearing the debris and I slowed to let him jump aboard, then throttled up to once again head back to our start position at the end of the tarmac. He came into the cockpit and sat down.

"Verdammt, Jurgen, I thought you were doing the Charge of the Light Brigade there," he laughed.

"That's a thought," I grunted as I swung off the grass and onto the runway, then turned a full circle to get ready to take off. We looked at each other. Paul grinned. "Let's go for it, Jurgen. We need to get out of here fast."

I throttled up both engines to full, let off the brakes and we surged forward. A volley of machine gun fire ripped over the roof of the cabin, I stared ahead and could make out the shape of a medium machine gun manned by two men, set up on the side of the runway. Their intention was obvious, to destroy our aircraft. I turned to Schuster. "The M2s in the locker on the bulkhead, they're loaded and ready to fire. They've thoughtfully provided us with a firing port, perhaps now would be a good time to use one of them."

"Good idea, at least I can try to spoil their aim."

I hoped he'd do more than that. Paul Schuster was a veteran of the Russian Front and the French Indochina War here in Vietnam. Even now he was as muscular, tough and hard as I could ever remember him, almost six feet tall with cropped blonde hair and piercing clear blue eyes that were as sharp as the day his unit crossed the border into Poland.

He'd survived innumerable firefights and one of the skills that had helped him survive was the ability to shoot accurately, especially when under enemy fire. He got up, took down the rifle and expertly checked the clip. He quickly grabbed three spare clips that were in a bag hanging next to the gun, and then pushed it through the cockpit window. We were getting near the Viet machine gun position and a burst of fire hit us, this time going low, I guessed they were aiming for the tyres but instead they hit the belly of the aircraft. God only knew what damage they were doing but if we survived this there'd be plenty of time to repair it.

We were still seconds away from reaching take off speed, Paul still hadn't fired and I could clearly see the faces of the machine gunners. Again the starboard engine faltered, I leaned forward to work the throttle to try and encourage the engine to run smoothly again and steered to port to correct the swing as the port engine tried to push us off the tarmac, at the same time another burst of fire hit the aircraft. This time their aim was slightly better, a burst hit the cockpit, putting holes in the metal skin and punching through into the cabin behind. Their aim was getting better as we got nearer, I didn't think we'd survive another one. Then the starboard engine picked up and I corrected our course once again. Paul still hadn't fired and I called out to him, "What's going on out there?"

"Two seconds, Jurgen, I'm almost on them."

I held us on course and kept my eye on our speed, and then three things happened at once. His M2 fired, a long burst that emptied the clip, the two machine gunners were flung to the ground as the hail of fire smashed into them and I reached take-off speed, hauled on the column and we were airborne. We were heavily loaded and I retracted the wheels immediately and kept the aircraft in a long, slow ascent, refusing to sacrifice speed for height. We barely cleared the trees as we flew over the jungle a half mile from the airport, but it was the only way. Too steep a take-off meant we would have been a high, slow moving target, a sitting duck for any enemy guns that decided to take an interest in us. But no more enemy fire hit us and we were airborne.

Paul removed his assault rifle from the window and went aft to find something to block the shattered window. Once we reached cruising altitude it would be a problem with the icy slipstream blasting into the cockpit. He came back with an old army blanket and stuffed it in the hole, the airflow hitting us from the outside stopped and he sat down in the co-pilot's seat.

"Good shooting," I smiled at him.

"Good enough," he grunted. "I thought I'd really have time for just one clip so I had to be sure. There wouldn't have been enough time reload, it all happened so fast. If I'd needed to change clips it may have been a different story."

He looked across at the top of my seat and his eyes widened. "Jurgen, that last burst, did you lean forward as they fired?"

I said I had.

"Behind your head there's a bullet hole right through the seat, exactly

where your head is."

"I had to adjust the starboard engine, it was faltering again."

"It's just as well."

I felt an icy sensation in my stomach. How many times in my turbulent life across the world's battlefields had I come that close to death? More than a few.

"Paul, when we get back to Tan Son Nhat don't tell my wife it was that hairy, will you."

He grinned. "You're more afraid of her than the Viet Cong."

"Too right."

We flew steadily south, the starboard engine didn't give any more trouble, I tuned the radio into AFN, the American Forces Network station playing The Locomotion, sung by an American known as Little Eva. Not quite the cultured classical pieces I remembered from the many fine orchestras of my homeland, at least when I was last there more than twenty years ago. But this music was modern, young and alive, a world away from the doom laden arias of Hitler's favourite, Richard Wagner. It was the music of optimism, besides, Adolf was dead, Wagner was dead and Little Eva was alive and singing her songs. Several hours later we were approaching our home airport. When I called for landing clearance the familiar voice of Nguyen Cam Le, the air traffic controller at Tan Son Nhat sounded in my headphones.

"SGN-SS1 this is Tan Son Nhat, you're cleared for immediate landing, winds south easterly, speed ten knots and the sun is shining as usual on our beautiful city."

I smiled at his cheery voice. "Thank you Le, I'll buy you a beer when I see you."

"You always say that, Herr Hoffman, I calculate you owe me at least twenty by now."

"I'll pay you when the war's over, Le."

"You mean after we're all dead?" he chuckled. "Tan Son Nhat out."

It was good to hear the familiar joking voice of the friendly Vietnamese in the control tower. We went straight down onto the tarmac and taxied over to our hangar where we supervised the unloading of our cargo. I left Paul to talk to our ground engineer Johann Drexler, another Waffen-SS and French Foreign Legion veteran, about repairing the damage to the C-47. Feeling battered and exhausted, as if I'd used up one of the few remaining lives left to

me, I went home.

My bungalow lay just outside the perimeter of Tan Son Nhat Airfield, its surface pockmarked with the patches that covered the shell holes from the mortar rounds that struck regularly. I often wondered if we should move further away from the danger zone, but our home was convenient to our hangar. Besides, was anywhere really safe here in Vietnam? I smiled as the tempting fragrances of Helene's French cooking came out to meet me. In this ramshackle, broken, crazy dumpster of a country of Vietnam that we called home, I sometimes thought that without her none of it would be worth it. She rushed out to hug me, as passionate now as the day when we first decided that we were made for each other, flung together in a dank, jungle clearing whilst fleeing an avenging horde of Viet Minh savages. She was just as beautiful as she was then, more than ten years had passed but not one day slipped by without me counting my blessings for having met this girl. I hugged her to me and felt myself becoming erect, she could drive a man wild almost with a look, even now when she was in her mid-thirties. She felt me against her body and smiled.

"No, Jurgen, down boy, you're a typical soldier, back from a mission there's always one thing on your mind. Dinner first, my love, get yourself washed."

Despite Helene's charms, I felt distracted, we'd been having a few problems with the starboard engine on our C-47, the aircraft that was our main source of revenue. If the engine had failed completely on the last run we could have lost the aircraft to enemy action.

The Douglas C-47 Skytrain, also known as the Dakota, was built as a military transport aircraft developed from the DC-3 airliner. It had a reinforced fuselage floor and the addition of a large cargo door to allow for the loading and transport of quantities of military supplies. Used extensively by the Allies during World War II it had remained in front line operations through the 1950s. The Skytrain was at one time the standard transport aircraft of the US Army. Since they began to replace them with other, larger transport aircraft, many of them appeared on the surplus market, where we had picked up our own aircraft at a knock-down price.

The phone rang and I held Helene to me while I answered it. It was Drexler, he'd already taken a preliminary look at the starboard Wright Cyclone GR-1820 engine and suspected a faulty centrifugal supercharger. Paul Schuster was on his way into Saigon to buy a replacement unit that

Johann understood from his contacts could be found in an engineer's shop in the city. Probably stolen from the US military, I reflected, but that wasn't my problem. I turned my attention back to Helene, kissed her again and detached myself to take a shower. Newly changed into clean cotton trousers and bush shirt, I went to check out my dinner, but in the lounge two guys were sitting waiting, sipping cold drinks, I hadn't heard them come in.

"Jurgen, these two gentlemen have called to see you, I'll leave you to it."

I nodded my thanks, she was a soldier's woman, and knew when my clients would require privacy. I looked at them, they were as different from each other as chalk from cheese, a soldier with the insignia of a lieutenant colonel and a civilian. The civilian's clothes gave away his occupation as much as the soldier's uniform gave away his own. The colonel was sitting almost to attention, alert and as ramrod straight as it was possible to be on our old couch. His name badge said Goldberg and I guessed his age at about forty. He could only be Special Forces, the unique units that the Americans had formed to come and train their South Vietnamese allies, and a glance at the green beret he was holding under his arm confirmed it.

Disliked by the army brass, the green beret had been adopted from the style worn by the British Special Forces group, the Royal Marine Commandos. The military hierarchy had initially banned its use, but on visiting Fort Bragg, President Kennedy asked General Yarborough to encourage all of the Special Forces to wear their green berets to attend the event. Kennedy delivered a speech whereby he made the green beret "a mark of distinction in the trying times ahead".

I had no doubt that Goldberg had earned his own 'mark of distinction'. He looked fit and tough, about medium height, his jungle green uniform razor sharp, clean and neatly pressed, his hair cut so short as to make him almost bald. He carried a side arm in a holster on his belt, Vietnam was a war zone, of course. But I doubted the weapon was for show, he had a hard look in his eyes, the cold, calculating stare of someone who has seen much action and spilled a goodly amount of blood. A look I had seen often during my own career.

The civilian was wearing clothing so unsuitable for the climate, for the humidity and filth of Vietnam, that I briefly wondered why they had become almost a mandatory uniform for intelligence operatives. Beige chino trousers, pale blue button-down long sleeved cotton shirt and mid-brown

Docksiders on his feet, the kind with a little tassel on the toe. He'd obviously left his bow tie and pipe at home, together with his tweed jacket. I could almost sense his discomfort at travelling without the outward trappings of his American WASP upbringing that would have taken him directly from Harvard or Princeton to a career in the corridors of Langley, Virginia. He may as well have been wearing a badge similar to his companion's, but his would have said CIA.

"Gentlemen, what can I do for you? I see my wife has brought you cold drinks."

The soldier looked straight at me and we shook hands. He came straight to the point. "Mr. Hoffman, it's quite simple, we have a charter for you if you have an aircraft to spare."

"That's how I make my living, Colonel. If it's just the two of you, I can have the Cessna 170B fuelled up and ready to go in the morning, where do you want to go?"

Our four-seat Cessna 170 was a light, single-engine, aircraft produced by the Cessna Aircraft Company in 1954. It had a metal fuselage and tail and fabric covered wings, and was fitted with a powerful 145 hp Continental engine and large fuel tanks. For simple jobs ferrying passengers or small loads around Vietnam it was the perfect workhorse, able to operate out of the smallest and roughest of the airstrips and it made the jungles of this hostile country a little more accessible.

"To Hue," he replied, "Tay Loc. Is that a problem? Just the two of us, myself and Mr. Anderson here, not really much in the way of luggage."

"That's fine. Journey time is about three hours in the Cessna, she's a four-seater so we won't be fully loaded. When do you want to leave?"

"Is ten in the morning ok with you?"

"Fine, that'll give me time to get back here the same day. I'll see you at the airfield just before ten, the flight plan will be filed ready and the aircraft good to go."

We discussed the price, when carrying military men I had a rule of thumb, think of a price and double it, but they just shrugged when I told them how much and Goldberg said it would be fine. Anderson suddenly took an interest in the conversation, he looked up and spoke to me.

"Do you ever miss Germany, Mr. Hoffman?"

The room suddenly felt as chill as his gaze. I could tell that Helene had been listening in the kitchen, she had stopped what she was doing when she

heard his words.

"Why do you ask, Mr. Anderson?"

"You've got an interesting past, lots of rumours about you. You were in Russia during the war, I gather?"

It wasn't really a question. What did he want?

"I was here in Vietnam too," I replied. "I was a soldier in the French Foreign Legion. I am also a citizen of France, but I do not miss France any more than I miss Germany. Surely you'd know that, your people, wouldn't you, Mr. Anderson?"

He shrugged. "I've seen your file, Hoffman."

"So why do you ask?" I pressed him. "Do you have a problem with Germans?"

He smiled a superior, knowing smile. "No, of course not. Not all Germans were members of the, you know..."

"The SS, Mr. Anderson?"

"Something like that. Amazing, eh? One minute you're all fanatical Nazis, the next minute half the country is commie. Which side were you on, Mr. Hoffman?"

"I can assure you I was not on the side that your agency is fighting a cold war against, Mr Anderson. The side that is supplying arms to their communist allies here in Vietnam. The side that I was fighting while you were still in kindergarten, my friend."

His expression darkened and Goldberg jumped in before the conversation deteriorated further.

"Miles, we're all allies now, you know that, Mr. Hoffman is a French citizen, so leave it alone. We'll be at the airfield in the morning, Sir, see you then. Would you say goodbye to your charming wife for us? And wish her Happy New Year."

"Yeah, do that, Herr Hoffman," Anderson added, putting the accent on the 'Herr'.

I smiled at them, "Of course, gentlemen, see you in the morning. Happy New Year to you."

It was January the first, 1963.

So what the hell was wrong with Miles Anderson, CIA agent? The Second World War had ended eighteen years ago, yet some people seemed able to harbour a grudge for life. But he'd need watching, he was one of those people that naturally had to knock people down, perhaps to make

himself look good. There was something else, too, something about Miles Anderson that was dark and hidden.

I told Helene I'd be going to Hue in the morning and then I telephoned Drexler and made sure he'd have the Cessna fuelled and ready to go. As I went to sleep that night, I thought more about the two men. One thing I'd learned about Vietnam, everyone had their own agenda and most were on the make too. And one other thing, of course, life was cheap here. Very cheap.

In the morning I said goodbye to Helene and walked out to the Hotchkiss jeep, Schuster had called in early to pick me up. The former Waffen-SS officer had stayed on in Vietnam when his enlistment in the Foreign Legion ended. We had both spent our termination pay on acquiring pilots' licenses in the US, where it was cheap. Commercial and type approval licenses were not difficult to obtain in Vietnam, like most things here it was simply a matter of money changing hands. We drove the short distance to our hangar at Tan Son Nhat in our Hotchkiss, the French copy of the Willys jeep, open to allow the breeze to cool some of the sticky humidity, our clothes were already sticky with sweat.

The Willys MB US Army Jeep was initially built from 1941 to 1945. In the SS we had the radically different and inferior Volkswagen Kübelwagen. Based on a small automobile, the VW Beetle, it used an air-cooled engine and lacked four wheel drive. Before the Americans arrived in Vietnam the French Army produced the Willys derivative, the Hotchkiss M 201, in considerable quantities. When they left Indochina, a large number were put up for sale and our workhorse was one of these French built vehicles.

I noted with approval that Drexler had the Cessna ready to go, the engine already ticking over to warm it up. My pre-flight checks were almost completed when Goldberg and Anderson arrived. Goldberg had changed into Tiger stripe camouflage, almost a copy of the old SS pattern. He still carried his sidearm, but in addition he was carrying an AR-15 assault rifle with pouches of spare clips hung on his belt. Built of black plastic and aluminium, the Colt AR-15 was probably the most lethal assault rifle ever produced. It was light in weight, easy to shoot, and extremely accurate, so that it was fast becoming the standard infantryman's weapon of the US and ARVN forces.

Anderson was dressed identically to the previous evening, I suspected it was the only type of clothing he possessed or would ever deign to wear. The only difference was that he was wearing a shoulder holster with a huge Colt

automatic pistol in it, the standard sidearm of the US military. And of the CIA. He saw me looking at it.

"Yeah, don't worry Hoffman, if we come down in Gook country, I know how to use this thing."

I nodded at him. "That's very reassuring, Mr. Anderson."

Goldberg smiled. "Are we ready to go, I'd like to keep to schedule?"

"Yes, if you would like to climb into the aircraft and strap in we can take off straight away."

They climbed into the Cessna, Anderson in the back and Goldberg next to me. I called the control tower and got immediate clearance from Nguyen Cam Le.

"You're ok to go straight out, Jurgen. If you're headed anywhere nice you can bring me back a nice present. Something small, like a Rolex watch," he broke off, laughing to himself.

"Yeah, we'll see, thanks Le."

I taxied down the runway and took off, heading north towards Hue.

"That guy fancies himself as a bit of a joker," Goldberg said.

"Le? Yeah, he's always cheerful, but don't let the jokes fool you, he's a good man, very professional, runs a tight ship. Hates the commies, too," I replied.

"Why is that?" Goldberg continued.

"Le's family were murdered while he was in the US doing his air traffic control training. Apparently the communists accused them of supporting the Americans by allowing their son to train in the US. When he came back he tried to enlist in the ARVN, wanted to shoot every commie in sight, but he was too valuable in air traffic control so they ordered him to stay there."

Goldberg grunted an acknowledgment as I concentrated on climbing to our operating altitude.

We reached five thousand feet as quickly as possible. I burned up more fuel that I would have liked but ground fire was becoming increasingly common and I preferred not to offer the Viet Cong a tempting target. We reached operating height and I set the throttle to cruise. Goldberg leaned nearer to speak to me, out of the corner of my eye I could see that Anderson had moved closer to listen.

"Do you know the area around Ap Bac, Mr. Hoffman," the soldier asked me.

I thought for a moment, Ap Bac was a village about forty miles to the

south west. I nodded.

"We'd like you to detour and fly over it if possible, we want to take a look."

A strange request, I wondered what was behind it.

"It's in the opposite direction, Colonel. It'll add almost an hour to our journey time and put us on the limits of the fuel reserves."

"I'll add a fifty percent bonus if you'll do it," he replied.

It was a very good deal, I nodded, they both seemed to relax as I banked the Cessna around through one hundred and eighty degrees and set course for Ap Bac.

We flew on in silence, just the drone of the engine for company and the unending sight of the jungle below, hiding everything that was both good and bad about this benighted country. I heard the action of a pistol being worked and looked around. Miles Anderson was checking his Colt automatic, as I watched he removed the clip, checked the load and slid it back into the pistol. He saw me looking.

"You ever fired one of these or seen any real action, Hoffman, or were you just a desk jockey in those old wars?"

"I've fired a few guns, yes," I replied.

Colonel Goldberg sighed with irritation.

"Christ, Miles, I thought you'd read Mr. Hoffman's file."

"Well yeah, I did glance at it, he was in the Nazi SS and the French Foreign Legion, I read some of it. That doesn't mean a thing, he could have spent the whole time behind a desk."

"Did you read the bit about him being an SS-Sturmbannführer, a major, a highly decorated combat veteran of the Eastern Front? Or his Foreign Legion record, a shitload of medals including their Legion D'Honneur, like our Congressional Medal of Honor, for leading countless engagements against the Viet Minh?"

Anderson looked at me, then at Goldberg. "I just glanced at it, Aaron. So he got lucky, did he?"

Goldberg and I looked at each other, we both smiled briefly, then he looked out of the window at the jungle below, I busied myself with the chart I had unfolded on my knee.

Four minutes later we were approaching the area of Ap Bac, I was about to call out to the passengers that we were almost there when there was a bang on the starboard wing. I looked across and there was a ragged hole about an

inch in diameter punched right through it. While I looked, another bullet struck further out on the wing. I flung the Cessna in a tight bank to port, set the throttle to maximum and pulled back on the column to start gaining height.

"We're taking ground fire, I'm going to get more height," I explained to them.

I looked around, neither of the Americans seemed surprised, although Anderson had gone deathly pale. Just then a voice came over the radio.

"Unidentified Cessna over Ap Bac, you are entering a battle zone, turn back immediately. Acknowledge."

I looked around, there was another Cessna, an army O-1 Bird Dog liaison and observation aircraft about half a mile away and closing on us.

The O-1 was the first all metal fixed wing aircraft flown by the United States Army since the U.S. Army Air Forces separated from the Army in 1947, becoming its own branch of service, the U.S. Air Force. The Bird Dog had seen a lengthy career in the U.S. military as well as in other countries, they were a common sight in the sky over Vietnam where they were used for artillery spotting, directing battle and a range of less glamorous but equally valuable tasks.

So there was some kind of a battle going on here, that's why they were so interested.

"Mr. Hoffman, would you circle the area for a few minutes," Goldberg said to me. "Could you let me have a communications headset, I'll talk to the army spotter."

I passed him a spare headset. "Colonel, I don't know what's going on here, but I'll give you five minutes over Ap Bac, no more. I have no intention of being shot down in an unarmed aircraft."

"Five minutes will be fine, Mr. Hoffman."

He put on the headset and clicked the send button.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Goldberg, Fifth Special Forces Group, flying in civilian Cessna over Ap Bac, who am I talking to?"

I listened in my own headset, the radio was silent for a few seconds, and then it crackled to life.

"John Paul Vann, United States Army assigned to Col. Huynh Van Cao, commander of the ARVN IV Corps as advisor to the Seventh Division. Colonel, I'm observing and directing a battle right at this moment, I don't have time to make conversation."

“I read you, Vann, we’ll just watch for a few minutes and then head out of here. How is it going? Those ARVN boys shaping up well?”

Vann replied immediately. “It's a miserable damn performance so far, Goldberg. These fucking VCs are outnumbered five to one but they’re still giving the ARVN a hammering. There’s gonna be some heads rolling after this little lot, I can tell you. Colonel, we’ve got a battle on our hands here, I’ll catch up with you some time, I suggest you clear the area immediately.”

“Understood. Good luck, Goldberg out.”

He took off the headset and turned to speak to Anderson, who had not heard both sides of the conversation. I looked down, two CH-21 Shawnee helicopters were visible sitting drunkenly on the ground, clearly casualties of the battle. I wondered if the troops they carried had got out safely. While I watched, a flight of five Huey UH-1 helicopters flew in and discharged a platoon of ARVN troops on the ground. There was an explosion in the middle of them, mortar fire, I noted, and the survivors scattered to take cover. It didn’t look very good. Five to one, Colonel Vann had said, that was by how many the Viet Cong were outnumbered, yet they were hammering the ARVN soldiers who didn’t seem to understand what was required of them. Several ran back to the Hueys, if they hadn’t lifted off the troops would have jumped back in them. Perched on a hilltop not more than two hundred yards away I could see the distinctive sight of a Type-24 7.92mm Chinese made heavy machine gun, a copy of our German First World War Maxim gun, belt fed, it would be deadly if it opened fire on the exposed ARVN. I shouted at Goldberg, “Colonel, the VCs are setting up a Maxim down there, a heavy machine gun, it’ll destroy those ARVNs that have just deployed.”

He looked down where I was pointing. “Yeah, I see it, Colonel Vann is bound to have seen it too, we have to leave it to him.”

Anderson leaned over and put his face close to me so that I would hear him. “It’s not your war, Hoffman, so I suggest you stay out of it and leave it to the experts.”

I smiled at him. “With pleasure, Mr. Anderson.”

I threw the Cessna in a tight bank and put her on a course for north east, to Hue. Anderson looked furious, but Goldberg only smiled at him. “Miles, you did tell him to stay out of it. Anyway, we’ve seen enough. You’re going to need those Montagnards, I don’t think the ARVNs can do it all on their own.”

The French term Montagnard, meaning people from the mountains, referred to an indigenous people from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In 1950, the French government established the Central Highlands as the Pays Montagnard du Sud under the authority of Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai. When the French withdrew from Vietnam and recognised a Vietnamese government, Montagnard political independence was drastically diminished. The U.S. Special Forces were beginning to develop base camps in the area and recruit the Montagnards to fight alongside ARVN and American soldiers, and were intending that they would become a major part of the U.S. military effort in the Central Highlands.

I flew the Cessna steadily on towards the ancient imperial city of Hue, home of the Emperor of Vietnam, or more correctly, South Vietnam. I was concerned about the fuel, it was cutting it fine after the diversion to Ap Bac, but I throttled back to the most economical speed and at nearly seven thousand feet we should get there with a little fuel to spare. I didn't think it likely that we had taken any hits to the fuel tanks, there were three of them on board the aircraft. If we were losing fuel, the gauge would have shown it.

Anderson and Goldberg were arguing about the Montagnards. It was no secret that the CIA regarded Vietnam as their own little war, a chance for them to cover themselves in glory. Nor was it a secret that the U.S. forces saw Vietnam as a chance to muscle in with their own advisors and weapons inventories, perhaps like our German forces did during the Spanish Civil War when the Luftwaffe tested their air war theories prior to declaring war on the whole of Europe. I was faintly amused, these Viets had shown extraordinary tenacity in defeating France, the final battle of Dien Bien Phu demonstrating that Ho Chi Minh's troops were the equal of any in the world, and often better led and better motivated. It was well known that the French had treated their colonials as little more than slaves. What better motivation was there to fight hard than to gain your freedom from a colonial oppressor? A lesson we Germans had learned the hard way from the Russians during the war on the Eastern Front.

"We were talking about the Montagnards, Hoffman, what's your take on these people?" Anderson asked me.

I had met a few of them during my time in Indochina, most I had found to be decent folk, if a little primitive in their strange costumes.

"They're no friends of the communists, if that's what you mean."

"Exactly what I mean. We're meeting some of their leaders in Hue,

setting up a programme to help their people."

I smiled at him. "By giving them guns to fight the Viet Cong, I suppose?"

He bristled at that. "Maybe we will, sure, why not? The VCs have given them a hard time, they sure want to fight back. Nothing wrong in that."

"No, of course not. The French armed the Montagnards during their war with the communists. Giap sent his men into the Montagnard villages and wiped them out in droves, especially after partition when much of the Montagnard region lay in North Vietnam."

"The difference is this time we're gonna win, we'll beat those commie fuckers once and for all."

"Like you were doing at Ap Bac, Mr. Anderson?" I asked him.

Even as I said it, I knew I shouldn't have opened my mouth, the CIA paid well and seemed to have an endless pot of money from which to pay for their schemes. But I had seen those ARVN troopers thrown into the mincing machine, facing down a heavy machine gun like the badly led soldiers of the First World War. This American prick wanted to send more men into the lion's mouth to enable him to play his stupid war games, as if they were pieces on a chess board. I'd seen too many sacrifices of good men not to be angry. Goldberg put his hand on Anderson's arm and gripped him tightly.

"Leave it, Miles, it's just a difference of opinion, not worth you getting riled about."

Anderson gave him a murderous look, threw off his hand and sat back in the rear seat, a petulant look on his face. He didn't speak for the rest of the journey.

The beautiful city of Hue came into view, the emperor's palace clearly visible. I got clearance from Hue tower, asked my passengers to fasten their seat belts and dropped in to land. I helped them out of the aircraft, passed them their bags and shook hands with both of them, it seemed that even Anderson had decided to let bygones be bygones.

"I hope you have a good stay here in Hue, gentlemen. Can I offer to arrange your return journey?"

Anderson sniggered. "No thanks, buddy, we're not coming back this way, the agency has got it all taken care of."

Goldberg frowned, but Anderson rambled on. "Once we get these mountain men organised, we'll go out and kick some ass."

I smiled. "I certainly hope you do, gentlemen. No one has so far

succeeded in kicking the ass of the Viet Cong, no doubt you'll be the first."

"You bet," he replied, totally missing the irony of my words.

Goldberg gave me a cold smile. "Take care on…"

Several shots echoed across the field, I counted a total of four. We dived to the ground as a Vietnamese of about twenty years of age dressed in black trousers and white shirt and carrying an automatic pistol came running from behind one of the hangars. He sprinted towards us, saw us on the ground near the Cessna and took a snap shot that went wide. He was screaming something in Vietnamese. I'd heard it before during my service in the Legion, shouted by Viet Minh as they charged at our legionnaires, intent on killing us at all costs. Then another man came around the corner dressed the same as the first one, this guy carrying an AK-47.

Goldberg was fast and accurate. He brought up his AR-15, clicked off the safety, aimed and fired all in one smooth motion. The first man screamed and fell heavily to the ground. The second guy was still running, Anderson whipped the pistol out of his shoulder holster and aimed. At the last second, I knocked his arm up, ruining his aim, the pistol fired harmlessly into the sky.

"What the fuck are you doing, Hoffman? Colonel, shoot that Gook fucker while I deal with this German."

"Leave it, Miles, for fuck's sake shut up and stop making yourself look like an ass," Goldberg shouted back. The CIA man's eyes widened and he tried to bring the pistol down to point at me, but in combat terms he was nothing more than a child, I simply took the gun out of his hand, removed the clip and handed it back to him. His mouth opened making him look like a goldfish, but he was unable to get any words out. We watched the second guy walk up to the first, put down his AK-47, kick the fallen man's pistol away and start to examine the body.

"Miles, the guy is airport security," Goldberg said, "He's on our side."

The CIA man looked at me silently, his eyes filled with impotent rage. He then stomped off to the terminal building, a single storey structure that served as an airline office, departure lounge and customs shed. Goldberg looked at me sympathetically.

"I'm sorry about Anderson, he's just not very experienced in this country. He'll learn, sooner or later."

"Either that or he'll be dead, Colonel."

"Yeah, I expect. Hey, I like your tail number."

I looked at the tailfin of the Cessna, SGN-SS1. SGN was the

international prefix for Saigon, SS1 was someone's idea of a joke. We smiled at each other.

The Colonel went after Anderson and I walked over to the terminal and arranged for the Cessna to be refuelled for the journey back to Saigon. As usual it meant parting with more cash for bribes, in Vietnam, no one did anything, their paid job included, unless they were bribed. I wondered if Miles Anderson realised that, then it occurred to me that his ancestors had probably invented the system. I genuinely like Americans and got on really well with them, they were some of the best people I had come across, friendly and generous to a fault. But there were bad ones too, as with every nation on earth and when they were bad they were, well, like Miles Anderson. I sat down in the coffee bar and downed a cup of coffee, the radio was playing and I listened to the news. Already, the battle of Ap Bac was making news with reports of a casualty list of one hundred and eighty men, of which eighty were dead, and the loss of five helicopters. There was no mention of Colonel Vann, but I pitied him, once the final tally was added up the commanders would look for scapegoats and I guessed that he would fit the bill exactly.

I walked into the office and filed my return flight plan for Saigon, then went out on the tarmac. Fuelling had finished on the Cessna and I could leave as soon as I was ready. I started the pre-flight walk around, almost immediately I spotted Cessna Bird Dog, painted all black, positioned at the far end of the field. Even from three hundred yard away I could recognise the figures of Lieutenant Colonel Goldberg and Miles Anderson standing next to the black Cessna, talking to a couple of soldiers. It all added up to a Special Forces night insertion. No doubt the two Americans would be dropped into the Central Highlands to conduct negotiations with the Montagnards. Did these people never learn? If it was obvious to me what they were up to it was obvious to every Viet Cong sympathiser and spy on the airfield and there would certainly be no shortage of those. Wherever the two men were headed, the North Vietnamese would know about it even before they took off. I wanted to walk over and warn them, but I knew that they would take no notice of an ageing civilian. They would just have to learn the hard way.

I checked the two bullet holes in the starboard wing, they were not really serious and we'd repaired plenty of those in the past. I made a note to remind Johann Drexler to patch them when I got back, holes in the wing

made the passengers nervous. Then I climbed into the cabin, started the engine and got clearance from the tower.

The journey back to Saigon was uneventful, nobody took shots at me from the ground and there was no spoilt American secret agent to spar with. I landed at Tan Son Nhat after receiving Le's customary greeting and clearance from air traffic control and Johann came out to help me tie down the aircraft.

"Did Paul have any luck finding a supercharger?" I asked him.

"No, nothing yet. I've done a temporary repair on it, Jurgen, it's just as well. We've got a full load to pick up from Da Nang first thing in the morning, a delivery to Vung Tau. Paul is preparing the C-47 right now."

"Ok, thanks, Johann. I need to get home for a shower, I'll take the Hotchkiss and call back later."

I drove back to my bungalow and Helene was waiting for me, as beautiful, graceful and warm as ever. Thank God for the French. She kissed me and led me to the shower, helped me undress and then undressed herself.

"You must be stiff after all that flying, Cherie," she grinned and felt my cock. "Ah yes, I thought so. Do you want me to wash it for you or did you have something else in mind?"

"Maybe you could soap my back?"

She smiled. We made love while the tepid water cascaded down over us, revelling in the passion of our lovemaking, and exploring each other's body. She squealed with joy as she came and I followed shortly after, both of us for a short time at least able to forget the humidity and hatred that were so much embroidered into the fabric of our adopted country. Afterwards we got dressed, Helene made up food for all of us and we drove back to the airfield. We sat eating happily in the passenger cabin of the C-47, Helene and me, Paul and Johann. Afterwards, Paul dropped us home and went off with Drexler to a nearby bar. At dawn he was back to collect me and we took off in the C-47 for Da Nang. There would be no need to refuel, the Douglas C-47 had a range of sixteen hundred miles, enough for the entire round trip and back to Tan Son Nhat, another routine flight that was the bread and butter of our little business. When all of the crates were loaded we got clearance and headed back for Vung Tau, a resort town near the Mekong Delta and a frequent jumping off point for Special Forces operations.

"Any idea what's in the crates?" Paul said as we neared Vung Tau."

I had wondered too what was inside them, but in Vietnam is was not always wise to know everything. Some things were best kept hidden.

"None of our business, my friend, and I want it to stay that way."

He nodded his agreement. We landed at Vung Tau in the early evening, as we were taxiing towards the freight hangar Paul said, "I could murder a cold beer before we take off again."

It was an attractive idea, it was getting dark and we would be staying overnight before unloading the crates in the morning and returning to Saigon.

"Me too, I'm sure the airport bar will accommodate us."

Then a mortar round hit the tarmac immediately in front of the aircraft and the port wheel dropped into the crater, we heard the snap as the leg collapsed and I quickly shut down the engines as the aircraft slewed violently to the left.

We shuddered to a stop as another mortar round exploded nearby. There was no need to say anything to each other, we both ran for the locker at the rear of the cockpit and took out weapons, the M2s, the fully automatic variant of the famous M1 carbine together with our two Tokarev pistols. We had tried carrying AK-47s, but their distinctive shape had once brought friendly fire down on us while we were on the ground in the Mekong Delta, guarding a shipment of vehicle parts, or so the crates said. After that, we bought the more expensive M2 which hopefully would not be the cause of any mistaken identity.

Paul pushed open the fuselage door and we jumped down, the first thing we saw was the port leg, smashed beyond use. The second was the flashes of gunfire and exploding mortar rounds. A harassed looking ARVN lieutenant came running over to us.

"It's a VC attack, you need to find somewhere to get under cover."

"How many of them are there?" I asked him.

"How many?" He looked surprised that I had even bothered to ask the question. "I don't know, maybe ten or twelve."

"Are you engaging them, Lieutenant?" Paul asked him.

"Well, we've got a Marine company here, I expect they're forming up now to counter-attack."

"In that case," I said reasonably, "we should be safe, a company will surely take care of them. We'll stay with the aircraft, just in case any of them slip past you."

He shrugged. "As you wish," he said, angry that we weren't taking his

advice, “but keep your heads down, this isn’t a game you know.”

He said it so gravely that Paul and I had to look away to stop ourselves from laughing and embarrassing him further, which would not have earned us any favours.

“Thank you, Lieutenant, we’ll bear it in mind,” I replied courteously.

He ran off to find his unit. We took cover in the crater, crouched next to the port wheel of our Douglas.

“It seems you were wrong, my friend,” Paul said to me.

“Wrong?” I looked at him, puzzled. He pointed across the field, four shadowy shapes were running towards us, their intention was obvious.

“About it not being our business. It seems that these gentlemen have made it out business.”

We clicked the selectors of our rifles to full auto and waited.

*****

*The message on Vietnam is the same: vigorous American action is needed to buy time for Vietnam to mobilize and organize its real assets; but the time for such a turnaround has nearly run out. And if Vietnam goes, it will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible to hold Southeast Asia.’*

*General Maxwell Taylor*

The President was looking at a cable in his hand. He was sat awkwardly on the couch in the Oval Office, one of his bad days for the injury he still suffered from twenty years after his patrol boat was shot out from under him in the China seas. He looked up.

“Robert, you’ve seen this?”

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, nodded. “Yes, Mr President, I have. I contacted General Harkins at MACV in Saigon and asked him for his opinion too.”

Kennedy looked around the room. Who could he trust to give him an honest opinion about the war in Vietnam? The only one here he could really trust had no real influence with the military, his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General. The two brothers exchanged glances. Kennedy looked back at McNamara. “Go on, what does he say?”

“He concurs, Sir. Our troops, our advisors, are making a difference, but there just aren’t enough of them. With a few thousand more troops, the

communists can be beaten and the South Vietnamese government will be able to hold their own."

"Yeah, so you keep telling me." He sighed and looked around the room.

"Look, all this advice I'm getting, then word comes in from this," he paused and shuffled through papers on the low table in front of him. "Lieutenant Colonel Vann. These South Vietnamese troops together with units of our own people outnumbered the Viet Cong five or maybe even ten to one!"

He raised his voice and the advisors looked at each other uncomfortably. Upsetting the leader of the free world was not a good way to handle your career.

"Ten to fucking one, anyone got any ideas, people? These communists field a hundred thousand men, you want me to send a million Americans to fight them and even then we might not win? Because that's what these figures tell me. Bobby, what's your take on this?"

The others barely concealed their sneers. A staunch supporter of civil rights, Bobby Kennedy was no friend of the more militaristic members of Kennedy's cabinet. They joked about his lack of experience, even his own brother President Kennedy had laughed at the criticisms of Bobby and said, 'I can't see that it's wrong to give him a little legal experience before he goes out to practice law.' But what he lacked in experience he made up for with a razor sharp mind. Architect of his brother's successful presidential campaign, he had no direct influence on this meeting. But the President wanted someone he could trust to help him steer his way through the minefield of personal political agendas and prejudices that were part of every president's cabinet.

"Has anyone read the history of these Vietnamese people?" Bobby asked unexpectedly. "For the past thousand years, these people have been fighting one foreign invader after another. China, Laos, Cambodia, you name it, they've scrapped with them. And when they're not fighting someone else, they're fighting each other. These aren't a bunch of slant eyed rice farmers with the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh in one hand and an AK47 in the other. They're hard and they're tough. Sure, this current bunch are communists, but if they weren't commies they'd be called by some other name. Fact is, they're no pushover, anyone that says different hasn't done their homework. Sure, our boys are tough too, but the South Vietnamese? Fact is, Diem doesn't want them to fight the commies too hard, as long as they keep him in

power."

McGeorge 'Mac' Bundy, the National Security Advisor, spoke up. "These people threaten the stability of the whole of South East Asia, Bobby. No matter how tough they are, they're a direct threat to U.S. foreign policy and trade in the region, they need to be beaten."

Kennedy looked at them tiredly. "Ok, so we know what we need, we know the problem, so what do we do? Send more troops?"

Robert McNamara muttered under his breath.

"What? What was that Robert?"

"I said Diem needs to go," the Secretary of Defense said.

Bobby jerked upright. "Jesus Christ, Robert, he's the head of state."

"He's a number one pain in the ass," McNamara said. "He singlehandedly invented the word corruption, his brother's an opium addict and he terrorizes any of the population that aren't Catholic, and that's the vast majority, they're Buddhists and they hate him. Get rid of Diem and the war is winnable, otherwise..." He let his words hang.

"Ok, ok, let's tie this up. Bottom line, do we send more advisors or not?" He looked around and received affirmative nods.

"Very well, Robert, get me some figures and I'll take a look at them. Stay behind, would you. That's it, thanks."

They drifted out, the great and the good who steered the fate of the free world. When they were alone, Kennedy turned to his Secretary of Defense. "About Diem, Robert, I want a report, I especially want to know who would replace him if the worse came to the worse. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mr President."

* * * * *

# Chapter Two

*'Secretary McNamara summed up such concerns in 1962 when he told Congress that US strategy was to assist indigenous forces in Third World crises rather than commit US forces to combat there. Avoiding direct participation in the Vietnam war, he said, would not only release US forces for use elsewhere, but would be the most effective way to combat Communist*

*subversion and covert aggression in Vietnam: To introduce white forces, US forces, in large numbers there today, while it might have an initial favorable military impact would almost certainly lead to adverse political and in the long run adverse military consequences.'*

*US Library of Congress*

It seemed obvious that our aircraft was the intended target of the four infiltrators. The normal VC tactic was to strip the contents from the aircraft, especially if they thought it contained arms or military equipment, and then destroy the plane. In this case with the whole airfield a battlefield it seemed unlikely they would take the time to pillage so they were probably planning to just destroy our C-47. We waited until they got within fifty yards, sure enough we could see that they were already removing the pins from their grenades. We opened fire in the same instant, after so many battles and so many wars, we were both able to finely judge the moment. They didn't stand a chance, we dropped all four between our first two bursts. They tumbled to the ground, some screaming in agony, then the grenades went off and we ducked lower as shrapnel flew through the air. The screams stopped and we looked around again. There was a firefight in progress at the terminal building, difficult to make out in the dark, but we could distinguish the sounds of the AK-47s carried by the communists and the sharper crack of the M16s, the new infantry rifle developed from the Armalite AR-15, increasingly being adopted by the ARVN. The sounds of the AK-47s were gradually petering out as the shooters were either killed or crept away in the darkness.

Eventually it all went quiet, the lights blazed again in the terminal building and a siren sounded the all clear. We climbed out of our hole to check the VCs we had shot, but they were all dead, either from our bullets or shredded from their own grenades that exploded after they were hit. We returned the rifles to the aircraft, it wouldn't do for unidentified civilians to be walking around carrying rifles. The sentries would be nervous enough for the rest of the night in case a second wave of attackers came, but we still had our automatics tucked into our waistbands. Finally we walked cautiously to the terminal building and went in. There was no damage, the attack hadn't got that far, they'd even restarted the sound system, Ray Charles was singing, 'I Can't Stop Loving You' softly in the background. We found a telephone

and I called Johann Drexler. As expected he was in our office inside the hangar at Tan Son Nhat, we liked to keep someone there to stop the locals from pilfering our supplies and shipments. I told him about the damage.

"I've got a spare leg here, Jurgen, I can bring it to you in the jeep and do the repair," he said. "What about the wheel and the tyre, is that damaged?"

I thought for a moment, then told him to bring a spare wheel and tyre as well, it was unlikely that they were completely undamaged. He promised to go and speak to Helene and leave for Vung Tau in the morning, about a two hour drive cross country. Then we went to the terminal office where I filed a report of the damage and amended our flight plan to leave later the next day.

We eventually got our cold beer at the bar, which had already re-opened. There was a big crowd of ARVN troopers already drinking, I briefly wondered why they were not out mopping up after the attack, chasing down the VCs who had got away. But only it was only a brief thought. It was an open secret that President Diem feared and despised his majority Buddhist population as much as he did the Viet Cong. He deliberately spared the ARVN troops from engagements that might risk them taking heavy casualties. That way he hoped to keep them as a loyal reserve in case his own people tried to depose him by force, as well as not incur the army's wrath by forcing them to undertake dangerous assignments. To say that Diem's rule was authoritarian was to understate the case. His most trusted official was his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, leader of the primary pro-Diem Can Lao political party. He was an opium addict and fervent admirer of another corrupt, authoritarian dictator, Adolf Hitler, the architect of Germany's misfortune. Both Paul and I still bore many scars from Hitler's disastrous attempt to rule Europe.

Indeed, Diem modelled the Can Lao secret police's marching and torture styles on Nazi designs. Ngo Dinh Can, his younger brother, was put in charge of the former Imperial City of Hue. Although Can did not hold any official role in the government, he ruled his regions of South Vietnam with an iron fist, commanding private armies and secret police.

Another brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen, was appointed Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Diem's elder brother Ngo Dinh Thuc was the archbishop of Hue. Despite this, Thuc lived in the Presidential Palace, along with Nhu, Nhu's wife and Diem. Diem was nationalistic, devoutly Catholic, anti-Communist, and preferred the philosophies of Confucianism. The result was that in a situation such as this one, the troops were drinking in the bar instead

of chasing down and destroying a defeated enemy force. Sadly, we'd seen it all before.

"So Colonel Goldberg and Miles Anderson think that a few thousand Montagnards will make all the difference?" Paul said, shaking his head in disgust. "Even the SS would have had a hard task defeating the Viet Cong, this place is going to become another Eastern Front if this is all they have to fight with."

He was right, of course. The communists had defeated the French, it seemed that the Republic of South Vietnam was militarily very weak even with American support, it could only be a matter of time.

"What if the Americans lend even more support?" I asked him. "Do you not think it would make a difference?"

He laughed. "Sure, of course it would make a difference, but they can't be here forever. Ho Chi Minh is in it for the long haul. Do you remember the communists handing out free land to the peasants? What is this government doing to help these poor bastards? I tell you, Jurgen, if I was a peasant here I think I'd fight for the Viet Cong myself, and I hate the communists."

It was true, Diem initially limited individual land holdings and reimbursed the landlords for the excess which he sold off to peasants. This being Vietnam, many landlords evaded the redistribution by transferring their property to the name of family members. In addition, the three hundred and seventy thousand acres of Catholic Church land were exempted. As a result, only thirteen percent of South Vietnam's land was redistributed, it was estimated that only ten per cent of the tenants had received any land at all, resulting in a lasting legacy of bitterness and hate towards the government.

We drank several more beers and then went back to watch over the aircraft and its cargo. The ARVNs were still in the bar drinking, I had no doubt they'd be there all night. The airfield had gone quiet and we took turns to stay on watch, but there were no more attacks. We waited as the humidity rose, at just after ten o'clock a lorry and two jeeps arrived to unload the cargo. A short, scrawny looking young Viet was in charge, accompanied by two tough looking Americans with aviator dark glasses and shoulder holsters, probably Special Forces or CIA. So the crates were filled with weapons, I wondered if that was the reason for last night's attack, and how the VCs had found out. Their intelligence was amazingly good, they seemed to be able to communicate better than the army with their sophisticated radio

equipment. Six Viet civilians jumped down from the lorry and began to transfer the cargo. The Viet in charge, Le Van Dao came and paid me for the freight and they drove away. It wasn't long before the welcome sight of our Hotchkiss jeep came towards us, the back laden with the spare wheel leg, the wheel and tyre and a selection of tools and jacks lashed around it. Johann climbed out and we shook hands, then he went to look at the damage.

"Yeah, we can fix that, no problem. First thing is to jack her out of there, I'll put some support under the wheel and we can replace the whole unit."

It was good news, we worked through the sweltering heat of the day, drenched in sweat, jacking up the port wing, removing the broken leg and replacing it with the spare. While Johann finished adjusting and testing the hydraulics, Paul and I loaded the broken parts into the empty hold of the C-47, they would be repaired and re-used when we got back to Saigon. I started the engines and slowly taxied the aircraft away from the pothole. When he was satisfied, Johann jumped in and came through to the cockpit.

"I want you to slowly taxi a couple of hundred yards and I'll walk along to give a final visual check on that leg."

I nodded to him and he went out and jumped back down to the ground. I started to taxi again, after two hundred yards I stopped and Johann jumped back into the aircraft and came into the cockpit.

"It all looks fine. I'll drive back to Saigon now, I'll see you there."

"Thanks, Johann, I'll have a couple of cold beers ready for you when you get back," Paul laughed.

"You'd better." He jumped down to the ground and was halfway across to the Hotchkiss when there was a massive explosion and the jeep disintegrated in smoke and flames. Mortar! The shock wave of the explosion had blown Johann to the ground.

"Paul," I shouted, "go and get Johann, we need to get going."

He was already running out of the cockpit, through the window I saw him run up to Johann and help him to his feet. Thank God, he didn't seem to be badly injured. There was another explosion near the terminal, and then the answering sound of heavy machine gun fire as the ARVN detachment guarding the field opened up in the general direction of the mortar. Paul got to the door and I ran back to help him in with Johann. We helped the mechanic climb on board and brought him forward to the cockpit where he sat down on the navigator's jump seat.

"You ok, Johann?" I asked him.

He smiled. "I will be when we get out of here."

"Yeah, we're leaving now, don't worry." I sat down in the pilot's seat, the engines were still ticking over.

"What about clearance?" Paul called to me.

I laughed. "I don't think they'll be worrying too much about procedures just at the moment. We'll get in the air and call them afterwards."

I throttled forward all the way and the aircraft began to gather speed. Another mortar hit the airfield, this time on the runway about three hundred yards ahead of us. I made a slight correction to avoid the pothole, then we were past and I rotated the plane off the tarmac, we were airborne. Yet another mortar shell hit just where we had taken off, it had been a near thing. I could see the ARVNs crouched behind their M60 machine gun as it blazed away, shredding the distant jungle foliage where they thought the mortar was sited. Scattered groups of them were lying on the ground blazing away with their M16s, but so far none were advancing to tackle the enemy. I wanted to get down there and shout at them to get out and start doing what they were paid for, to kill the enemy. But I was a civilian now, not a soldier, and I had to suffer the consequences of their failures like every other civilian in this country. We gained height rapidly and I set course for Tan Son Nhat and now that we were safely away Paul went back to check on Johann. My headset crackled.

"C-47 SGN-SS1, you departed Vung Tau without proper clearance, please clarify."

I deliberately didn't answer for a few moments, sometimes these people went just too far, did they want us to wait to be hit with a mortar shell?

"Vung Tau Control, it was a medical emergency, we're taking a badly injured man back to Saigon."

"Understood, SS1."

It was near enough the truth.

We landed safely at Tan Son Nhat. The loss of the Hotchkiss was a blow, not least to Paul Schuster who regarded it as his personal toy. Helene was waiting for us, she checked Johann over thoroughly and pronounced him fine, except for minor shock and concussion that he would recover from in a day or two. She came and held me tightly.

"Jurgen, things are getting worse here, I was very worried about you."

"It's just a blip, I'm sure the government will have it under control

soon," I replied. I was a rotten liar, she pushed me away and looked me in the eyes.

"That's rubbish and you know it. The only good thing for you is that the more they make trouble, the more you make money transporting people and equipment around this rotten country. This has been going on for nearly twenty years, they beat the French, they're beating Diem's people, what next?"

"The Americans, my dear, they're arriving in force. Every day, more and more of them are coming into the country to fight the Viet Cong."

"Do you think the Americans will succeed where everyone else had failed?"

I had been thinking about the increased American efforts for some time. We Germans had swept into Russia and were eventually defeated simply by the fact that we alienated most of the population and they fought back willingly, even fanatically. Shoot ten Russians and fifty would step forward to take their place, blinded by their hatred of the Nazis and the golden promises of their commissars. Diem's troops were becoming no less hated than we were, and the Viet Cong commissars were promising the people everything that the government refused them. Could the Americans reverse things? They would need to change the whole system of government, effectively overthrow the Diem regime and rebuild from top to bottom. But that never worked, only the population could achieve proper change and they were cowed by the brutality and corruption of the Diem regime and enticed by the false future offered by Hanoi.

I looked back into her beautiful eyes. "No, Helene, ultimately they will not. They'll make a difference, but not enough, I think. I hope I am wrong. If other countries get involved, perhaps it will help."

Already Australia, a near neighbour, had sent troops to Vietnam to shore up the anti-communist government. But they were few and the VCs were growing rapidly.

"We should leave, Jurgen, get out of here while we still can." She didn't say before one or both of us were killed, but I understood.

"You know that we have debts to pay off on the loans that we took out to buy the aircraft. Perhaps when everything is clear we could consider moving then."

"Let's hope we're both still alive to make the move," she said bitterly as she stalked off.

I went home to a chilly reception and a silent dinner. In bed when I tried to talk she just rolled away from me, what the hell was wrong with her? She had a fiercely independent streak but she wasn't usually this moody about the future. I satisfied myself that it was Vietnam, this damned country got to all of us in the end.

The next morning she was still ignoring me so I made an early start. I got to the hangar to find Johann already at work hammering away at the bent and broken leg.

"You should be resting, Johann, not at work, you were hurt quite badly. Helene said to take today off."

"And if you break another wheel leg on the next job, where do we get a spare?" he asked.

I didn't reply, he was right, of course. Without a spare leg, we'd still be on the field at Vung Tau, a target for every VC mortar crew that happened along.

Paul came into the office, we had a new charter, a cargo to take up to Lang Vei, a small base just south of the DMZ, the local agent had just phoned through, it was already on the way here and would arrive within the hour.

"What are we carrying?" I asked him. "Freight or people?"

If it was people we had snap down seats in the fuselage of the aircraft, but on this occasion it was freight. A civilian lorry turned up driven by a Vietnamese, it was loaded with more of the inevitable anonymous wooden crates, they may as well have stencilled them 'military equipment', everyone knew what they were. Two Americans jumped out of the passenger side, another four men, Vietnamese, got out of the back and began transferring the crates to the C-47. The two Americans approached us.

"Change of plan Mr Hoffman, we're going to accompany the load to Lang Vei. Any problems?"

I looked at them warily, jeans, t-shirts, shoulder holsters with Colt automatics, each carried an AR-15. Short crew cuts, jungle boots and canvas packs on their backs, they could only have been Special Forces. It was fine with me, if we had to make an emergency landing they would come in handy if we hit any trouble.

"No problem at all," I smiled and shook hands with them. "What's up at Lang Vei, why are you taking so much equipment up there?"

They both looked at me suspiciously. Then one of them said in a

friendly way, “I guess if you’re flying us up there you’ll know soon enough anyway. It’s a CIDG camp we’re setting up near a village called Khe Sanh.”

I’d never heard of Khe Sanh, but we had all heard about the Civilian Irregular Defense Group programme. It was a programme developed by the United States to develop South Vietnamese irregular military units from the minority populations. It had been devised by the CIA in early 1961 to counter expanding Viet Cong influence in South Vietnam's Central Highlands. Beginning in the village of Buon Enao, small Special Forces A teams moved into villages and set up Area Development Centres. Focusing on local defence and civic action, the Special Forces teams did the majority of the training. Villagers were trained and armed for village defence for two weeks, while localised Strike Forces would receive better training and weapons and served as a quick reaction force to react to Viet Cong attacks. The vast majority of the CIDG camps were initially manned by inhabitants of ethnic minority regions in the country especially Montagnards, who disliked both the North and South Vietnamese and therefore quickly took to the American advisors.

I nodded and went to supervise the loading. Paul was already at work lashing down the crates, I told him about the CIDG camp we were headed for.

“Let’s hope it works, this CIDG programme, he said gloomily. “From what I’ve seen the locals will just sell their arms and equipment to the VCs.”

I laughed, it wasn’t entirely fair, from what I’d heard and encountered the CIDG programme was proving to be quite successful, even though it was unlikely that there would ever be enough recruits to fully counter the Viet Cong who had limitless numbers of ethnic Viet peasants from which to recruit. Unlike the fortified hamlets scheme which appeared to have exactly the opposite effect and did little or nothing to deter the communists. While the loading was going on, Johann finished fuelling the aircraft. When he was finished he came with me for the pre-flight inspection.

“Will you be back tonight?” he asked me.

I shook my head. “It’s not likely, Lang Vei is fairly new, there won’t be any lights for us to attempt a night take off, so we’ll leave at first light, we’ll be back late morning. Johann, things are not getting any better here, would you mind if I sent Helene to sleep here in the hangar with you?”

He looked surprised. “In the same bed?”

I felt my anger rising, then saw the grin on his face. I gave him a

friendly punch. “Schweinhund! But it’s much easier to defend here than our bungalow.”

“Of course, send her over, I’ll look after her.”

When I went back to the bungalow, Helene almost spat fire at me for suggesting that it would not be safe for her to spend the night in her own home, but in the end I pressured her and she gave in.

“At least I’ll be safe with Johann,” she grinned.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that he’s not overly fond of women, Jurgen, hadn’t you noticed?”

“So, you’re saying that…”

“He’s queer, Jurgen, haven’t you seen him in town with one of the local pretty boys on his arm?”

I was astonished, so Johann was a homosexual. Well, that was his business, I’d encountered plenty of men that were that way inclined, it made no difference to me as long as they did their job. My face must have looked shocked, because she said to me, “You don’t need to worry about him either, Jurgen.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re too damned old and ugly, not his type at all,” she laughed

“That’s alright then. But please will you stay in the hangar tonight, I’m thinking about strengthening security around the bungalow, but until then you need to be more careful.”

“I will, yes, I promise,” she said.

She came and kissed me, I felt the love and the warmth flowing out of her. If anything happened to this woman I knew I would have little or nothing left to live for. I picked up the pack she had prepared with food and drinks for the flight, then walked across to the airfield, we had yet to replace the Hotchkiss.

The cargo was already loaded, the two Special Forces soldiers were laying in the grass sipping cold cans of beer, without doubt Paul’s gesture to keep the paying customers happy.

“I’ll radio the tower for advance clearance, as soon as we’re ready I’ll give you a call and we can take off.”

They both waved an acknowledgment and I got into the cockpit and contacted the tower. Paul had lodged our flight plan and they were expecting

me, quite apart from the small envelope of U.S. dollars that I gave the airport manager each month, so they cleared us to leave straight away. I started the engines and beckoned our two passengers onboard. They scrambled up and climbed into the cabin, Paul closed the door and I opened up the throttles for take-off. Soon we were airborne and I set course for north, the trip would take us about six hours and we took turns at the controls. Using the auto pilot was an option we rarely used, this was a war zone and pilots needed to keep alert for the enemy, more than once a MIG 17 had wandered south bent on causing mayhem. Then there were the friendlies to consider, many of the South Vietnamese pilots were recruited more on family connections than skill, they were just as likely to shoot at us as the communists. Yet it was an uneventful journey, we landed on time at Lang Vei and a crew of Vietnamese immediately began to unload the crates. They were dressed in a rough approximation of paramilitary uniforms, no two were alike, but their faces were unmistakably Montagnard. The camp they were building was not impressive, I hoped they would develop some sort of effective well defended fire base before the Viet Cong attempted to overrun it, as they did with every camp that was built.

Our passengers had gone away when the crates were finally unloaded, one of them returned to invite us to the mess for drinks.

"Hi, we were never introduced, my name's Ed, I guess you knew we were army."

I shook his hand. "I'm Jurgen, this is Paul. Yes, I'm afraid it was pretty obvious. If you're an American in civilian clothes in this country armed with an M16 it normally means US Army Special Forces. We've transported a lot of your equipment around Vietnam, and a few of your people."

We wandered into their mess tent, a bar was set up and one end and everyone was sprawled around folding chairs and tables, some were lying on the floor. Ed ordered us a cold beer each with condensation running down the outside of the glass, we drank it thankfully in the extreme humidity which was even worse here than at Tan Son Nhat.

"Someone said you were here before, Foreign Legion, right?"

I nodded to him. "Yes, it was before the country was partitioned."

"Well, we hope to do better this time."

I didn't reply. Paul looked away and took a deep sip of his drink. Ed looked at us intently.

"You don't think we will?"

"Ed, Paul and I were soldiers during the Second World War, on the Eastern Front."

"SS?" I nodded. "Waffen-SS. We were soldiers, like the French, like the Americans, like you. We went into Russia using overwhelming force, a mechanised army and air force the like of which the world had never seen before. And they beat us."

He listened intently. I noticed that heads had turned to listen too, well, let them. He had asked a question, I would give him a straight answer.

"They beat us because when our rear echelon forces were terrorising the population, stealing their land, enslaving them, the communists promised them everything if they would fight for Stalin. Land, wealth, food, freedom, everything a man could want. And of course, it they refused to fight for Stalin, there was a bullet for them. So they fought, in their millions and millions. The communists here are making a similar offer. While the government gives them nothing, no hope, only endless corruption so that everything they own is liable to be stolen from them by the officials, the Viet Cong offer them peace, bread and land," I smiled. "In fact, that was the slogan of Lenin, the architect of Soviet Communism. Peace, bread and land. Whoever can offer them that will win."

There was a silence in the mess tent. Then a voice came from a dark corner at the back of the tent.

"Ain't no fucking Nazi gonna tell the U.S. Army it's beat before we've even fought a battle."

We looked over as a tall man got up. He must have been six feet six inches tall and almost as broad, unusual for Special Forces who tended to be more conventional in appearance, often slight and wiry. He came over to us.

"You hear me, Nazi? Are you telling us that we're beat before we even start?"

"No, leave it Jerry," Ed said to him, "they're drinking with me."

"It's ok, Ed," I smiled. I believed I had the big guy's measure, undoubtedly a bully, very strong but a heavy drinker and right now he'd clearly been indulging for some time.

"In the first place, my friend, I am not a Nazi. And in the second place I did not suggest that the Viet Cong would beat the U.S. Army."

He lunged forward, shouting, "You're a shitfaced liar, you fucking Nazi bastard."

He telegraphed his move very obviously. Even before he launched the

blow I was ready for him. A huge fist came around that would have broken my jaw if it had connected, but I stepped slightly to one side and scooped his ankle away, chopping the side of his neck as he went down. He lay quietly, unconscious. The tent was silent, the other soldiers astonished that their huge comrade had been knocked out so easily. I looked around the room.

"Before I go, let me be clear. The American forces will probably beat the Viet Cong, but the day you leave Vietnam the Viet Cong will roll through this country like a knife through butter. Good night, gentlemen."

We walked back to the plane. The wind had risen and it had started to rain. Through the blackness we could see the trees bending in the wind. We checked the ground anchors to make sure the Douglas was securely tied down.

"What do you think?" I asked Paul.

"Monsoon," he replied, "it'll be here by morning, it's going to be a bastard to take off."

"We've done it in worse," I replied. I heard him grunt. He didn't sound happy.

As usual when we were away from Tan Son Nhat, we took turns on watch. There was little to worry about, the Special Forces patrolled regularly, they were taking no chances this close to the DMZ. By morning the storm was just as bad and we sat in the cockpit to wait it out. We heard a noise at the door and looked around, a captain was climbing in. He walked through to the cockpit.

"Gentlemen, my name is Captain Forester, I'm in command at this base. We've has a message from Saigon, you're required to return immediately to Tan Son Nhat."

Paul smiled at him. "Captain, we'd like nothing better than to go home, but in this weather we have no choice but to wait it out."

The American looked cold. "Sir, you don't understand. You are to return to Tan Son Nhat, my orders are to make sure you leave immediately."

Paul looked at me. I tried to reason with the soldier. "Captain Forester, you can see the weather outside. If we try and take off now it is quite likely that we will not even clear the airfield. That won't help anyone if you have a crashed plane littering your field."

"Nevertheless, Sir, I have my orders. You will take off from this airfield within the hour or your aircraft will be impounded and become the property of the U.S. government. Either whole or in pieces," he smiled

thinly.

I could see Paul beginning to glow bright red with anger and I hurried to head off a violent confrontation.

"Paul, leave it. Captain, we will take off as ordered."

"Very well, have a safe flight," he grunted ironically as he left the cockpit.

"What the hell, Jurgen, it's impossible, we'll never get off the ground, we'll lose the plane."

"Maybe. I've been watching the weather, it swirls in with torrents of rain, then the wind and rain eases for perhaps a minute or two, a tiny weather window. If we can catch that moment, we could make it."

"That's crazy," he said angrily.

"No, not at all. Would you have us walk home and give the C-47 to the U.S. government?"

He was thoughtful for a moment. "Ok, perhaps that's not much of an alternative. We'll need to be throttled up ready to go as soon the weather is about to ease, it'll be touch and go."

"When has that ever stopped us?" I asked him.

We pre-flighted the plane and started the engines. We taxied to the end of the short strip, head to wind, and waited with the brakes on. It was impossible to see more than fifty yards in front of us, the rain smashing against the windscreen. When I thought the window was approaching, we throttled up, the engines screamed and then nothing. The rain lashed against the aircraft, shrouding the field in wet mist. After a minute, Paul shouted across to me over the noise of the engines. "Jurgen, we're going to overheat, we'll need to throttle back."

"Another few seconds, just wait."

I could see him looking at the gauges, the starboard engine was already in the red, the port engine nearly there. The engines continue to scream, the gauges rose, and then something, some sixth sense, told me that the moment was about to happen.

"Go, Paul, brakes off, let's go!"

With a look of astonishment on his face as if I'd just told him to jump off a cliff, he released the brakes. The engines were still screaming and the rain beating down on us as we hurtled along the field, gathering speed. To his credit, Paul made no further objections, trusting in my judgement, but I wondered if his trust was misplaced. We reached takeoff speed, he looked

over to me, but I kept going. Suddenly the wall of green jungle loomed in front of us, I wrenched back on the column, we left the ground and the rain suddenly, magically eased. Paul began retracting the undercarriage and added his weight to the control column as we fought to gain height to clear the trees. We weren't going to make it, then I saw a slight gap in the tree line, I banked the plane over and kicked the rudder bar to take us towards it. We edged nearer the tree line, I banked over more steeply and we were in the gap. We gained height and within seconds The C-47 was soaring over the jungle.

We flew on in silence, Paul throttled back slightly to stop the engines exploding and we continued to slowly gain height. We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Gott im Himmel, Jurgen, you've taken five years off of my life."

I laughed, we'd made it. At six thousand feet we burst out of the clouds and rain into clear sky. Provided we didn't run into a wayward MIG or trigger happy ARVN fighter jock, we'd be back at Tan Son Nhat by afternoon.

"How about some music?" I said as we eased the throttles back to cruising speed and the intense racket of the engines became more bearable. He turned on the radio already tuned to AFN. It was playing 'The Wanderer' by Dion and the Belmonts. It seemed appropriate for the two of us, lost forever to wander the skies over the dank, hostile jungles of Vietnam like the tale of the Flying Dutchman that became one of Wagner's most famous operas.

"What made you start the take off roll before the weather window arrived?" Paul asked.

I shrugged my shoulders, not wanting to share the moment with him. In truth, I didn't know for sure myself. We had faced death many times over the years, the grim reaper always seemed to be waiting for me with open arms. I could swear that at the blackest moments I'd seen him, hideous in his hooded black cape, grinning at me with his skull like face. So it was at Lang Vei, yet this time I'd clearly seen Helene standing next to him, her hand outstretched. If I told Paul, he'd have me checked out by a doctor, so I kept quiet. The mind played strange tricks on you.

When we landed at Tan Son Nhat, two American civilians, probably CIA, were waiting outside the hangar for us. As we taxied in and stopped, they walked over to the aircraft. Almost certainly they were behind our being

forced out of Lang Vei, I wondered what the hell they wanted that was so important.

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*'A revolutionary must be thrifty, be resolute to correct errors, be greedy for learning, be persevering, adopt the habit of studying and observing, place the national interests above personal interests. . . be little desirous of material things, and know how to keep secrets'*

*Ho Chi Minh*

The men glared at each other, Giap wondering how Pham Van Dong, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of North Vietnam, dared to criticise Ho. The President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had made it clear that they were becoming far too dependent on aid from China. Yet Pham Van Dong objected, coming out strongly on the side of the Chinese. Ho tried explaining once again.

"For a thousand years this country belonged to China. On a dozen occasions during that period, the residents of Vietnam attempted to expel the ruling officials and soldiers by force of arms. Many of the rebels had even been born in China or descended from Chinese ancestors, but they did this out of a desire for power or freedom from the oppressors. The final revolt in 939 ended with Vietnam receiving vassal status from its massive northern neighbour, which entailed the payment of tributes to China in return for our autonomy. They were replaced by the French, who we drove out. Now we have the Americans, who we will also defeat in the course of time. Are we to replace these invaders with the Chinese, invite them back for a further thousand years?"

Le Duan nodded emphatically to agree with the President's word, Giap added his own weight.

"Let the Chinese in, Chairman? That way is madness, we have fought hard for the first victory of our struggle for independence. Now, before we have beaten the Americans, you talk of opening the door to the Chinese once again. Would you have us paying tribute for another thousand years?" He sneered as he finished. He had not shed blood to forge his professionally trained army into becoming servants of China.

Pham was calm and refused to be flustered. "Comrades, all that you say

is true. But listen, in the past we took arms from the Americans, has it made us vassals of America? No, they will suffer inevitable defeat at the hands of our loyal army," he nodded towards Giap. After Ho, Giap's favour was not to be discarded lightly.

"But listen, we already have the Russians on our side, even as we speak their guns and munitions are travelling down through Laos to reinforce the struggle in the South. Are we their vassals, their client state? Of course not. Is there any rule, any law that states that we cannot accept the generosity of more than one patron? I say take everything the Chinese have to offer us. They think we are fighting their war against the imperialists for them, as do the Russians. Let them think so, when our country is free of the foreign invader we will send them the bill for fighting their war. We will owe them nothing, they will owe us everything. But to achieve victory, we need guns."

They all nodded, it was a strong philosophy.

"So you make no agreements, Comrade Pham, no promises?" Giap asked.

The Chairman shook his head. "None, nor would I ever commit to making any kind of agreement."

Ho overrode them, it was time to move on.

"So it is agreed, we accept the arms from both China and Russia and make it clear they are all in our debt for fighting their war for them. Agreed?"

They all nodded.

"Excellent. Now what of these two Americans being held at Son Tay? How can we use them to our benefit?"

Le answered him.

"Propaganda, Comrade President. One of them is certainly a CIA spy, we will put them both on trial. Perhaps the American public would like to see that their government is sending spies to invade foreign nations."

"I have heard there may be a rescue attempt," Giap said abruptly.

Ho looked at him sharply. "When is this due to take place?"

"It is being planned now, Comrade Ho. We had word from Saigon to expect someone to try and break them out of prison. As yet, we have no further details." Giap paused, as if he wanted to add something, but he continued. "I have sent a company of soldiers to reinforce the local militia, we expect to prevent any attempt at a break out."

"You have given orders to shoot the invaders on sight?"

Giap nodded slowly.

"Excellent, Comrade Giap, keep me informed," Ho said.

"Now, about the rice harvest for this year. How can we distribute sufficient to feed our army and yet prevent the peasants from starving?"

"Perhaps they will just have to starve, the army must take priority," Le Duan said.

"Will you then give them your rations, Comrade?" Pham Van Dong asked.

Giap let them bicker, he was thinking about the rescuer from the south, and one of them in particular. He made a note to get clarification from his contact in Saigon.

* * * * *

# Chapter Three

*'We believe that Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving. . . . Improvements which have occurred during the past year now indicate that the Viet Cong can be contained militarily and that further progress can be made in expanding the area of government control and in creating greater security in the countryside.'*

*NIE 1963*

We shut down the engines and slumped for a moment in our seats, still astonished that we had got off so lightly at Lang Vei and made it home safely. When I had drawn breath I got up and walked back into the cabin and opened the door. The two men were stood there waiting for us.

"Mr. Hoffman, we're glad you got back safely, could we talk to you for a moment?"

Paul and I climbed down the ladder to the ground. "You'd better come into the hangar and I'll find some cold beer," I said to them.

"That's ok, Sir, we don't need any beer, we instructed the base commander at Lang Vei to order you back so that we could have a talk, we have a new contract for you."

Paul spoke angrily to them. "Your stupid order to get us to take off

from Lang Vei in a storm almost cost us the aircraft, we certainly do need a cold beer, so your business will have to wait a little longer."

He walked to the port wheel, there was a tangle of foliage around the leg. He looked at me and smiled, then pulled a small branch out from the leg and gave it to one of the men.

"Here, this is yours, government property, part of your field at Lang Vei."

They looked at it without understanding and followed us into the hangar. Johann was grinding pieces of metal, the broken wheel leg was on the bench. He waved to us and carried on and we went into the office. We took an ice cold bottle of beer apiece and sat down.

"Now, gentlemen, how can we help the CIA?"

Why were these people always surprised that they were so obvious. Just like Miles Anderson, these clean-cut American WASPs could not be anything else in their middle class American clothes and middle class American faces that were now looking at me with surprise. Perhaps they thought that ordinary well dressed American businessmen came to airfields in the war zone of Vietnam to charter ramshackle aircraft to carry anonymous cargoes around the country.

"We'd better introduce ourselves, I'm Milton Burns, and this is Robert Anderson."

We shook hands, I thought that Anderson looked familiar. "Mr. Anderson, are you by any chance related to Miles Anderson?"

He nodded, "Yeah, Miles is my older brother."

"So you both went into the same line of business?"

He smiled. "It seemed like a good idea, they were actively recruiting at Harvard, so when I graduated I just followed Miles into the Agency."

Milton Burns leaned forward. "And you, Mr. Hoffman, we understand you had a military career before starting your own airline?"

I waved my hand around the hangar. "Not much of an airline, I'm afraid. A Douglas C-47, a Cessna 170B and a tired old Junkers JU52. Hardly any competition for your Air America."

"It's not ours, Sir, Air America is a purely civilian operation, a commercial airline like yours."

Paul nearly choked on his beer, at least Anderson had the grace to go pink with embarrassment at the transparent lie.

"As you wish," I replied gravely.

“However,” he continued, “I was asking about your military career. Where did you serve?”

“I was a Senior Sergeant in the French Foreign Legion, here in Indochina, or Vietnam, as it is called these days.”

“So you’ve seen plenty of action against the communists?”

“Some, yes.”

“And before that?” He was looking at me keenly.

“Mr. Burns, I’m sure you have a file on me, the CIA has files on all foreigners in Vietnam, does it not?”

“It is true, we do keep files, but they don’t always tell the full story. You fought in the Second World War?”

“As you know, Mr. Burns, I was an officer in the SS, I fought on the Eastern Front.”

“Yes, so I understand. Tell me about your service in the Foreign Legion, did it ever take you behind enemy lines?”

I was suddenly very wary. Paul and I looked at each other, we had both taken part in a highly secret mission up on the Chinese border, before partition. It was still classified secret by the French government, I didn’t like the way this was heading.

“How can I help you, Mr. Burns?”

He sighed, understanding that I wouldn’t discuss it with him. “Ok, it’s like this. Miles, my brother, he’s been captured. He was with Lieutenant Colonel Goldberg. They left Hue overland for Quang Tri to meet up with some of the ethnic tribes. They never reached Quang Tri and we had word yesterday evening that they were snatched by the Viet Cong. They’ve been taken to a small prison outside Hanoi, called Son Tay. Have you heard of it?”

I resisted the invitation to become embroiled. “That is most unfortunate. Are you planning a rescue mission?”

They looked at each other, Burns spoke first. “Diem’s government won’t agree to it, they’re worried about upsetting Hanoi. Diem is looking pretty shaky at the moment, he won’t do anything that may make things worse for him. So officially, the answer is no.”

I knew exactly where this was going, we all did in this room. I looked across at Paul and he gave a small shake of his head. We both knew it would be absurd to even consider going on a military mission behind enemy lines.

“Well if there’s anything we can do to help you, this side of the DMZ,

of course, do let us know. North of the DMZ is of course a foreign country, that would be an invasion, as you are aware. Sorry, gentlemen, we cannot help you there."

Robert Anderson stood up, his expression so woebegone and desperate that it was almost a caricature. Almost. "Hoffman, they'll torture him, maybe kill him."

I inclined my head, "That does occasionally happen, yes, this is a cruel war."

"Cut the crap, Hoffman," Burns snarled, revealing his true colours. "You know what we want, there's no one else who can do it, even our black operations guys have to have some sort of official clearance and that isn't going to happen, Diem has closed the door. You've carried out missions behind the lines before, certainly in Vietnam, although we don't have the details. Probably in Russia, too."

So they didn't know about our assassination mission. At least that was something, they wouldn't be asking us to go and shoot the enemy generals in their sleep.

"Gentlemen, all that was in the past, I was younger then." I smiled and showed them my palms so that they could see how open I was being with them. "Now I have a business, this airline, as you call it, and a wife. It's just not possible, sorry."

"How much?" Burns asked abruptly.

"How much? There is no price because we will not be going," I replied firmly.

My refusal only seemed to spur him on.

"I am authorised to offer you one hundred thousand dollars, cash, half in advance, half on completion of the mission." He sat back, waiting for me to absorb the amount on offer.

"I'm sorry, but we cannot do it."

"Two hundred thousand dollars, and your commercial permit will be guaranteed to be renewed for the next five years."

"What the hell are you talking about, there's never been a problem with our permit before," Paul shouted.

Burns shrugged. So that was the way it would be, a large sum of money and our permits renewed, or the possibility of being grounded next year.

"A dirty trick, Mr. Burns," I said coldly.

"Maybe, but we're in a dirty situation. For Christ's sake, this is my

brother you're talking about here, not some gook rickshaw driver," Anderson said loudly. "Mr. Hoffman, I'm begging you, will you at least consider it?"

I looked at Schuster. "Paul?"

He nodded. "We'll consider it, a serious look but no more, on condition that the threat of the permits being withdrawn is taken off of the table."

A clever move, they had little choice if they were not to look like cheap, bullying blackmailers.

"Very well," Burns said, "come over to MACV at 0900 hours tomorrow morning, we can go over the situation there with all of the intelligence reports. You'll be meeting the commander, General Paul D. Harkins, so try not to keep him waiting.

"It would help if you would send us out some transport, our jeep was destroyed in a VC mortar attack, and we haven't replaced it yet."

It was all agreed, we'd be ready at 0830 and they would send transport to pick us up. We shook hands and they left.

"What do you think?" Paul asked anxiously. "It's a lot of money, it could be a simple in and out operation."

I laughed. "Paul Schuster, when have you ever know any military operation be either simple or in and out?"

He nodded and grinned. "You're right, they never are. No, this is one to give a miss to."

Helene came into the office, she'd walked out to the airfield when she heard us land. We embraced and kissed each other warmly.

"Darling, I was worried about you," she said, "The weather reports said that there was a monsoon over Quang Tri province, I'm glad you weren't caught up in it."

"We were glad too," I replied. Schuster kept a straight face.

"I've cooked up a late lunch, would you care for some, Paul?"

He agreed enthusiastically, he had a local Vietnamese girlfriend but she was more decorative, a typical Vietnamese pocket Venus in her Ao Dai, but she wasn't the domestic type like Helene. We walked over to our bungalow, as we got nearer we could smell the cooking. She had the radio playing, a haunting song called 'Stranger On The Shore', by and Englishman, Acker Bilk. We washed and sat down to eat. I went to speak, but Helene stopped me.

"Listen to me, you two. I'm not a fool, what were those two CIA spies doing waiting for you at the hangar when you landed?"

We looked at each other. It was true that Helene had an intelligence gathering network that was sometimes the equal of the CIA.

"Just a job," Paul replied, "they wanted us to fly up north and make a collection."

"I see," she said, looking thoughtful, "so the CIA trains its Harvard and Princeton summa cum laude graduates to be simple messenger boys, do they? Why couldn't they just pick up the phone?"

I hadn't got a fool for a partner, she was highly intelligent, a doctor and an accomplished woman. I guessed that she already knew exactly why they had come, so we told her everything, including the hairy takeoff from Lang Vei.

"You're not going to accept, of course?" she said immediately.

"Well, it's not as simple as that," I replied hesitantly. "It's not just the money, if they pull our commercial permit, we're finished. We may as well pack up and leave."

"At least you will be able to pack up and leave. If you're dead or in a North Vietnamese prison, you won't even have that option."

It was a fair point. We argued backwards and forwards, but in the end there really was no way we could consider going, it was an operation best left to the military. We sat eating and drinking for the evening, it was one of those times when it was good to be alive. Vietnam could be a scented paradise, the sun shining and birds singing, when it wasn't hell on earth. Finally Paul got up to say goodbye, he thanked Helene for dinner.

"You're welcome, but remember, no missions to the North, do you understand?" she said severely.

He looked at me uncertainly, but I didn't smile.

"No, my friend, she isn't joking."

When the car came to collect me in the morning, Helene came out and got in.

"What are you doing?" I said, aghast.

"Doing? I'm representing my interests as a part owner of the airline, darling. What else?"

I sighed and made room for her in the car. The driver, an elderly Vietnamese MACV employee, turned around and glanced at me and we both raised our eyebrows. Women!

The airfield was becoming busier with every week that passed. Our operation was conducted from what was little more than a field at the side,

which kept us away from the hubbub of the stream of traffic that went in and out constantly. MACV had a satellite office situated in a building at the side of the airfield. We went through the door, Anderson and Burns were waiting for us, they raised their eyebrows at Helene but said nothing. We shook hands and went up the stairs and into a reception room outside the General's office. We only waited for a few minutes, then a tough looking major came out and called us in. The General stood up to greet us, he shook hands with me, Helene and Paul and the major seated us in chairs set before the desk. Looking every inch the professional soldier, Harkins sat down behind his desk and waited for the two CIA men to begin.

He was fifty eight years old, a soldier who had made his name serving under General Patton in the Second World War when Adolf Hitler embarked on his final piece of idiocy, the Ardennes counteroffensive in the winter of 1944. As Patton's operations officer, he earned the name Ramrod Harkins for his constant efforts to press forward. Harkins had repeatedly expressed optimism about the course of the war, although I wondered if his optimism has been dented by the poor performance of his forces at Ap Bac.

Milton Burns, the CIA man, started the ball rolling.

"I've spoken to Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Schuster, so far I haven't managed to persuade them to give it a go, but I'm still hoping they may find it possible when they've seen the plan we've prepared."

"And Mrs. Hoffman is here for what reason?" Harkins asked.

Before Burns could answer, Helene spoke up. "General, Mrs. Hoffman is here herself, you can ask me personally. And the answer would be that she is part owner of the airline so she has a say in the decision of whether to go or not."

He smiled. "Very well, allow me to introduce Major Duane Brown."

We nodded to the Major, who gave us a quick smile. "Major Brown is a man of, shall we say, exceptional talents, he has led several teams on search and destroy missions against the Viet Cong."

"Does he have experience of North Vietnam?" I asked him.

"No, not as such, but we're confident he can do the job."

I wasn't. The culture, customs and everything about North Vietnam was totally different from that in the South. But it was their business, not mine.

"The plan is to fly his men into the North, his team will parachute into Son Tay and break the prisoners out, then lead them back to safety. Right,

let's have a look at the maps."

We spent some time going over the maps and charts of the area, intelligence estimates, reports, even some aerial photographs that the General told us were taken by a U2 overflight. We winced as he said it, almost three years ago the Soviets had shot down a U2 spy plane with an S-75 missile, it was piloted by Francis Gary Powers who was still serving a ten year sentence in Russia for espionage.

Russia, of course, was the country that was supplying Hanoi with most of their arms and equipment. I hoped for the U2 pilot's sake that they hadn't yet supplied Ho Chi Minh with the S-75.

The photographs were remarkably clear, they showed a village and a larger structure at one side which they said was a factory that had been converted into a prison. It was about twelve miles outside Hanoi. After surveying all of the maps, looking at the photographs and reading the reports, we sat back down to discuss it.

"Mr. Hoffman, what do you think, you've fought in that area, can it be done?"

"General, what you are proposing is to send a small team into the heart of Ho Chi Minh's territory, take on the guards of this prison and release the prisoners, who may be injured or wounded, then get them back hundreds of miles through enemy territory. The chances of success are very slim. If you fly them out, you'll be up against North Vietnamese MIG 17s and their air defence system, which has become quite sophisticated. It is definitely not worth the risk, unless one of these Americans had knowledge of your complete order of battle and the Commander in Chief's strategy for the next several years, which I assume is not the case."

There was a silence in the room. The General, the Major and the two CIA men looked embarrassed, and it suddenly stuck me in a blinding flash of comprehension. The extraordinary sum of money on offer to get them back, the threats, the personal interest of the MACV commander. Bringing them back was not a priority.

"It's not a rescue mission, is it, General? It's an assassination."

Helene went white. "Oh, dear God, like the Giap mission."

They all looked at her. "What was that," Burns said, "About Giap?"

"Something we heard, that's all, about a French plan to kill the commander of the Viet Minh during the French war," I said quickly.

"Oh, right, did it come to anything?"

"No," Helene, Paul and I replied in chorus.

"How would you know?" Burns asked suspiciously.

We would know because we were there, fighting through a hostile, inhospitable country on a virtual suicide mission. But it was a forgotten part of our past, sealed by order of the French government and mutual agreement.

"There was something about it in the local paper," I replied lamely.

Burns nodded and lost interest so I tackled the General further. "So what exactly do these two men know? Am I to understand that you sent them into hostile territory with detailed knowledge of your military planning? That's why you're talking about coming out overland, you don't intend that they'll be with you, you're planning to silence them."

Harkins looked angry. "What knowledge they have is not your concern, Mr. Hoffman, but we consider it vital to our interests that they not be forced to tell the communists what they know."

He put emphasis on the Mr., underscoring my civilian status. "Neither did we send them into hostile territory, they were operating inside the Republic of South Vietnam."

I couldn't help laughing out loud. "You may not consider it hostile territory, General, but I can assure you that the communists do."

The office went silent, we were at an impasse. Major Brown made an attempt at a resolution. "Look, arguing won't make a dime's worth of difference. I propose we make a deal with Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Schuster."

We looked at him. "Go on, Major," Harkins said suspiciously.

"It's just this, they both have considerable experience of operating in the North. If they will agree to act as mission consultants, we'll offer them a reasonable payment for their services and no threats on their licenses. We'll get one of the company aircraft to take us, I'm sorry, Burns," he said, nodding to the CIA man, "that's the way it will have to be."

He looked hard at Burns as he mentioned the licenses and using the CIA's own aircraft, Burns glared back at him.

Harkins nodded. "That's sounds reasonable, Major. Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Schuster, what do you say?"

Paul nodded to me in the affirmative. "On one condition, that this mission is a rescue, and not an assassination, we'll have no part of that."

"Of course, we can agree to that. There never was a plan to assassinate anyone, so that's no problem," the General said. He had the grace to avoid my eyes as he said it. He rounded on Burns, who was trying to speak.

“Mr. Burns, just get me an aircraft, I don’t care how you do it, clear?”

The man nodded resignedly.

“In that case we’re agreed,” I said, “we’ll give you all the help you need.”

We spent the rest of the morning going over their plans. Schuster and I checked and rechecked maps and reports and passed on our knowledge of the area around Hanoi, constantly reminding them that it was ten years out of date. The General had sandwiches and coffee brought in for lunch and we kept on working into the late afternoon. By six we still hadn’t finished and they took us back to our hangar.

The following morning we were booked on a routine flight to Hue, taking regular supplies for a French exploration company. We agreed to meet the day after, which would be the final day before the actual mission began. Time wasn’t on their side, if the communists found out about the information that their two American captives held, the mission would be over and with it a large part of American strategy for the foreseeable future in South East Asia.

Schuster and I took the C-47 to Hue in the morning. It was a milk run, as the RAF used to call their missions during the Second World War. We flew up, unloaded and started the flight back without any problems from the communist insurgency. On the way back the starboard turbocharger started malfunctioning again, we decided that we would have to import a spare from the US, expensive but the only way we would keep the aircraft flying. The radio crackled, it was Johann.

“Johann,” I greeted him cheerily, “you’re just the man I need, we’re still having supercharger problems, we’re going to need to source one in the U.S. if there’s no other way.”

There was silence. He came back after almost a minute. “Jurgen, we’ve got a problem. There’s been another mortar attack at Tan Son Nhat.”

“Damn, any damage to our hangar or aircraft?”

“It’s not that, one of the shells missed the airfield completely, Jurgen. It hit your bungalow.”

Helene! I couldn’t ask the question, I felt as if I’d been punched in the stomach, I felt dizzy, everything started to go black. Schuster understood immediately and took over.

“How is she, Johann, is she alive?”

“Yes, she’s alive,” he said hastily, “but she’s badly wounded. A U.S.

officer, a Major Brown, found out and pulled some strings, he had her taken to Saigon Station Hospital on Tran Hung Dao Street, it's a naval hospital that serves the whole of MACV."

I cut in. "Johann, how is she, what are they doing to her?"

"She's not good, Jurgen. She took a splinter to her abdomen that went right through and is resting against some major organs, I'm not entirely certain what they are, sorry."

"Look, tell me the truth, is she expected to live?"

He was silent for a full half a minute, it seemed like an hour. When he spoke again, his voice was stretched and broken as if he had been weeping. "It's touch and go. We don't know, but a priest has given her the last rites."

I reeled and clutched at a metal stanchion for support. Once again I felt the blackness coming over me. Paul looked over. "Are you ok, Jurgen?" I nodded, took a deep breath to control myself and spoke into the microphone. "Thank you Johann, we'll be back as soon as possible. Would you have a taxi standing by in an hour?"

"Of course, I'm sorry, Jurgen."

"Yes."

Schuster had already throttled up to maximum speed, he flew the aircraft steadily on to Saigon while I sat in my misery. When we landed I bounded out of the door, the taxi had come up and I got in.

"You know where to go?"

"Tran Hung Dao Street, Saigon Hospital."

We roared off, I heard Schuster shout that he'd follow me when the plane was secured. The taxi dropped me outside the hospital, when I ran in there was the usual antiseptic smell, doctors in white coats walking past and nurses in white uniforms. It being a naval installation there was a pretty, uniformed chief petty officer behind the counter. She raised her eyebrows as I rushed in, dusty and dishevelled after my long flight.

"I'm looking for Helene Baptiste, she was brought here after the mortar attack this morning."

"Yes, of course, the French civilian. She's in the OR at the moment, they're working on her. Who are you?"

"Jurgen Hoffman, Miss Baptiste is my wife."

"Very well, if you would like to sit and wait we'll call you as soon as there is any news."

"Will it be long?"

She looked at me sympathetically. "She was seriously hurt, Sir. They're doing their best for her, but…"

She left it unsaid.

"Please call me if anything changes," I said to her.

I went to the waiting area at the side of the reception counter, but I couldn't sit. For over an hour I paced up and down, waiting for news. Both Paul and Johann joined me, they were immensely fond of her and I could see in their faces that they feared the worst almost as much as I did. I shook my head in response to their unasked question.

After two more hours of agonised waiting, a surgeon came to speak to us. His face was grave.

"She's very sick, Mr. Hoffman, a fragment of shrapnel is lodged against her spine. Did you know she was pregnant?"

Pregnant? I was astounded. After all this time, we'd hoped and prayed that a baby would come along. Now it had, only for this to happen. I felt even more numb with the enormous loss I was facing.

I went in to see her. She was covered in bandages, the mortar had inflicted several small cuts to her face but the main damage was underneath the bedcovers. She was asleep, very peaceful under the effect of the painkilling drugs and the anaesthetic. I stayed with her for an hour, Paul and Johann spent a short time and then returned to the airfield, there were problems there that needed dealing with too. When I came out of the intensive care ward, I went and found the surgeon. His name badge identified him as Surgeon Commander Walter H Bloom, USN.

"Doctor, tell me, what are her chances?"

He hummed and hah'd the way all doctors do.

"Look, Mr. Hoffman, we have basic facilities here. Our hospital can only provide very limited care. This injury is far too serious for us to treat. Helene has shrapnel lodged in her spine and possibly spinal cord. Two vertebrae are damaged, L1 and L2. There are concerns that they could collapse further and cause permanent damage and paralysis."

He stopped to allow me to digest the bad news.

"Is she in pain?" I asked him.

He thought for a moment. "I'm afraid so, yes. She is in considerable pain, but it is controlled. Although she has feeling and movement in her legs, at times this movement is restricted and is replaced by a feeling of numbness. This is causing great concern as it suggests increased pressure on

the spinal cord. She has no signs of infection, but this is also a major concern as is likely to develop if untreated and cause serious complications, including meningitis. She has had no major blood loss, but her blood pressure is slightly elevated, there could be kidney damage. It is also possible that bone fragments and shrapnel could be in the spine which may lead to further damage or infection. Bear in mind, Mr. Hoffman, she is about eight weeks pregnant. Before she became unconscious, she made it clear that under no circumstances will she consider an abortion, which the hospital also feels should be considered."

We stood in silence as he watched me carefully. Did he think I was going to become hysterical, I wondered? But I supposed I had every right to go crazy. "So what can you do?"

"She needs urgent surgery, you must understand how life threatening this is, a potential outcome of permanent paralysis, kidney failure, brain damage if untreated and…" He didn't say the rest, I understood.

"We may be able to save her and the baby," he continued, "but it's touch and go. If we were back in the States I'd say her chances were very good, but we're not. Our equipment and expertise here is mainly for dealing with less serious wounds, we patch them up and either send them home for more treatment or back out into the field to rejoin their unit."

"Can you get her on a flight back to the States?"

He smiled and shook his head. "They pulled strings from MACV to get her in here, but a medical flight to the States, well, she'd need to be service personnel, which she clearly isn't. I'm sorry, Mr. Hoffman, but we'll do our best."

I argued with him for a half an hour until I was almost thrown out of the hospital, but it was useless, they wouldn't allow it. Before I left they let me see Helene, she lay alone in a white room, covered in pipes, wires, drips, bandages and monitors. She hadn't recovered consciousness, her face was ghostly white with a stretched, clammy pallor that I had seen many times before in the field worn by heavily wounded casualties. Some of them never recovered.

I left the base, walking like a zombie, I was in a dark, damp fog of misery and despair. I eventually found a taxi to take me back to Tan Son Nhat. I didn't go to the hangar, instead I went to MACV and asked for Major Brown. Robert Anderson came out instead. He nodded to the sentry. "It's ok, he's with us." We went through and upstairs to an office I hadn't

seen before, Milton Burns was sitting behind a desk. So this was where the CIA operated from.

"I came to see Major Brown, where is he?" Burns looked up.

"General Harkins asked for volunteers to go on a search and destroy mission to find that Viet Cong mortar team, he's out there now with a team of Green Berets. He thought it would be a good chance to get some field training prior to the mission."

I nodded. "You heard about my wife?"

"We did, yes, it's terrible news, Hoffman," Anderson replied.

"I want her on a flight back Stateside, she needs medical treatment and she won't get it here."

They both looked at me in surprise. "But she's a civilian, that kind of medical flight is impossible," Burns said.

"I'll do whatever you want, I'll do anything. You want me to transport your team into Hanoi, I'll do it, just get her to a U.S. hospital."

They both shook their heads. "It's impossible, not for a civilian, no matter what you are able to offer. We're truly sorry, Hoffman."

Burns at least did look genuinely sorry, perhaps the CIA man did have a soul after all. I left the office in despair and walked back to our hangar. Paul and Johann were both waiting for me, but I shook my head, no news.

The evening dragged on and I went back to the hospital, but there was no change, Helene was still unconscious. I sat with her for several hours and went home. Half of our bungalow had been destroyed, but I managed to make up a bed in the undamaged part and I spent a few hours drifting in and out of sleep. In the morning I phoned the hospital but there was no change. I got dressed and walked to MACV, Paul was already there waiting for me.

"I can take care of the meeting if you wish," he said. "Why don't you go back and see Helene?"

"No, I'll go to the hospital later, let's get this done."

We walked in, the sentries were ready and let us through, and we went up the stairs and into the outer office of General Harkins. Burns and Anderson were waiting, they both looked grave.

"What's up?" I asked them. They shook their heads, tight-lipped spooks to the very end. The door opened and a different officer showed us into the office. General Harkins nodded a greeting.

"Gentlemen, this is Captain James Cady, Special Forces. He is Major Brown's replacement for Operation Reachout." He saw our looks of

incomprehension. "That's what we've called the rescue mission."

"So where is Major Brown?" I asked him. "Why has he pulled out?"

"Major Brown is dead, Mr. Hoffman, he was hit by a Viet Cong bullet last night while leading a search and destroy team to locate the mortar crew that did the damage on this base, your wife included."

It was a major blow to their mission. Brown had studied the plan for several days and he had at least a slim chance of pulling it off.

"How much experience does Captain Cady have of fighting the Viet Cong?" I asked him. They all looked embarrassed, eventually, the General replied.

"Captain Cady arrived in the country two days ago, he was unassigned and volunteered to take charge."

I felt chilled, a sense of déjà vu. While our Waffen-SS troops were bleeding and freezing to death on the Eastern Front, Heinrich Himmler sent out teams from his Ahnenerbe research institute to discover archaeological evidence related to the origins of the Aryan race. He had a bizarre mix of adventurers, mystics, and even reputable scholars to help rewrite all of human history. His expeditions went to Biskupice in Poland, Olympia in Greece, Slovakia, the Croat fortress of Surval, Serbia and Caucasia. Further expeditions made their way to Tibet to help find evidence to support his crackpot theories of the origins of the Master Race. This mission was of a different type, but it seemed just as ill-conceived, just as crackpot.

The office was silent for a moment. Cady broke it. "Mr. Hoffman, I may not have the experience of fighting these savages, but I've seen action and I'll see this mission through."

Harkins looked at me and Paul. "Well? What do you think?"

It was Paul who spoke up, angrily. "Is this the way the U.S. Army operates, sending ill-prepared, untrained men to carry out dangerous missions? Good God, General, it's crazy."

"Hoffman?" he asked. I shook my head. "Paul is right. Without the kind of expertise that Major Brown had as a bare minimum, the chances of success are zero."

"Hoffman," Milton Burns broke in, "that's not your call to make."

"Shut up, Milton," Harkins said. "There are only two people in room who have actually been there and know how the land lies, and you're not one of them." He looked at Paul and me. "What do you gentlemen suggest? We have to get them out, it is imperative."

"I'll take them in and bring them out," I said to him. He nodded thoughtfully. "I see. What's the price, Mr. Hoffman?"

"You get my wife on a flight to the States today, and get her wounds treated in a hospital equipped to deal with them."

"General, you can't…"

"Burns, I told you to shut up," he snapped. He picked up the phone.

"Get me the colonel in charge of logistics, I want him now, wherever he is. Get him in here, on the double."

We sat waiting for less than a minute before the door burst open and a harried looking colonel rushed in and saluted. "Yes, Sir, General, what can I do for you?"

"Colonel, there is a lady in the Saigon Station Hospital, Helene Baptiste. I want her on a flight tonight to Washington and a team standing by at Walter Reed Army Medical Centre to operate on her. Make it happen, Colonel, I won't take no for an answer."

"Sir," the colonel saluted and rushed out.

"Satisfied, Hoffman?" Harkins said to me.

I nodded. "Thank you, General. I'll get your men back for you." I felt an enormous weight beginning to lift off my head, but I knew this was only the start. It was a long flight Stateside and a lot of complicated treatment before she recovered. And there was the baby of course, Jesus Christ, I was about to become a father and now this.

"Good, then I suggest you make a start. Nice meeting you, Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Schuster."

He shook hands with us and we left his office, an aide was already announcing the arrivals for his next meeting.

"It seems we're going back to war," Schuster said grimly.

I nodded. God help all of us this time.

*****

*'A Communist land reform program in South Vietnam, begun by the Viet Minh, is still being carried out under the Viet Cong. Current reports also indicate that the Viet Cong provide assistance*

*to peasants in land clearance, seed distribution, and harvesting, and in turn persuade or force peasants to store rice in excess of their own needs for the use of guerrilla troops. Controls are apparently imposed in Viet Cong zones to prevent shipments for commercial marketing in Saigon, or to collect*

*taxes on such shipments. The Viet Cong themselves often*

*pay cash or give promissory notes for the food they acquire. Captured Viet Cong doctors or medical personnel indicate that dispensaries for treatment of Viet Cong wounded often are scattered inconspicuously among several peasant homes in a village, and that civilians are treated as facilities and supplies permit. There are also references to primary and adult education, much of it in the form of indoctrination, and to Viet Cong run schools operating almost side by side with government schools. The Viet Cong also promote cultural activities, heavily flavored with Propaganda, through press, radio and film media, as well as live drama and festivals.'*

*CIA Secret Memo*

Eight new senior officers leapt to attention, all newly arrived in Vietnam to help lead the American 'Special Advisors' programme. Harkins looked at them one by one.

"The groundwork has been done, gentlemen. On every front our Vietnamese allies are fighting the communists and achieving good results. The Viet Cong is retreating and will eventually be defeated if we keep up the pressure. Your contribution will be invaluable to that success, as will the contribution of further American units that I expect to arrive in this country over the next few months. Questions?"

"Sir, there've been stories in the news that suggest that the ARVN is not committed to the fighting and they've taken some pretty good beatings from the communists, or that they've refused to fight at all." The newly arrived major could see the General's face darkening as he spoke, but it had to be asked, it was their lives that would be on the line.

"Is the ARVN a serious problem?"

Harkins looked irritably at the major then at Colonel Gia, the ARVN liaison officer, standing passively next to him. He had to defuse this potentially embarrassing question, for no other reason than the need to maintain good relations with the Vietnamese army, the ARVN.

"The ARVN is a well trained and equipped fighting force, Major. Nothing to worry about."

Most present looked satisfied, but the major was obviously puzzled at the General's inability to answer the question. One of Harkin's aides, a captain, looked up sharply as he heard what his general had said. But it was not for him to contradict his commanding officer, he had his own career to

worry about.

Harkins looked down on the assembled officers. He knew that he was not giving them the whole truth, politics prevented him from giving them the real story. He recalled a recent meeting with Diem, the President of the Republic of Vietnam. He'd spoken to Diem directly, giving it to him straight.

"During the preceding week, all of your ARVN divisions, everywhere, it was reported that there was a serious shortage of company grade officers. In some cases, there were only six officers in a battalion. There were instances of companies commanded by trainees or sergeants. Leadership is lacking in platoons and companies, the very place where it is needed most, since these are the units which do the fighting."

He had recommended diverting officers from headquarters or logistical commands to combat units, shortening the training time at the officer school, and bringing more young professional men into the armed forces with abbreviated officer training.

Diem had nodded to Harkins.

"Of course, you are correct, General. I am concerned over the number of senior officers who have reached the height of their potential and who lack the education and initiative required in higher grades."

"Such men should be eliminated," Harkins replied.

Diem spread his hands wide, as if to say 'look how difficult this is, how my hands are tied.'

"One of the difficulties in identifying incompetent officers lies in the fact that my generals do not want to recommend the separation of officers who are old friends. But I am considering the thought of elimination."

But of course, none of this was for the consumption of these new officers, nor for his superiors back in Washington. He had a war to fight, sometimes that meant bending the truth a little to get people on your side, it was called politics. In the meantime, he needed men, both American and Vietnamese, who were on his side.

"Don't worry, men, although the Viet Cong is already beaten, there is still plenty to do. We're making history here, defeating the communists. For you officers that means promotions and medals, and there are plenty of both to go around."

The men cheered heartily. Now he had to get them and their ARVN counterparts to fight the communists.

* * * * *

# Chapter Four

*As you are aware, the great difficulties we had to live through last August and September resulted largely from a nearly complete breakdown of the Government's ability to get accurate assessments of the situation in the Vietnamese countryside. The more we learn about the situation today, the more obvious it becomes that the excessively mechanical system of statistical reporting which had been devised in Washington and applied in Saigon was giving us a grotesquely inaccurate picture. Once again it is the old problem of having people who are responsible for operations also responsible for evaluating the results.*

*Michael Forrestal, NSC 1963*

Paul and I went into the city to see Helene. Still unconscious, she was already being prepared for a flight to the States. It was late evening by the time we got back to the hangar, I decided to sleep there, I was too sick with worry and grief to go back to the ruined bungalow. Besides, there was work to be done. Johann Drexler was waiting for us, he seemed to live in the hangar surrounded by his beloved aircraft and tools. Strangely, he'd learned to fly during a period of time he spent in South America after the war, but he preferred spending his time up to his armpits in grease. He freely admitted that with poor eyesight he would be a danger to himself and to his passengers if he ever flew. He had gone through the war on the Eastern Front as a Waffen-SS Hauptscharführer in the Das Reich Panzer Regiment. Escaping from the Battle of Berlin with hardly a scratch, he made his way to Bolivia where he was hit by a shell fragment during one of the many upheavals that were a feature of that country's politics. Besides, he preferred the company of engines and tools, they were much more reliable and less fickle than the shadowy clients for whom we flew cargos and passengers around the country.

He asked about Helene and was visibly relieved that she would be receiving the best possible treatment.

"We had a Captain Cady called round earlier, he said he would be back in the morning to brief you."

Paul and I smiled at each other. So this fiery young Special Forces Captain with no experience was coming to brief us with his extensive knowledge and experience of North Vietnam. It would be interesting. We sat and drank our way through a few beers. Aircraft took off constantly from the main runway of Tan Son Nhat, Helene would be on one of them, it was reassuring. I thought of her as she lay in that hospital bed, so close to death, then I thought of the woman I knew, lively, vivacious, caring, warm, she was everything any man could want and more. She had to pull through, just had to. I vowed to do everything in my power to make that happen even if I had to go into Hanoi and murder Ho Chi Minh personally. Finally, I made up a camp bed in the office and slept. In the morning, I was drinking a cup of coffee and making some notes on a pad about maintenance schedules when I heard a series of shouts outside the hangar. I went outside and there was Captain Cady lining up his Special Forces troops, five soldiers, festooned with packs, weapons and a heap of stores they were unloading from a U.S. army truck. He was shouting orders at the top of his voice and it was obvious his men were unhappy, all Green Beret sergeants who were trained to act and fight independently. Cady spotted me.

"Good morning, Mr Hoffman, where do you want us to stow these crates?"

I nodded to Cady. "Captain, we are about to embark on a mission that is highly secret. I suggest you get your men and equipment inside the hangar immediately and send that truck away. You're advertising your presence to the Viet Cong."

His face darkened, stung by the implicit criticism.

"Hoffman, we are on a friendly airfield, are you suggesting that the communists are operating here?" he laughed. "Jesus Christ, are you gonna be the type that sees a red under every bed?"

I had misgivings before about working with an inexperienced officer, but now my confidence ebbed even further.

"Captain," I said gently, "in Vietnam, it is safer to assume that every single native is the enemy. That way, you tend to live longer, and I have lived here for almost fifteen years. Please, get everything inside the hangar."

He sighed and muttered something about "fucking krauts," but he shouted more orders to his men.

"And Captain," I continued, he looked at me, his face harsh, "please, a little quieter, let's keep this mission a secret for a little longer."

I thought he would explode. His men were grinning to themselves, but it had to be done, this inexperienced fool would get us all killed. They quickly stowed all the equipment inside our hangar and Cady called everyone around to go over the mission briefing. He had a packet of maps and intelligence documents in front of him.

"Ok, our reconnaissance shows that they are being held at an old rubber processing factory near Son Tay. My plan calls for us to go in during daylight, I'm unhappy about night actions. We'll make contact with elements of the Vietnamese resistance and use them to guide us to the prison. Any questions so far?"

I was astounded, what planet had this soldier been living on? "Captain Cady, tell me more about the 'Vietnamese Resistance'."

"Yeah, you should know more about that, Hoffman. When Vietnam was partitioned, a lot of anti-communists were left in the North, we just need to make contact with them to get help."

Paul and I looked at each other, this was going to be difficult. "Captain, when we cross the DMZ, you must regard every single Vietnamese as the enemy, period. Even south of the DMZ, as I have said, it is little different."

"Hang on there, pal," he said angrily, "we have made contact with one of the resistance already, Le Van Tri. He's offered to help us, we won't be on our own."

He sat back, a 'so there' expression on his face. Paul and I laughed.

"Le Van Tri is a crook," I said to him. "We move his shipments occasionally, he's a smuggler, pure and simple. His main business is taking goods into North Vietnam to beat the communist blockade. I strongly advise you to be careful when you accept his help, there will be a high price."

He shook his head, he was a hard man to convince. "Not your worry, Hoffman, I'm expecting a message from him shortly, they'll forward it from MACV, the whereabouts of a good landing zone for our aircraft and his radio operating frequency."

I shrugged. "As you wish. Next, Captain, there will be no daylight landing."

He opened his mouth to object, but I hurriedly overrode him. "Captain, when we overfly the North every gun will be turned against us. The second we cross the DMZ during daylight hours, we'll start taking ground fire. As well as that, every single Vietnamese peasant will be alerting the local party HQ that an aircraft from the South is crossing their airspace. They'll

scramble the MIGs and we'll be shot down before we even get near Hanoi."

Once again he opened his mouth to object, once more he was interrupted, this time by one of his own men.

"Cap'n, this guy's been here a long time, might be worth listening to him," he looked at me. "Pleased to meet you, Sir. I'm Master Sergeant Tim Beckerman."

I nodded to him, "Jurgen Hoffman. Captain, perhaps you would introduce your team before we go on?"

Cady wasn't happy about the interruption, but he gave in with bad grace. "Yeah, I was about to get to that. Hoffman, these are Master Sergeant Beckerman, Communications Sergeant Jack Bond, Abe Woltz, the unit sniper, Chief Warrant Officer Frank Burr, Weapons Sergeant Joe Russo."

I said hello to each of them. Now that the introductions had been made, they started to hit me with a barrage of questions about the North, but Cady cut them off.

"Can it, men, save it for later. Ok, Hoffman, you reckon on a night landing?"

"It's the only way, Captain. You can contact Le Van Tri and get him to light the landing field for us."

He nodded. "Yeah, we can do that. So what about getting out?"

"Preferably the same night, it's the only way to be certain. Remember, every single peasant is a potential enemy, it would be almost impossible to hide an aircraft during the hours of daylight."

"Why not fly it back out when we go in and return the next night for the pick up?" he persisted.

"Same problem, the whole North Vietnamese defence system will be alerted during the intervening time. No, it must be done in the same night, in and out."

He nodded slowly. He was obviously unhappy that his carefully drawn up plans were being torn to shreds, but he at least understood my reasoning. On top of that, his men listened alertly as I spoke, nodding when I made a point. He knew that these were tough, experienced soldiers, the best. He may have led them by virtue of his rank, but with men like these, consensus was just as essential to get them to follow orders. Perhaps more so. One of them spoke to me, a huge, black sergeant.

"Chief Warrant Officer Frank Burr, Sir, you obviously know what you're talking about," everyone looked at Cady, who reddened slightly.

“What’s gonna be our main problem, what do you see as the biggest obstacle to us successfully completing the mission?”

The men waited quietly for my reply. I considered carefully. “In the German army, we called it the ‘Schwerpunkt’, the hard point. Yes, a good question. The answer is communications. The communists have an extensive early warning and intelligence system. Every farmer, every village has a means of communicating enemy incursions with Hanoi. If one of them, just one, a farmer herding pigs on a hillside, a labourer digging a road, gets the word out, we’re in trouble, we’ll have the MIGs on our backs before we cross back over the DMZ.”

Cady sneered. “You make them sound almost invincible, Hoffman, a bunch of commie peasants and guerrillas.”

I smiled. “You haven’t beaten them yet, Captain. These people have been fighting one oppressor after another for over a thousand years. Just think, hundreds of years before the Europeans discovered America, they were fighting the foreign invader. And they keep fighting, they beat the French and it is by no means certain that you Americans will do better. At Ap Bac they defeated a combined ARVN and American force ten times their size. Don’t underestimate them. That way, we stand a good chance of getting in and out without undue problems. Avoid contact, that’s the real trick.”

The room was quiet, then a soldier rushed into the hangar clutching an envelope.

“Message from MACV for Captain Cady.”

“I’m Cady.”

He took the envelope, ripped it open and rapidly read the message. Then he looked at me meaningfully. “It’s a message from Le Van Tri, did you know about this?”

I shook my head.

“Well,” he continued, “it seems you were right, Le Van Tri has named his price.”

The soldiers looked at me as if I was Merlin the Wizard, but the truth was, I dealt with these people all of the time, there was always a price.

“His son, Le Van Dao is down in the Mekong at a place called Soc Trang. He’s staying with some people called the Binh Xuyen. We’re to pick him up and take him with us and hand him over to Le Van Tri. What do you make of it, Hoffman?”

“Paul, would you explain to the Captain what this means?”

"By all means," he replied grimly. "Firstly, the Binh Xuyen is a criminal gang, no more, no less. They're rivals to Le Van Tri's outfit, both are always trying to carve out a bigger slice of the cake. If Le Van Dao is with the Binh Xuyen, he's a hostage being held for some reason, maybe ransom, maybe something else. Le Van Tri wants us to go down there and bust him out."

They all looked at him in amazement.

"Mr Schuster," Cady said contemptuously, "You're saying that this fucking smuggler wants to use an American Special Forces unit as his own private army?"

"It looks that way, yes."

He shook his head from side to side. "No way, no fucking way. We'll have to do it some other way."

We were all silent for a moment.

"Hoffman, do you have anyone who can light a landing field for us near Son Tay?"

"Only Le Van Tri, I'm sorry. And if there was anyone else, he'd only kill them to force us to get his son back for him."

"Jesus H fucking Christ," he snarled, "one fucking slope peasant holding the U.S. army to ransom. Is there no other way?"

I shook my head.

"What if I could persuade the General to pay this ransom?"

I shook my head again. "It may not be ransom, it could be something else entirely, a squabble over territory, anything."

Just then, Johann walked over to us, he'd been working on the C-47. "Bad news, Jurgen, that supercharger has finally given up altogether."

"How soon can you source a replacement?"

He looked mournful. "It's already on order. Three days, I'm afraid."

"Is he talking about our plane, the one you said you'd fly us in with?" Cady asked harshly.

I didn't answer him for a moment. I was sick of this arrogant, corn fed American officer. His men were quiet, watchful, intelligent, obviously tough and competent at what they did. He was a product of wealthy parents, probably an Ivy League college and regarded anyone not as privileged as him as a lesser human.

"It's ok, we'll use the Junkers 52, it's not a setback."

"Are you talking about that piece of Nazi junk out there in the hangar?"

he said incredulously.

I gave them a potted history of the 'Aunty Ju', as we called this stalwart of the German armed forces during the war. The Junkers Ju 52, a German transport aircraft, was manufactured from 1932 to 1945. It saw both civilian and military service during the 1930s and 1940s. In its civilian role, it flew with over twelve air carriers including Swissair and Lufthansa as an airliner and freight hauler. In a military role, it flew with the Luftwaffe as a troop and cargo transport and briefly as a medium bomber. The Junkers 52 continued in post war service with military and civilian air fleets up to the present day. Indeed, the Portuguese Air Force, already using the Ju 52s as a transport plane, employed the Junkers as a paratroop drop aircraft for its newly organised elite parachute forces, later known as the Batalhão de Caçadores Páraquedistas. The paratroopers used the Junkers 52 in several combat operations in Angola and other Portuguese African colonies before gradually phasing it out of service in the 1960s. The Swiss Air Force also operated the Junkers 52 from 1939 and was still using them. During the 1950s the Junkers 52 was also used by the French Air Force here in Vietnam as a bomber.

"She may not look much, but it's a thoroughly reliable aircraft that will get us there and back," I finished.

I could see his point, looking across the hangar she did look outdated with the corrugated fuselage. But she was also the only aircraft ready to go and one that I would trust implicitly. Cady finally gave in. "Yeah, yeah, if that's all we've got, we'll have to use it, but I don't like it, Hoffman. Right, what about this kid Le Van Dao, what do you suggest?"

His men were looking at each other, realising uneasily that their captain was out of his depth. From that moment, he effectively lost control of the mission, although he was almost certainly too arrogant to either admit or even understand it.

"The Binh Xuyen has a warehouse next to the airfield at Soc Trang, it's almost certain that's where they'll be holding him. It should be possible to fly in with a couple of men and free him, they won't be expecting it. In the meantime, we can get the Junkers loaded, fuelled and ready to go."

"Yeah, ok, how many men can you carry?"

"It'll have to be the Cessna," I replied. "She'll carry a maximum of four, that's the pilot, two of your men and Le Van Dao on the way back," I replied.

“Very well, that’s what we’ll do. Take off this evening for Soc Trang, Sergeant Woltz, Chief Warrant Officer Burr, you will accompany Mr. Hoffman and bring this gook kid back here. Hoffman, I want to be ready to leave as soon as you get back. How long will it take to get us to the North?”

I looked at the clock. “Paul, you’ll need to load extra fuel in the Junkers, we’ll refuel on the ground in the North. We can get you there tonight, Captain, we’ll time it to cross the DMZ soon after dark to give us the maximum mission time.”

“Right, I’ll get things organised here. Good luck, Mr Hoffman. Frank, Abe, you look after Hoffman and this gook, get him back safely.”

Did he mean for them to get me or ‘the Gook’ back safely? Cady’s men were open mouthed at his arrogance and stupidity, but had no choice but to ignore it and get on with their jobs. I talked to Paul about the load for the Junkers, and then set out across the field to the Cessna. Johann had already gone ahead and was unfastening the ground anchors. Burr and Woltz followed, the sniper was carrying a long rifle fitted with a sniper scope.

“That looks impressive,” I said, looking at the rifle he held carefully, its stock was finished in a dull, matt varnish, the metalwork had that slight sheen of frequent but careful use.

“It’s the Springfield Sniper Rifle M1903,” he said proudly, he went on to describe what was obviously a favourite topic of his. The M1903 was officially adopted as a United States military bolt-action rifle in 1905, and saw service in World War I. It was officially replaced as the standard infantry rifle by the faster-firing, semi-automatic eight round M1 Garand in 1937. However, the M1903 Springfield remained in service as a standard issue infantry rifle during World War II, since the U.S. entered the war without sufficient M1 rifles to arm all its troops. It also remained in service as a sniper rifle during World War II, the Korean War and was still in service, particularly as a specialist sniper rifle in Vietnam.

“It ain’t everyone’s idea of the perfect rifle, but this baby shoots clean and straight every time,” he added, as he wiped the action over with an oily rag.

I left him to clean his beloved rifle and checked over the aircraft, climbed in and the others followed, Woltz carefully fitting the awkward long length of his rifle in the cabin.

“Mr Hoffman, are you armed, you got anything to defend yourself with?” Burr asked me.

I smiled at him. “I have something, yes. Please, call me Jurgen, I didn’t go to West Point.”

He laughed. “Yeah, the Captain is a bit of a pain in the ass, but we manage to ignore him. It’s Frank, this is Abe.” They held out their hands and we shook.

“Frank, would you open the locker behind you, I’d like my weapons out ready to use.” He opened the small door and whistled. “I see you’re prepared for anything, Jurgen.”

“Yes, it’s the only way to survive in Vietnam. Would you pass me the Tokarev and an M2 carbine, there’s a canvas satchel with clips for both guns, I’ll need that too.”

Johann waved all clear, and I started the engine and called the tower for clearance. Cady had already alerted them and they cleared us straight out. I throttled up, let off the brakes and taxied out to the main runway. Then I throttled up all the way and we accelerated down the runway and took off. Another mission, I wondered if I was too old for this, then I thought of Helene, whatever it took I would do it.

We set course for Soc Trang, it wasn’t a long flight. I described the layout of the airfield for them. Neither soldier was in army uniform, indeed, they looked just like two of the thousands of foreign mercenaries that operated in Vietnam offering armed protection to the highest bidder. We discussed the best way to carry out the rescue. In the end it was decided that Woltz, the sniper, would remain hidden inside the aircraft to provide fire support. It would be difficult for him to hide his sniper rifle outside of the aircraft before the time came to use it, but when it was needed the need for secrecy would be gone. Burr and I would go into the warehouse with pistols only, concealed inside our shirts. I had a cardboard box of old aircraft parts waiting for Johann to get around to reconditioning them, it was stowed behind the seats next to the weapons locker. I got Burr to remove the parts and put in two MP38s that we carried with several spare clips, just for insurance. He would carry the box as a pretext for delivering a shipment of drugs to the smugglers.

After an hour we came up on Soc Trang and I got clearance to land. It was the airfield that served a small tourist destination with a number of historic sites nearby. It was also strategically positioned in the Mekong Delta, a place where deals were done and cargos shipped through with few questions asked. I dropped the Cessna onto the runway and taxied over to the

Binh Xuyen warehouse. There was nobody to be seen anywhere, either around the airfield or near the warehouse. Woltz had already ducked down low, he had a blanket over his head to hide him from a casual observer. There was no reason for them to be alerted, two civilians flying in a Cessna usually meant a straightforward drug shipment, something they were used to all the time. Frank opened the door and climbed down with the cardboard box, I climbed down after him and we walked casually over to the warehouse and opened the door. Two Vietnamese were inside, one sat behind a desk, the other sprawled on broken couch reading a comic book. A local radio station was playing softly, I recognised the song, 'Telstar', a haunting instrumental piece played by a band called The Tornados.

"Hey," I greeted them, "where do you want the shipment? We'll need to see the money before we leave it."

The guy behind the desk looked puzzled. The other guy on the couch was disinterested, he looked up for a moment and then back at his comic. He was the guard, we'd both noted his well worn shoulder holster with a large automatic, his AR15 rifle leaning against the wall nearby.

"We're not expecting any shipment. Who sent you?"

"Le Van Tri," I said softly.

The one on the couch looked up sharply as he heard the name. Burr had his silenced pistol hidden under the cardboard box in his hands, he brought it out in one fluid motion and shot the guard between the eyes, he slumped down on the couch without a word. The man behind the desk reached inside a drawer, I stepped to one side and Burr's pistol coughed again, he was thrown backwards out of the chair and fell to the floor in a bloody heap. We heard someone call out through a partially opened door at the rear of the office. Burr opened the cardboard box and tossed me an MP38, took one for himself and we waited.

Four Vietnamese came hurtling through the door, we hit them with short bursts from the machine pistols and then ran through the door into a narrow passage. Two more Vietnamese were standing with pistols pointed towards us, we cut them down with short bursts from the MP38s. A side door was open and we could hear footsteps running away from the building.

"They'll be going for reinforcements, we need to hurry, let's find Le Van Dao."

Burr nodded, we started checking the doors that led off the passage. He opened one and a Vietnamese aimed a pistol at him, I cut the guy down with

another burst and we ran in. Dao was there, tied to a wooden chair. He was in a bad way, bruised and beaten, but at least he was alive. We untied him and almost carried him out of the building. We ran across to the Cessna as several bursts of automatic fire sprayed over our heads. Woltz was prone on the ground, sheltering behind the wheel of the aircraft.

He took aim and fired several times, the gunfire stopped.

"We've got him, get in the aircraft, we need to get moving," I shouted.

We climbed aboard, I started the engine and began taxiing to the downwind end of the strip. A voice was shouting in my headset that we had to wait for clearance, meanwhile, a Toyota truck with half a dozen heavily armed Vietnamese was speeding towards us. I estimated our speed and distance, we weren't going to make it.

"Guys, you need to deal with that truck," I shouted.

They nodded. Burr used the butt of the MP38 to smash two of the back windows of the Cessna to give them a firing slot for their guns.

"Sorry, Jurgen," he shouted.

"I'll put it on your bill, now finish them, they're coming in fast."

Burr hosed the truck down with the sub-machine gun, emptied the clip and snapped in another. Woltz poked his rifle out of the broken window and took careful aim, the truck lurched as one of the tyres was hit. He fired again, and again. The incoming fire that threatened to overwhelm us had slackened, finally the sniper hit the driver and the truck slewed around and tipped over, throwing dead and dying to the ground. We reached take-off speed and I rotated the Cessna off the runway, we were airborne. The headset still babbled incessantly, the controller outraged that we had taken off without clearance. I made a note to telephone him in the near future and find out how much he wanted to forget it. I still had an airline to run after this operation was over.

It took us just over an hour to get back to Tan Son Nhat. I landed and we taxied to the hangar. Cady came out and peered in.

"Good work, Hoffman, we're all ready to go, you can transfer Mr. Le to the Junkers."

"Certainly, Captain, your two men had something to do with it as well, you know."

Oh, yeah," he looked at Burr and Woltz, "good work men, let's snap to it, we've got a way to travel."

I don't know who he was trying to impress, but he was failing dismally

with his men, already I could see he was becoming a laughing stock. That could be a liability in a dangerous situation, but in the meantime dealing with it was going to be difficult. The ideal situation would be for him to break a leg before we started, but that was not likely to happen, I'd dealt with officers like him before, no doubt his men, all Sergeant's and Warrant Officer's ranks had experience of officers like Cady too. We helped Dao over to the Junkers, it was still inside the hangar. Paul had packed it with enough fuel drums to top up the tanks when we got to the North, enough at least to get us back south of the DMZ, where we could refuel at Hue. The wooden crates that Cady's men had brought were there too, they were all marked, AR15 assault rifles, two Browning M60 light machine guns, grenades, demolition explosives, even food rations. Another large crate carried a single Browning .50 calibre heavy machine gun.

"He thinks he's going to fight a war," a sergeant with the name Russo on his breast pocket said to me with a smile. Weapons Sergeant Joe Russo, the man who would be responsible for taking charge of this arsenal.

"Yes, it seems that way," I replied. "We'll have trouble getting off the ground with all this lot. Sergeant, doesn't he realise that if we have to use this amount of weaponry, we'll have lost already? How are we expected to carry it if we have to abandon the aircraft?"

Russo shrugged. "I know that, you know that, but he doesn't. The name's Joe, by the way."

I shook his hand. "Jurgen."

Joe Russo was a wiry, slightly built man of about twenty seven. Cropped hair, almost bald, like most soldiers in the U.S. army his small build concealed a body that was all muscle. He was dark, betraying his Mediterranean ancestry.

"Don't you worry, Jurgen, we'll manage to keep him in check, we've had worse," he hesitated. "We've had better too, most of our officers are good men, this one, well, I think his daddy is related to a congressman or something. He wants this tour to put on his resume for when he goes back Stateside."

There was the noise of a diesel engine, Johann drove our old John Deere farm tractor into the hangar, jumped down and hooked the hitch up to the drawbar of the Junkers. Paul sat in the cockpit as Johann slowly towed it out of the hangar and turned it to face the runway.

I found Cady going over his mission plans in my office. "We're ready

to go, Captain."

"Uh, yeah, ok, Hoffman. I'm going over the mission brief one last time. Do you want me to run you past everything?"

"Captain," I replied gently, "Paul and I have been there before, we're fine. When we get near, we'll call Le Van Tri on the frequency he gave us and he'll give us further coordinates for the landing field. As soon as we're overhead he'll light it up for us. I think it might be a good idea to load the men and go."

"Right, yeah." He seemed oddly hesitant, not something I would have expected in a Special Forces officer.

"Look Hoffman, I think I'd better go over to MACV and see if any last minute changes of plan have come in."

I had it now. He was scared, terrified of going behind enemy lines for the first time. Maybe that was understandable, but a lot of people were depending on him to see this mission through, my wife Helene included.

"Cady!" I spoke to him as loudly as I dared. He looked up at me. "Look, we go now or not at all, if you waste time going over to MACV it'll be too late, you'd better have your excuses ready for General Harkins. What's it going to be, do we go or not?"

His men had come into the office and were watching him curiously. He stared at them and back at me. Then he squared his shoulders, as if something had clicked in his brain. "Let's go then, mount up."

Paul already had the three engines running, I distributed the soldiers around the cargo bay and went forward to the captain's seat. Paul looked over at me.

"A heavy load with all of that junk, we'll need a good take-off roll."

"Yes, you take her up, Paul. I'll take a look at the charts for the Hanoi district."

I flicked on the tiny map light and began poring over the maps even before the aircraft took to the air. There were only a limited number of fields we could land on, I hoped that Le Van Tri had chosen a good one without too many potholes and obstacles. Still, we were carrying his son and the Junkers was a sturdy aircraft, built for operating out of rough, temporary fields, so I saw no reason for concern on that front. We droned north towards Hue and the DMZ, by the time we reached it the sky was dark.

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*'I refuse to play the role of an accomplice in an awful murder. According to a few immature American junior officials—too imbued by a real but obsolete imperialist spirit, the Vietnamese regime is not puppet enough and must be liquidated.'*

*Madame Nhu*
*'The Dragon Lady'*

The room in the Saigon Presidential Palace was magnificent, furnished in the most expensive and exquisite manner. The short man looked around the room and thought for the thousandth time how wonderful were the trappings of power. He could and did have the ear of the most powerful man in the free world. At a word from him armies marched and people quaked in fear. Especially the traitors. Who could he trust here? Madame Nhu, his brother's wife, known to many as The Dragon Lady, was the official First Lady of the Republic of South Vietnam. But she had enemies, so many enemies, she seemed unable to adopt even the most basic understanding of world politics. Ngo Dinh Thuc was the Archbishop of Hue and also his brother. Carrying the torch of his beloved Catholicism throughout Vietnam, he also had amassed enemies, not least amongst the country's majority Buddhists. Ngo Dinh Nhu, another brother, head of the Republic's Secret Police. Was he planning a coup? Already, Diem had survived two coup attempts, who would be next to try it? And Nhu, of course, was a known opium addict, patently unstable. Lastly, there was ARVN General Duong Van Minh, his most trustworthy general. Diem had bowed to demands to allow the ARVN to avoid the most dangerous contact with the rebel Viet Cong. As Duong has pointed out, what was the point of defeating the Viet Cong if the army was so demoralised and alienated that it turned on its leaders, including Diem himself. They all needed watching, Diem knew, every single one of them.

"Mr. President, the Americans are protesting that our army fought like cowards at Ap Bac," Madame Nhu snapped out suddenly.

General Duong looked sullen. Everyone here knew why the ARVN was encouraged to avoid military contact, even if it could not be openly admitted. "There were Americans there too," he said, "it made no difference."

Nhu giggled suddenly, Diem made a mental note to speak to him about

his opium consumption. He rang the bell and a servant came in quietly. "You may bring my jasmine tea now."

The servant bowed and left, he came back within moments carrying the President's tea on a silver tray.

"Two Americans were captured in the North recently," Madame Nhu continued.

Diem took his tea from the servant and looked up at his first lady. "Were they soldiers or spies?"

"Hanoi says they were spies," Nhu giggled again as he spoke, "but they always say that, they'd have said that if they were nuns," he giggled yet again. Diem became more irritated.

"What are the Americans doing about it?"

"I understand they're sending in a rescue mission tonight," Madame Nhu said.

The servant bowed and left the room. Back in the kitchen, he hurriedly wrote a note and gave it to a maid who was about to go off duty.

"We must pray for their success," the Archbishop of Hue said pontifically.

"Yes, yes, of course," Diem agreed.

He wondered when it would be time to speak to his brother about the armed Catholic militias that were reportedly terrorising the Buddhist population of the Republic. Still, many of his people were converting to Catholicism, so perhaps it was best to leave things as they were. A Catholic South Vietnam would be a magnificent legacy to leave, especially if it meant the end of these hideous Buddhists and communists.

"Nhu, find out what you can about this American rescue mission, find out what would benefit us most, success or failure," his brother nodded.

Diem continued, "General, there will be no change to our strategy for the time being, if the Americans are not happy, let them deal with it, they have plenty of troops, they can always send more. Our army needs to be protected and nurtured against the day when they are really needed."

General Duong bowed, "Yes, Mr. President, very wise."

"Good, that's settled," the President looked harsh. "Now, I hear that the Buddhists are still refusing to pay their taxes and are even disobeying orders to show more respect to Catholic shrines. It must not continue. Nhu, see to it."

The head of the secret police smiled and looked at his wife, the Dragon

Lady.

"It shall be as you say, brother, Mr. President."

* * * * *

# Chapter Five

*"It seems, on the face of it, absurd to think that a nation of 20 million people can be subverted by 15–20 thousand active guerrillas if the Government and people of that country do not wish to be subverted. South Vietnam is not, however, a highly organized society with an effective governing apparatus and a population accustomed to carrying civic responsibility. Public apathy is encouraged by the inability of most citizens to act directly as well as by the tactics of terror employed by the guerrillas throughout the countryside."*

*Joint Statement - Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense and Dean Rusk, Secretary of State*

"Gentlemen, we are now leaving the DMZ, you may like to know that you are now overflying the Democratic Republic of Vietnam."

A few minutes before we had taken the Junkers down to five hundred feet, crossing the DMZ as low as possible and hopefully out of sight of North Vietnamese radar. We were flying on instruments, almost blind, relying on pinpoint navigation to thread our way between the hills and valleys of North Vietnam. I'd gone back into the cabin to alert the men. Russo had a transistor radio playing, turned up loud over the noise of the engines. A song called Soldier Boy, by the Shirelles was playing. I wondered if that boded well for the mission or not. He turned down the volume and they all looked at me as I explained our situation.

"Although we're off their radar, we need to be ready for anything. Remember, the peasants like to take pot shots here at low flying aircraft, they usually assume that they are from the South. We don't know about the possibility of the North Vietnamese Air Force flying night fighter patrols, so we need to stay alert. If we have to make an emergency landing, well, bear in mind that everyone in this country will be more than glad to turn us in to the

local militia, that's if they don't shoot us first. I need to get back to the cockpit now, we're entering a mountainous region and the navigation is going to be tricky."

"Try not to fly us into a mountain," Frank Burr joked. No one laughed.

"I'll bear it in mind," I said as I went forward.

It had started to rain heavily, visibility was becoming extremely poor, the wind had also come up strongly, the windscreen wipers were struggling to keep the screen clear. Schuster was flying the plane with one eye on the instruments and the other trying to catch glimpses of the terrain below us when the sheets of rain cleared for a few moments, although there really was little to be seen. Occasionally we came out from under the cloud base and the wan moon tried to light up the countryside, so that we could just make out grey shapes of mountains slipping by us. We took advantage to drop even lower and navigate through the valleys, below the height of the surrounding hills. Then the cloud came over and we had to ascend. I checked the chart.

"You need to take her up to three and a half thousand feet, Paul, the mountains here start to get higher."

He nodded and pulled back on the stick. The aircraft pointed her nose steeply upwards as we quickly gained height to clear the nearby hilltops. "We'll show on radar at this height," he said to me quietly.

"Yes, but we've no choice if we're to avoid flying straight into the mountainside," I replied.

We flew on for another fifteen minutes, I checked the chart and looked down, the cloud had thinned.

"You can take her down again, we passed the mountain range, five hundred feet should be fine."

He pushed the stick forward and we descended rapidly. "I can see lights up ahead, we're coming up on some sort of town."

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was a dark country at night, most of the countryside without electricity, even the towns were limited in their use of power and there were no street lights. The sight of half a dozen lights almost certainly meant a good sized town or a military installation. As we neared the lights, I saw a stream of fairy lights twinkling towards us. Tracer.

"Paul, bank right, take her up higher," I shouted, but he'd already seen it and was hauling on the control column.

We went back up to two thousand feet and disappeared in a bank of heavy cloud. But we were now visible on radar. We flew on, hour after

hour, playing cat and mouse with the North Vietnamese defences. So far, we'd not seen the lights of any other aircraft, a night fighter would finish us.

I checked the map again, we were coming up on Hanoi. We were down to treetop level again, so we couldn't see the lights of the city, but I knew we were quite close. I had Le Van Tri's frequency so I warmed up the radio and called him. He answered straight away, after all, we were carrying his son, he wouldn't be taking any chances. He gave us a map reference and told us to look for nine lights arranged in an arrow. That would be the leading edge of our landing field. I told him about twenty minutes, then the radio went quiet, neither of us wanted to be picked up by the North Vietnamese. We were heading for a field midway between Hoa Binh and Son Tay, normally used by smugglers, twelve miles outside Hanoi. As we were well within range of their inner air defences, I knew that we'd only have a limited time to find the airfield before they picked us up and came to investigate.

"There," Paul pointed ahead, about a mile away. Nine lamps, laid out in an arrow, by a rare streak of luck we had flown straight to our intended destination.

"A good omen," I said, but I was thinking of Helene. This needed to work for her, somehow I knew that if I could pull this off she was going to recover. It was a weird feeling, as if I was a psychic, but I knew in my guts, in the blood of my Teutonic ancestors, that somehow it was true.

Paul looked at me briefly but didn't reply, he was concentrating on preparing the Junkers for landing. I ran back to tell the soldiers to prepare for an imminent landing, then back forward to assist. There was a strong crosswind blowing, the aircraft rocked from side to side. I called out the altitude and air speed, he had to keep his attention focussed totally on the lights.

"Two hundred feet, flaps down, one hundred knots," I said.

He nodded. The Junkers had a huge wing flap that gave us a low stalling speed, he was bleeding speed off quickly to lower our landing speed on the unknown field.

"One hundred feet. Eighty knots."

We crossed the lights and almost simultaneously hit the field with a bump. Paul throttled right back and I hit the brakes hard. The field was still wet, we slewed at an alarming angle, but he corrected with a touch of throttle and rudder and we eventually came to a stop. We had landed in North Vietnam, there was no time to celebrate. I rushed back into the cabin.

"We are in Le Van Tri's field, we need to get out fast and establish a perimeter, watch out for his people, we don't want anyone getting shot accidentally."

Cady looked at me resentfully for shouting the orders, but I didn't give a damn, this was bandit country, we had little time for niceties. I wrenched open the door, dropped the ladder to the ground and climbed down into the field. Several shadowy figures surrounded me, all armed with a variety of weapons, I recognised Soviet or Chinese AK47s and a couple of American M1s. An elderly Vietnamese walked through them and came face to face with me.

"Mr Hoffman, do you have my son?"

"Yes, Mr Le." I called through the aircraft door, "Dao, come out, your father is here."

He came to the door, Tim Beckerman jumped down and helped him down the ladder. His father gave a small smile of relief.

"I am pleased you are back safely, my son." Dao nodded. "Thank you father."

At a nod from Mr Le two guards helped him away and across the field, I assumed they had some kind of transport waiting. The rest of the Special Forces were unloading their equipment from the aircraft. Le frowned when he saw the huge quantities of weapons. "I thought this was a simple rescue of two men, Mr Hoffman. Is it wise to carry so much weaponry?"

At that moment Cady jumped down into the field. "Mr Le, this is Captain Cady of the U.S. Army, he is leading this mission." They nodded to each other. "Mr Le, pleased to meet you. How far away is this prison?"

A younger man stepped forward. "This is my other son, Bao," Le said. "He will guide you, it will take about half an hour to get there."

"Form up, men, we'll be leaving soon," Cady shouted. They all looked around in alarm. "Captain, I would suggest you keep it quiet, we are in enemy territory," Le said respectfully, but the scorn in his voice was there for all to hear.

I couldn't see his face in the dark, but I was certain it reddened. "Yeah, well, there's no one around," but he kept his voice lower, "let's move out."

Paul was at the door of the plane. "I'll go with them, Paul, I suggest you get the aircraft refuelled from the drums, can you manage?" He nodded grimly. "It'll be a long job with the hand pump, but yes, I can do it. That fool Cady will need you along, he's going to get everyone killed. Good luck,

Jurgen."

"You too," I replied.

We walked along a mud track for almost half an hour until we saw a few hundred yards away the looming shape of a concrete factory. Bao stopped us. "They're being held in there, Mr Hoffman. We understand that there are eight guards, four will be on duty and four asleep at this time. There is no rear entrance, only one double door at the front with a smaller door to one side. The double door is rarely opened since the factory became a prison."

"Are there any more prisoners being held?" I asked him. He shook his head, "no, only the two Americans."

Cady came up to us, clearly he was irritated that we were excluding him from the conversation. "Right, Hoffman, here's what I propose." I held up a hand. "Captain, please. Save it for later, let's just go into the prison, bring out your two men and go home."

He glowered at me. "Damnit, Hoffman, this is a military mission, if we encounter a North Vietnamese Army unit…" "Then we're finished, Captain. If we do run into the communists, they'll just call up reinforcements we'll find ourselves in a battle we can't win. Let's get in and out without stirring up too much fuss, ok?"

He looked furious, but his men were making encouraging noises, "makes sense, Cap'n," and more like that. In the end he gave a curt nod. "Have it your way, Hoffman, but God help you if it all goes wrong."

I didn't add that if it went wrong we would be beyond any help. Bao crept forward and then held up his hand. We stopped. Outside the building we could see the glow of a cigarette and the vague outline of a helmeted soldier became apparent, the strange pith helmet favoured by the North Vietnamese regular army. Thank God they all smoked so heavily.

Woltz was already bringing up his rifle. It was fitted with a huge silencer, making it look as if it had part of a cannon on the end of the barrel. There was a faint thud and the guard crashed to the ground. We ran forward, Burr checked his pulse and shook his head, he was dead. Woltz stayed back with Jack Bond, the communications sergeant, as the rest of us waited outside the door, there was no other sentry outside. The rest of us, Burr, Russo, Beckerman and Cady waited either side of the door. I spoke quietly to Bao. "Tell them you've brought women up from the village, do they want any."

He nodded, and then knocked on the door while I waited to one side.

After a few moments a suspicious looking guard opened the door a crack and looked out. Bao spoke to him quietly, I saw the man's expression change. They negotiated for a few moments, then the door opened wide to let Bao enter. He moved to one side, the four Americans stepped around the door, a knife flashed and the guard was carefully lowered to the ground. They dashed in and I followed. Two soldiers were sitting at a desk reading magazines, two shots coughed out from silenced pistols and they crashed to the floor. The Americans rushed over and checked that they were dead, I went past them and opened a door at the back of the room. There was a long corridor with more doors leading off it. I heard one of the doors opening and ducked back out of sight, a sleepy Vietnamese voice shouted something. I pointed to Beckerman, who was holding a silenced pistol, he jumped through the doorway, another cough and a clatter as the man dropped to the floor.

I looked around, he was in his shorts and t-shirt and probably had got out of bed to go to the bathroom. We ran down the corridor, a door was partly open to sleeping quarters with eight bunk beds. Three were occupied, the Americans went to work, the pistols coughed and they all died without even waking.

"The officer," I whispered to Beckerman and Burr. They nodded, there were two more doors both closed. One was reinforced steel, that had to be the cells. The other was a normal wooden door. They burst through, both pistols coughed and another crash. They came back out.

"That should be the lot, let's see if our boys are in here." Cady came up and gestured for them to cover him while he opened it. There was another corridor with three barred cells, Miles Anderson and Aaron Goldberg were in one of them. Their faces lit up when they looked through the bars and saw us.

"By Christ, are we glad to see you boys," Goldberg said. I rummaged through the keys on a panel on the wall and found the one that opened their cell. "Miles is in a bad way, he's got a broken leg and some cracked ribs," Goldberg warned.

"Can you walk, Mr Anderson?" Cady asked. He looked dazed, I looked at Goldberg. "Hard interrogation," he explained.

"Shit. Russo, Beckerman, give him a hand, we need to get back to the aircraft," he looked at me, "do we have much time left?" I shook my head. "We need to be airborne within the hour, Captain."

"Right, men, let's go," he called out.

When we got outside the building, there was no sign of Bao. "Where'd the gook go?" Cady asked me. I shrugged. He asked Woltz and Bond but they hadn't seen him slip away in the darkness. He looked irritated. "Fucking natives, never trust them. Right, let's move."

We stumbled back along the path to our landing field. I had memorised the path and managed to guide us back. When we got to the field I put up a hand to stop them. "What's up?" Cady asked. "Schh. We've got trouble." "Yeah? What kind of trouble?"

"Can't you smell it, Captain, cigarette smoke?"

"Maybe it's Schuster," he said, "No, he doesn't smoke," I replied. "One of Le's men, then?"

"I don't think so. Stay there, I'll go and check." I skirted the field and looked closely. Nothing. In the cockpit, I could make out the figure of Paul Schuster sat at the controls. Then the clouds slid away from the moon and in its dim light I could see another shadowy figure behind him, holding something to his head. It was enough. I crept back to the Americans. "North Vietnamese, they've taken Paul and are holding him in the cockpit. Somehow they found us."

"Damn," Cady looked flustered for a moment, "we'll have to go in and take them out, we need that plane to get out of here."

I shook my head. "Captain, you can forget the plane. They'll have heavy machine guns set up around the field, the minute they see us they'll open fire. Besides, they could have twenty men hiding in and around the plane." "Shit. We can take twenty of these bastards, no sweat," he said cockily.

His men looked concerned at his stupidity. "Captain, even when American and ARVN forces outnumbered the Viet Cong ten to one at Ap Bac, they couldn't beat them. I suggest we use a little caution." He didn't like me correcting him, but the alternative was this officer getting us all killed. A shadowy figure ran up to us and gun barrels swung around to cover him, but it was Bao returning, Le's son. "I'm sorry, we didn't know they were coming," he said.

"Not your fault, thanks for coming back. What do you know? How many of them are there?" I asked him. "It looks like a half-platoon, about twelve men. They're from the local barracks in Trung Chau, about twenty five kilometres from here."

I felt strangely alone without Paul Schuster to talk things over with,

we'd been together for so many years that it seemed second nature to turn to him and say, 'What do you think, Paul?' But this time, he needed help and I was determined that I wouldn't leave this Godforsaken country without him. I spoke urgently to Bao.

I heard Cady giving orders to his men, preparing them for an overland trek to the South. "Captain, could I have a word with you?" I said. He looked annoyed at the interruption. "Yeah, what is it, Hoffman?"

"You'll never leave North Vietnam on foot, it's virtually impossible." He was too angry to be told how to do his job.

"Mr. Hoffman, I can assure you that we'll walk out of here and kill any sonofabitch that gets in our way. What the hell do you mean, we'll never leave?"

I sighed, he was going to be difficult, and I needed him, or at least, his men. I explained about up to a million North Vietnamese Army regulars, the guerrillas, the Viet Cong, and the peasants, every hand would be turned against them and every eye would be watching for them.

"The problem is they know we're here, Captain. It'll be the biggest manhunt in their history, no matter what you do they'll find you and probably sooner rather than later. Your mission will all be for nothing."

"So what do you suggest? I assume you do have a suggestion?" he sneered. "Certainly. We can fly out, after we've picked up Paul Schuster, of course."

"But you said that reaching the aircraft would be impossible, it would bring down the Viets and we'd be blown out of the sky."

"True, it would be inevitable in that plane, now that it's compromised. I'm suggesting that we go elsewhere and take a different aircraft, we steal one."

He was interested, so were the men and they clustered around while I outlined what I had in mind.

"There's an airfield twenty miles from here at Bach Mai. These troops will give up at dawn when they know we're not coming back and return to Trung Chau. If we move quickly we can be there before dawn and ambush them when they get there. We release Paul and head for Bach Mai, Le says that there are at least two transport aircraft stationed there. We simply take one and fly home, their air defence system will be looking at the Junkers. With any luck we'll get away before they know what's happening."

Cady looked sceptical. "You and I both know it won't be so easy,

Hoffman. What do you plan to do about the survivors of the ambush? Take them with us?"

"That won't be possible," I replied. A silence descended on the group. "For God's sake," Frank Burr protested, "you're saying we'd have to kill them all, aren't you? Jesus!" I heard someone say the words 'goddamn Nazi' quietly.

"There's no alternative, if we leave them alive they'll raise the alarm. If we tie them up and one escapes, we're finished. We have to kill them all. It's either that or we die here, those are the choices.

You need to decide quickly, we'll need to get in position before dawn." Across the field, we could see two of the Viets had climbed out of the aircraft and were pouring petrol into the ground to make sure it never took off.

They talked among themselves. I heard some arguing, but I knew from past experience in Russia that when a man is thousands of miles from home, those kinds of decisions preyed less heavily on conventional morality than when safely within the borders of your own country. I told them that Paul wouldn't admit to carrying American troops, at worst he'd spin a story about Vietnamese smugglers trying to earn a few extra dollars. The prison guards were all dead, there was no one there to sound the alarm about an American led rescue mission. So far, we had a few things in our favour. If we could release Paul and steal an aircraft, we had a good chance of getting home. Otherwise, we may as well hand ourselves into the waiting North Vietnamese Army unit.

"Ok, we'll do it your way, Hoffman. God help you if you're wrong," Cady whispered. "If I'm wrong, Captain, I'll be beyond God's help."

He nodded and quietly gave orders to the men to form up. Bao had offered to lead the way and we marched away in the darkness towards Trung Chau. According to Bao there was only one viable route to Trung Chau and we were on it. I looked at the sky, the glow of dawn was just over the horizon. I didn't think we'd make it in time, but Bao had been scouting ahead with Abe Woltz and they came running back.

"Sir, the Viets have set up a checkpoint about half a mile up the road from here, there are four Viets guarding it, a sergeant and three soldiers," Woltz said to Cady. "It'll be a bitch to get past it unnoticed." I asked him to describe it for me, it sounded exactly like the small fortified posts that the French built during the first Indochina war. "This could be useful to us. If we can kill the garrison, we could set the ambush there and catch them by

surprise. I don't think we have sufficient hours of darkness left to get to Trung Chau, this would be perfect."

Cady saw the sense of it, I think by then he realised that he was out of his depth and welcomed the advice. We put together a simple plan and Bao agreed to act as a decoy. Woltz went off the path to get his sniper rifle into position while remaining hidden, Tim Beckerman went with him as his number two. We gave them ten minutes to get into position, and then started towards the checkpoint. Bao ran ahead, he'd torn his clothing and had prepared a story about being attacked by bandits who'd stolen his money belt. It was thin, but the guards would be tired and we had a good chance of making it work. He hurtled around a bend in the path and we heard shouts in Vietnamese as they ordered him to stop. He was good, playing his part to perfection. I understood him pouring out his indignant story of being robbed under the noses of these guards, what were they going to do about it? They barked a series of questions and it sounded as if a row was developing.

We got to the bend in the path and stopped, peering through the undergrowth to see Bao arguing strongly with the soldiers. I couldn't see Woltz and Beckerman but I knew they were there. The argument peaked to a shouting match, they were angry, Bao was virtually calling them cowards for not keeping the roads clear of thieves. Then he stomped away up the track. The sergeant shouted to him to stop and he ignored him, turning his back and making a rude sign as he walked off. The sergeant shouted louder, gave an order and one of his men cocked the bolt of his rifle. That was enough, Bao darted off the track and threw himself flat, the soldiers looked bemused, then two shots cracked out and the sergeant and the soldier with the loaded rifle were flung to the ground. The other two looked panicked and quickly chambered rounds into their rifles, but Cady's men hit them with a barrage of sub-machine gun fire that almost sliced them in two. We walked warily up to the checkpoint but they were all dead and no more soldiers waited to ambush us. Cady gave orders and the bodies were dragged away into the jungle and the path cleared of any evidence that there had been a slaughter. We looked at the building, it was quite small, maybe fifteen feet square with just one door at the front and two windows. There was an observation slit at each side of the building as well as two at the front on either side of the door and another at the back. There was only one room, it stank of cigarette smoke, sweat and urine. We prepared the area as best we could and settled down to wait. Frank Burr and Bao retraced out steps back

down the path to watch for the Viets, the rest of us set up the ambush. The key to it was Abe Woltz, he was hidden with Beckerman behind fallen tree trunks that looked as if they'd been cut down for firewood, opposite the checkpoint. I went inside the evil smelling room with Cady, Joe Russo and Jack Bond setting up a position twenty yards from Woltz so that they could catch the Viets in their crossfire. We all had grenades, although I spoke sharply to them about using them.

"If you throw one of those near Paul Schuster, you'll kill an expert pilot and maybe the only chance you have of getting out of here." Cady looked amused. "Hey, Hoffman, we've got you, you're the pilot. We'll take care of Schuster, of course, but he's not vital to the success of the mission."

"Isn't he?" I said harshly. "Let me make this clear, without Paul, I won't fly you out of here, period. We helped each other through the Eastern Front and through the French Indochina war and I'm not leaving him now."

He was silent for a moment. Then he looked across at me. "Don't sweat it, Hoffman, my men know what to do," he said. "They'd better, Captain," I replied.

He gave me a nasty look and then focused his binoculars on the path. We waited there for two hours, the sun was high in the sky and we were as much worried about peasants coming past as we were about the arrival of the Vietnamese troops with Paul. Cady and I looked at each other, they'd fired the Ju52 to make sure we didn't ever use it again. It wouldn't be long. Another hour passed and we heard the sounds of Vietnamese voices chattering and grumbling as they finally arrived. Soon they were in view, a lieutenant, a sergeant and ten men, with Paul in the middle of them, looking bruised and bloody. They approached the checkpoint carefully, I could see their faces clearly, they were puzzled that there were no guards outside the post but not unduly worried. This was North Vietnam, party officials giving unexpected orders was by no means unusual and they doubtless assumed that the guards had been moved elsewhere. We peered through the slits, I had my M2 carbine trained on the officer, Cady was looking through the other slit with his M16 pointed at the enemy. They were almost abreast of us when I heard the soft 'pop' and the lieutenant crumpled into the dust. The sergeant ran forward to pick him up, undoubtedly assuming he was ill and was thrown to one side by the second of Woltz's bullets. There was no question now, they were under attack and they hurriedly unslung their rifles and worked the bolts to begin firing.

The need for stealth was over, we hit them with everything we had. Woltz kept firing, Beckerman joined in with his assault rifle firing single shots and I saw Paul dive off the track in the confusion and crouch down in the undergrowth. Cady was firing single, well spaced shots into the panicking crowd of men when Russo and Bond stepped out, with Paul under cover they hosed them down with sub-machine gun fire. It was over, I went out of the door and began checking the bodies, one twitched slightly and I put a round through his head from the M2. I heard another shot crack out. Then there was silence, abruptly broken by the sound of Paul's voice calling cheerfully as he ran towards us. "Christ, am I glad to see you guys. Jurgen, I knew you wouldn't abandon me."

"I was tempted," I replied, "but you still owe me money, Paul, so I didn't have a choice." He laughed and we hugged each other. In truth, we both knew it had been a near thing. He went and shook hands with the Americans and Bao.

"You know about the Junkers?" he asked. I nodded. "We saw the smoke, but we couldn't have used it anyway, they'd be on to us before we'd gone a hundred miles."

"Shit, we're stuck. What do we do?" I smiled at him. "We're going to steal another aircraft, the Viets have got plenty, they won't miss one. Besides, they owe us one for destroying the Junkers." He grinned. "You're serious?" I nodded. "We're heading for Bach Mai. Bao says they have transport aircraft on the ground there and not too much security. Bao," I said, turning to the Vietnamese, "what kind of aircraft have you seen on the ground, could you describe them to me?"

He thought for a few moments, then spoke rapidly and described what could only be the Ilyushin Il-14. Codenamed 'The Crate' by NATO, it was a Soviet twin-engine commercial and military personnel and cargo transport aircraft that first flew in 1950, and entered service in 1954. The Soviet equivalent for the Douglas C-47 it seated up to twenty four passengers and would be perfect for our uses. Provided that we could steal one, of course, and provided it had enough fuel, and provided that they didn't shoot us out of the sky before we crossed the DMZ. I looked around, Cady's men were dragging the corpses away from the checkpoint and into the jungle. Then I made a last sweep of the checkpoint to hide any evidence of our being there.

Finally, we were ready to move out. Bao agreed to come with us as far as the airfield. Cady came over to where Paul, Bao and myself were

checking our packs. “I estimate we can reach Bach Mai in three or four hours, Hoffman. Let’s move.” I smiled. “Captain, travelling to Bach Mai during daylight would be suicidal. We need to get clear of here and find somewhere to rest up until nightfall.”

He was obviously annoyed at having his orders questioned yet again. “Look, we came here in daylight with no problem, why would getting to Bach Mai be any different?”

“No problem? We had to kill the troops at the checkpoint and ambush and kill the troops that were holding Schuster. Are you planning to kill every single person in this part of North Vietnam? Why not telephone party headquarters in Hanoi and tell them we’re here, it would be just as quick?” He gave a huge sigh. “Yeah, ok, we’ll do it your way. Ok, men, we’ll head out and when we’re clear of here find somewhere to rest up for the day.”

Woltz and Beckerman took the point, we moved off with Jack Bond guarding our rear. Burr and Russo helped Goldberg along, Paul and I lent our shoulders to helping Anderson. Cady strode out in front as if to give a demonstration of how Special Forces officers led from the front. With his head up, his back ramrod straight and his gaze looking unwavering ahead, he was the very model of a military commander. Look out George Patton, I thought, you’ve got a potential rival. Paul and I smiled at each other and swallowed the laughter that tried to leave our throats.

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*‘By 1964, the CIA's clandestine service was consuming close to two-thirds of its budget and 90% of the director's time. The Agency gathered under one roof Wall Street brokers, Ivy League professors, soldiers of fortune, ad men, newsmen, stunt men, second-story men, and con men. They never learned to work together - the ultimate result being a series of failures in both intelligence and covert operations. In January 1961, on leaving office after two terms, President Eisenhower had already grasped the situation fully. "Nothing has changed since Pearl Harbor," he told his director of central intelligence, Allen Dulles. "I leave a legacy of ashes to my successor." ’*

*Tim Weiner - Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*

General Paul Harkins glanced across at the two men who with himself made the crucial decisions about who would live and who would die in Vietnam. A West Point graduate, he instinctively distrusted the CIA Chief of Far East Division, William Colby, the Princeton boy who had previously served for a period as station chief in Saigon. He distrusted the Ivy League man, disliked the numerous unsanctioned missions that he knew the CIA had launched both north and south of the DMZ and found it difficult to believe much of the so-called intelligence that his office received from the CIA Chief. Colby's boss, Director of Central Intelligence John McCone gazed coldly into the distance, it was difficult to fathom his thinking.

"General, have you had communication with your people on the ground in the North?" Colby was asking about Cady's mission, Harkins realised.

"No, we're still waiting but it's early days yet, they've only just arrived. We understand unofficially that the prisoners have been broken out and we assume that Cady will get them back to the South very soon." McCone cleared his throat. The other two looked up at the man who had the ear of the President. "You are quite correct that the two officers, Anderson and Goldberg, have been sprung from a North Vietnamese prison. You are incorrect when you say that they will be back in the South very soon."

"How can you possibly know that?" Harkins asked.

"Let's just say that we have aerial intelligence to that fact," McCone replied.

The U2 spyplane overflights, it could only be that. The Lockheed U-2, nicknamed "Dragon Lady", was a single-engine, very high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft operated by the United States Air Force and flown by the Central Intelligence Agency. It provided day and night, very high-altitude all-weather surveillance.

"Do you have photos on which to base your assumption?" Harkins asked him. Without replying, McCone took a packet of photos out of his briefcase, they showed a burnt out aircraft in a field.

"That's the aircraft they were using, Hoffman's JU52. It looks as if the Viets destroyed it."

They studied the images. "Casualties?" Harkins asked. McCone shook his head. "Not on site, anyway. No sign of any bodies."

"Look, I'm working on the plans for an extended programme of infiltration," Colby interrupted. "I'm talking about sending teams into the North to disrupt their leadership, demolition, that kind of thing. Can we

liaise on this Cady operation, General, maybe we can even assist?" "I thought you were already sending people into the North, William?" Harkins said wryly.

Colby shrugged his elegant shoulders. McCone interrupted. "General, William is working at putting together a new operation that could change the course of the war. It's important that he has access to the Cady operation at all levels, can you sanction it?"

"I'll ask my people in Saigon to put something together," he said grudgingly. The CIA men knew they had gone as far as they could.

"The President has agreed to a preliminary study on a bombing campaign in the North to advance our campaign," McCone added, "that alone could tip the balance in our favour. If we could synchronise it with William's raids and your own conventional forces, it could hit them hard enough to finish them."

Harkins grimaced.

"Director, you should read your history. They tried it in the First World War, in Spain they wiped out a whole town, every single building was destroyed, thousands dead. During the Second World War we bombed Nazi Germany with the British, as well as bombing the Japanese. The Germans bombed England too, it all had one result. Nothing. Except, of course, for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I assume the President isn't contemplating a nuclear strike on Hanoi?"

"No, nothing like that," McCone said quickly, "our technology is different these days, General. We could hit them hard enough to really make a difference." Harkins looked across at the CIA men. Hadn't he heard them and their predecessors saying exactly the same thing last year and the year before that? He thought about Cady's mission to the North. He wisely said nothing, this Vietnam business was difficult enough without upsetting men who had the ear of the President. He realised that Colby had been talking to him. "Sorry, William, what was that?"

"The programme to convert the C-47 into a gunship is going well, we hope to have it operational next year."

"Yeah, I heard about that. You realise that a cargo aircraft is totally unsuited to accurately aiming a rapid fire weapon at a single target?"

"That's the conventional wisdom," Colby continued. Harkins noted his emphasis on the word 'conventional', of course he was the soldier with his boots firmly planted in the tactics of the previous war and the CIA man was

the forward thinking planner who would amaze everyone with his new ideas. That was the theory, at least. He'd seen his share of theories during his career, most had one thing in common, they were either useless or downright dangerous.

"So what's the unconventional thinking, William, what does your military wisdom say on this one?"

Colby smiled, acknowledging the swift riposte. "We're perfecting the aiming systems so that the aircraft will circle the target while the Gatling gun is kept pointed at a single target." Harkins grunted. "It sounds interesting, you'll keep me informed about it?"

"Of course, General."

McCone moved to wind up the meeting. It was a quid pro quo, the CIA would be more forthcoming about the gunship programme and the Army would cooperate on the Cady mission. "Are we all agreed, gentlemen?" They nodded and shook hands.

Both knew that neither would fully keep the bargain, and each would do their best to give the very least in return for as much as they would get from the other.

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# Chapter Six

*'We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, that we are only six percent of the world's population, that we cannot impose our will upon the other ninety-four percent of mankind, that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity, and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.'*

*John F Kennedy 1961*

We rested up several miles away from the checkpoint, Paul, Bao and I grabbed some sleep while the sergeants looked after the rescued men and maintained a sharp watch. Cady was restless, patrolling around the area, giving unnecessary orders and generally making a nuisance of himself. As night fell we pushed on and were lucky to get all the way there without

sighting a local. Electricity was almost non-existent in these rural areas and nightfall meant home to family and bed.

The airfield at Bach Mai was in darkness. The only light came from a low building the other side of the field across from where we crouched at the edge of the jungle. We could see the glowing tips of the guards' cigarettes as they ceaselessly patrolled the area. I doubted they'd heard about us, this country was a communist bureaucracy where no one made a decision or even a phone call without going up through the chain of command. But petty theft from the locals would be a problem, as well as larger scale raids from Vietnamese tribesmen who were still opposed to the communist regime, hence the guard presence.

The airfield probably had landing and take-off lights, but they would only be switched on when necessary, the possibility of raids from the South was always a very real danger. Across the field I could see several aircraft, including a MIG that appeared to have crash landed, lying abandoned just off the main runway. Near the control tower was a light aircraft, difficult to make out in the dark but it was similar in size to a Cessna 170, quite possibly that's what it was. The other side of the control tower two larger aircraft were parked near to each other. Ilyushin IL14s.

"Are those what we're here for?" Cady asked me. His face was stretched with tension, I got the impression he wasn't coping well with leading this mission into enemy territory. In contrast, his men were relaxed and quietly checking their equipment. I nodded. "Yes, exactly what we need. The question is which one will have enough fuel to get us south of the DMZ? We need to find out."

"I'll get two of my guys to take a look. Tim, Jack, check out those two IL14s, Hoffman needs to know the fuel situation. Abe, cover them all the way, if they're spotted by the Viets, we won't get home."

They nodded, I gave instructions on what to look for and Beckerman and Bond disappeared into the shadows at the side of the airfield. Abe Woltz set up his sniper rifle with the silencer and waited while Joe Russo kept a constant watch on the field with a pair of night glasses. I kept checking my watch, we had to get off the ground before midnight to cross the DMZ before dawn. Any later and we would be ducks in a shooting gallery. They all knew that, there was no need to remind them. At one time a soldier came close, we could smell the smoke from his cigarette quite strongly. Mingled with the aromatic smells of the jungle edge it left a slightly sour smell. He

didn't see us and walked on, avoiding the two silenced pistols and three combat knives that were waiting to take him out if he came too close. Beckerman and Bond suddenly came out of the darkness.

"The aircraft look good, Jurgen," Bond said. "Both seem to be operational. As for fuel, we've no way of estimating what they have in the tanks. The gauges are broken."

"On both aircraft?"

Beckerman nodded. "I checked out the second aircraft, no dice, the gauges are out."

I checked my watch again, it was five minutes to twelve, and we were already out of time.

"Captain, we'll have to take one aircraft and hope for the best, we need to move right now."

Cady nodded and signalled for his men to help Anderson and Goldberg to their feet. Beckerman and Bond led off, taking the point as they had already covered the ground. They crossed the perimeter and disappeared into the darkness. A Vietnamese voice called across to where they had gone to earth.

"Ngung lai! Stop!"

We hadn't noticed the sentry walking back on his route, he'd seen the movement as the two men ran across the field, or thought he'd seen something.

Cady opened his mouth to give an order, but Russo has already crawled away to get behind the sentry. Cady closed his mouth and we waited. There was a slight noise, the rustle of clothing, a muffled grunt that was quickly cut off and silence returned. Russo crawled back to us.

"All done, Cap'n, I can't see any more of them, we can go when you're ready."

"Ok, Russo. You men all ready? Let's go."

We darted across the field towards the waiting aircraft. Anderson and Goldberg were helped and five minutes later we were under the wing of the nearest Ilyushin. Beckerman and Bond were waiting for us, a metal ladder hung down from the cabin door to the ground. Woltz set up a sniper position to cover us as two men climbed into the aircraft and helped Anderson and Goldberg up the ladder. I turned to Bao.

"I think this is goodbye, maybe we'll see each other again. Thank you, Bao."

“Goodbye, Jurgen, Paul, you have a safe trip.”

He disappeared into the blackness and we climbed the ladder and walked through to the cockpit, behind us we could hear the last of the soldiers boarding. The aircraft was the cargo variant so there were no seats in the cabin, just piles of straps and cargo nets strewn over the floor.

The cockpit was depressingly Soviet era style, cheap red plastic upholstery and black plastic control wheels. Even in the semi-darkness everything was obviously much worn and badly maintained. Beckerman and Bond had said the fuel gauges were not working, what they hadn’t said, perhaps hadn’t even noticed, was that several other gauges were missing. They had been removed from the aircraft. The only good sign was the smell of aviation fuel, suggesting that it had been refuelled recently. Behind the pilots’ seats was a tiny radio cabin, barely large enough for one man to squeeze in and sit on the ripped upholstery to operate the radio, which I imagined was working. Paul and I checked the operation of the controls, the rudder, elevators and flaps all seemed to be ok. I went to get up and go back into the cabin to speak to Cady but when I glanced around he was standing in the doorway, waiting.

“Captain, would you get the chocks removed from the wheels, we’ll be taking off shortly. Can you withdraw the ladder and close the door?” He nodded curtly and disappeared.

“I’m not happy about taking off without knowing the fuel load, Jurgen,” Paul said.

“Think of it as a gamble, Paul. Hopefully we’ll get lucky,” I grinned.

“And if we don’t?”

I laughed. “Then maybe we should say goodbye now, before we dive into the jungle, although we might land this thing without engines if we find a suitable strip.”

“Might, if. That’s not usually the way we do things,” he sniffed.

“How many times have we charged the Soviets or the Viet Minh, hoping that we didn’t take a bullet before we killed them?”

He was thoughtful for a moment. Then he smiled. “Ok, I see your point. Nice knowing you, Jurgen.”

“You too. I’ll see you in hell.”

We shook hands just as Cady came forward.

“All done, Hoffman, the men removed the chocks, the ladder is stowed and the door shut.”

"Ok, Captain. Would you get your men to hold onto some of the cargo straps, this take-off is going to be touch and go."

"Yeah, I'll tell them. Hoffman?" I looked back to him. He was holding out his hand and I shook it, Paul did the same.

"You're a pair of Nazi bastards, but before we crash in some Vietnamese jungle shithouse, thanks for what you've done."

I shrugged. "It's no problem. Why the problem with the Nazis, the war was over a long time ago?"

"My grandmother, she was Polish, she died in Auschwitz."

"I'm sorry, Captain. For the record, I was never near any prison camp and we didn't even belong to the Nazi Party. I agree with you, they were bastards. Hold tight, now." He went back into the cabin and we primed the engines and switched on ready to start. I looked at Paul.

"Hals und Beinbruch!"

He grinned. "Du auch!"

I hit the start button on the port engine and it whirred slowly, picked up speed and burst into life. Then the starboard engine spooled up and shortly we had both engines running. A light came on in the control tower, then several buildings lit up and a flood of light spread over the field as the overhead security lights were switched on.

"Time to go," I said to Paul.

I throttled up and taxied onto the runway, heading for the end to turn into wind for take-off. Across the field, a Soviet built GAZ jeep had turned on its headlights and I saw soldiers jumping into it. It started towards us, bumping on the uneven field at the side of the runway. I put on the headset and heard the North Vietnamese controller shouting in French at the unauthorised Ilyushin 14 to halt immediately or they would open fire. Another set of headlights switched on and a ZIL-157 lorry, another gift from the Soviet Union, started towards the runway, we could clearly see a dozen armed troops sitting in the back. More ominously, the passenger side of the cab had a mounted light machine gun, the gunner was pushing up through the roof hatch preparing his weapon to fire.

"They're going to block us, Jurgen," Paul said.

"I can see that, it'll be touch and go. If Cady's men could open the cargo door and return fire when they start shooting, it would be a help, would you give him a shout?"

While I concentrated on getting the aircraft to the end of the runway,

Paul turned in his seat and shouted for Cady. When the Captain came into the cockpit, he explained to him what we needed. Cady nodded and went out. We reached the end of the runway, I spun the aircraft through one hundred and eighty degrees, lined up on the runway and opened the throttle wide. The aircraft picked up speed but it was too slow, much too slow. The GAZ was almost alongside us, keeping pace and the ZIL was halfway down the runway, manoeuvring to block it and prevent us from taking off. The voice in the headphones was screaming at me now but I had to keep listening, I needed to know when they decided we were an enemy. Which wasn't long in coming, I heard him shout 'Trier' into my headphones to be picked up by the Viets on the airfield frequency. Paul heard it too. He shouted back to Cady.

"Open fire, Captain, now!"

There was a single muzzle flash from the GAZ, then it veered off the runway as the Special Forces peppered it, Woltz's rifle cracked first to hit the driver and then the others open up with sub-machine gun fire. I could see an anti-aircraft emplacement across the field, men were running towards it but they would be too late, our problem now was the ZIL.

"Call Cady back up here," I shouted to Paul.

He called out and the Captain appeared in the cockpit. I explained what I wanted, he nodded and went back into the cabin. The ZIL grew nearer and nearer, a soldier with a rifle fired three shots but they went wide, I ignored them.

"Three seconds," I shouted to Paul.

He called back to Cady, we were almost on the ZIL when I wrenched the aircraft to the right and onto the rough grass at the side of the tarmac. The IL14 had a reputation for being able to operate on rough fields, I was about to test it to the limits. As we shot past the ZIL the soldiers in the cabin opened fire again, I didn't have time to see the effect of their gunfire, we were past. I swung back onto the runway, the aircraft lurching to one side and then righting itself.

"Rotate," Paul called across to me.

We hauled on both control columns, the aircraft was a heavy bastard as it took to the air, climbing slowly. I kept her at treetop level, they'd get that anti-aircraft gun working soon enough and we'd have been a sitting target at high level. At five hundred feet we levelled off and set course for the DMZ. Paul took over and I went back into the cabin to check the passengers.

“A bit of a hairy one, Hoffman,” Cady said.

I looked at him closely, he’d acted well during the take-off but I was still worried about his ability to lead men under battle conditions. I smiled.

“Hannah Reitsch would have done it with half the Vietnamese Army shooting at her.”

“Who’s Hannah Reitsch, does she work for you?”

I laughed. “No, Captain, she does not. On Hitler's orders, she took off from the Tiergarten in Berlin with von Greim, the newly promoted chief of the Luftwaffe, during the evening of the 28th April 1945. She flew the last German plane out of the city shortly before it fell by climbing out through heavy Soviet anti-aircraft fire. The Soviets were in the city at the time, it was an incredible piece of flying.”

He was silent for a moment, digesting my little piece of history.

“Well, yeah, but they were Nazi’s, weren’t they?”

He didn’t get it, just didn’t get it.

“That’s true, Captain, they were Nazi’s, fighting the same enemy that shot at you and your men out there on the airfield.” He looked puzzled and I didn’t pursue it.

“Were there any casualties during the take-off?”

He shook his head. “None, but Anderson and Goldberg don’t look too good, we need to get them medical attention as soon as possible. They took a good beating back there.”

“I’m doing my best, Captain.”

“Yeah. When will we cross the DMZ?”

“If we don’t run out of fuel, and if we’re not shot down, I would hope we should reach it in about three hours.”

“No way to check the fuel situation?” he asked.

I shook my head. “In situations like this one they would top the fuel tanks up before every flight so that they know they always start with a full fuel load. We don’t know of course if they did that or not before we took the aircraft.”

I noticed the other soldiers looking at us intently. Of course, they wanted to know their fate as much as I did.

“If we run out of fuel, what then?” Cady asked.

“Then we land. Crash land, that is. If we can find a flat piece of ground we may get down in once piece, if not, who knows?” I shrugged.

“Fuck it,” he said abruptly, “if only…”

“If only what?” I asked him curiously.

“Nothing,” he answered.

We droned on for two hours, our spirits lifted and somehow Russo managed to tune in the antiquated Soviet built radio to receive a South Vietnamese channel, they were playing an Elvis Presley song, ‘Good Luck Charm’. That was something we sorely needed, a good luck charm, somehow I doubted we were going to get one on this mission. In my experience you made your own luck and the more enemy you killed the luckier you became. It was a simple equation of war.

Cady smiled after a few minutes. “I reckon we might actually make it, Hoffman.”

I shrugged. Ideally we would have called for an escort from the South, possibly from an American aircraft carrier off the coast, but the second we used the radio they would triangulate on us and we’d become the target for every MIG they could send to shoot us down. Besides, the American military had made it quite clear that we were on our own. I looked out of the window, they would be hunting for us now, of course, but flying at low level made it difficult for them to find us. Difficult, but not impossible.

The first burst went just wide of the port wing, the sound of the gun coming just after the fighter shot past us, one cannon round even went through the wingtip but failed to explode.

I banked hard to port, guessing that the attacker was crossing port towards our starboard. Sure enough, a MIG 17 flashed past the cockpit as Paul shouted for the passengers to hold on tight.

“That’s something new,” he said, “I’d heard about the MIG 17 but it’s the first one I’ve seen in the flesh.”

His voice was oddly calm, he was making an effort to keep relaxed and not do anything that would panic the soldiers in the back. Cady had come up to the cockpit again and was peering silently out of the windscreen.

“It could be the last one, my friend,” I said to Paul, “Unless we can lose him, can you see any cloud we can disappear into?”

He was looking out of the window at the sky, but it was clear and blue. A mountain range loomed in front of us, maybe five minutes flying time away. Too long. I could see the MIG turning in for another attacking pass and I pushed the control column forward just as another burst of fire came towards us, this time we weren’t so lucky, it stitched across the fuselage causing chaos in the cabin. Cady rushed back to check the damage while we

concentrated on keeping the aircraft alive.

We reached the jungle canopy flying literally feet above it, if we'd lowered our wheels they would probably have touched it. We flew on, but I wasn't in any doubt that it was a matter of seconds, minutes maybe if we were lucky, before the MIG came in again and finished us.

"He doesn't know his business, that pilot," Paul grinned.

"Let's hope he's not a fast learner," I replied grimly.

Cady came back into the cockpit. "No injuries yet, Hoffman, what do we do next?"

"I'm trying to find somewhere to put down, Captain, before we're blown out of the sky."

He looked down at the unending jungle canopy and shook his head. "Any other options?"

"Pray he runs out of ammunition," Paul said with a grin.

The smile was wiped off his face as the MIG came in again, I was ready for him and wrenched the rudder, turning the aircraft sharply to starboard to vector away from the cannon fire, but it was hopeless. Another burst hit us, this time it was the port wing that took the brunt of the attack, the engine erupted in a cloud of smoke and oil and caught fire as the propeller began to feather.

"Get your men ready, Cady, we're going down," I shouted.

He went back in the cabin and I heard him shouting orders to them to find something to hold on to. We were almost on the ground anyway, there was no room to manoeuvre when I saw a small clearing in the jungle and pointed the aircraft at it.

"Landing gear?" Paul shouted.

I shook my head. "No time and anyway, the gear could topple us if it tangles with any branches or roots. Feather the starboard engine."

The first of the trees rushed past the cockpit window and we hit the ground with an enormous crash, the Ilyushin bounced back into the air and came down again as we slid along the clearing. We bounced up and down as we hit fallen trees and small mounds of earth. The sea of foliage hurtled towards us as we rushed along, then we came to the end of the clearing and the Ilyushin buried its nose into the first of the trees. We instinctively threw up our arms to cover our eyes as the windscreen burst in and shattered glass showered the cockpit and the aircraft rolled to a halt.

"Get everyone out fast and undercover," I shouted to the men in the

cabin. “Paul, we’ve done what we could, let’s go.”

He nodded, picked up his pack, we grabbed our weapons and rushed into the cabin and I followed him with my pack. The cabin was in chaos as the men scrambled to get out of the crashed aircraft, they had the door open already and were helping Anderson and Goldberg down to the ground.

“You need to move faster,” I shouted to Cady, “the MIG is still around and there may be several hundred gallons of aviation fuel that could catch fire.”

He nodded and started to urge them on but they had heard me and were already throwing their gear out and jumping clear as if their lives depended on it. Which of course, they did.

When they were all out Paul followed them and I left last, jumping to the jungle floor. Paul was already urging them to get away from the aircraft and they were running for the shelter of a huge, fallen tree that looked almost like the body of a giant dinosaur that had lain there for centuries, millennia even. I followed them and looked up at the sky from behind the giant tree trunk. The MIG was circling, almost certainly using his radio to ask for instructions. In a communist North Vietnam everyone had to wait until orders were relayed from someone at the top. Apparently this time he didn’t have to wait long. Abruptly he banked and turned towards us at high speed, then fired his cannons at the crashed plane. Someone would be in serious trouble for that order, I reflected. This was North Vietnam with a chronic shortage of everything. A crashed aircraft could be retrieved and repaired to fly again, one that was destroyed with cannon fire was useless. Then the Ilyushin exploded as the cannon shells hit the fuel tanks, sending a ball of flame shooting up in the sky that we could feel behind the shelter of the tree. Before he completed his attack his guns suddenly stopped firing, he was out of ammunition. I turned to Cady.

“Captain, we need to move, fast, away from here.”

He was mystified. “Hoffman, we’re ok, he’s out of ammunition.”

“And calling in reinforcements and ground troops to catch us here. Round up your men and get moving.”

His expression changed as he realised the danger we were in. He started giving orders and we struck out under the jungle canopy, out of sight of the MIG. We came on a game trail that looked passable and almost ran along it for a mile before I called a halt.

“We need to move east or west, the Viets know we’re heading to the

South and they'll be hunting for us in that direction. What do you think, Paul?"

He was looking at a map he'd brought from the Ilyushin. "We're a few miles away from the village of Dong Hoi, I think. If we head due east, we can swing south when we're further away and cross the DMZ near an old French fort just south of the border called Lang Vei, it's near the village of Khe Sanh."

"So we'll be as good as home when we get to this Lang Vei place, yeah?" Cady asked.

"No, we won't be. There's over a hundred miles to travel to get to the DMZ, the area will be thick with Viets searching for us. Once we're over the border, the Viet Cong will still be hunting us down, we won't be safe until we get back to Tan Son Nhat. Let's move."

We hacked our way east through the thick jungle, eventually we hit another game trail and the going got easier. As far as we could tell no one had passed this way recently but we couldn't allow ourselves the luxury of jumping to conclusions. Cady put out a rearguard, Russo and Beckerman, to stop us being attacked from behind. There was little point in sending out a point guard, we could barely get through the jungle as it was. We travelled that way for fifteen hard, brutal miles until the light was fading. Goldberg and Anderson looked all in, as if they were about to collapse unconscious.

"We'd better stop here," I said to Cady. "We can't go on any further and neither can they."

Cady nodded and gave orders to make camp. It started to rain and we sat miserably under our waterproof shelters to try and keep dry, but it was hopeless, the rain seemed to get through everything and we spent a miserable night listening out for the enemy. In the morning we were a sad, sorry group, cold, wet, tired and hungry. Frank Burr went to each of us and put together a collection of rations from which he produced a breakfast that tasted like decaying rat, but we wolfed it down, it could be the last food we would eat in a long time.

I was discussing the direction we would be heading in when Beckerman came up to us.

"Captain, Goldberg and Anderson, they're not looking too good."

We went over to inspect the two men. Goldberg had an obvious fever, he was hot, his eyes unfocussed and he had been unable to eat any food. Anderson was no better, apparently his ribs had been broken and his right

knee smashed with a blow from a pistol, he said he was in a great deal of pain. They wouldn't make the entire trip, of that I was certain. I nodded to Cady and we moved away to discuss it out of earshot.

"What do you think?" he asked me. "They don't look as if they'll travel a hundred miles through this jungle." I nodded in agreement, it would be impossible.

"We need to get them evacuated. Do you have a working radio?" I asked him.

"Yeah, Jack Bond our comms guy has been working on the surviving set, the other was smashed during the escape. But you know that the second we transmit they'll home in on us like flies around a stale turd?"

I grinned, it was an apt analogy. "You'll need to move the party on at least ten miles. I'll remain here with your communications sergeant and contact my people at Tan Son Nhat. What about the military, will they help?"

He shook his head. "My orders were clear, Hoffman, no involvement of any U.S. forces north of the DMZ. It's not negotiable."

"I thought not," I replied. "In that case I'll contact my people, we've got a light aircraft on the field, a Cessna, big enough to carry out Goldberg and Anderson. If we can find a field or even a road we can get it down and back off again. May I suggest we move out and travel until we find a suitable landing area, then I'll return with Sergeant Bond and try the radio."

"That sounds okay to me. You're a good man, Hoffman."

"For a Nazi," I smiled.

"Yeah, I guess."

We started out, this time the two casualties had to be completely carried in litters made from branches with our waterproof shelters stretch over them. Two men carried each of them, it was hard, heavy and slow going. Paul and I took a turn when they tired and I was impressed by the sheer strength of these Special Forces men, the task of carrying the litters through the jungle was an act of torture. We'd travelled about seven miles when we came to an open space. I asked Cady to halt the men while Paul and I went to check the clearing. It was feasible, just. Barely six hundred feet long, it was strewn with broken trees, low hillocks of earth thrown up by some sort of subterranean creatures and a variety of rocks and debris deposited over hundreds of years. But it was flat, it would have to do. We took the map coordinates and I explained to Cady that his men would need to set to work to

clearing it as much as humanly possible. Then I set off with Jack Bond to make contact with Tan Son Nhat, leaving Paul to supervise the runway clearing.

We hiked back the way we had come, it took us three hours to travel the seven miles through dense jungle. Finally we arrived at the tiny clearing where we'd camped the night before. We'd tried to camouflage it but I guessed it was obvious we'd been there, it seemed unlikely that we could mask our stay sufficiently to fool the noses of the Viets that would be tracking us. Bond got the radio out of his pack and switched it on to warm up, I checked my watch.

"When you start transmitting, we have a maximum of three minutes, then we cut the transmission and head out fast."

"They're that quick are they?" he said to me surprised.

"This is their country, Jack, not ours." I replied softly. He nodded and bent to the radio to dial in the frequency of my Tan Son Nhat radio. Then he turned to me. "That's it, Jurgen, she's all yours."

I picked up the telephone style handset and pressed the send button.

"Hoffman for Drexler, do you read?"

I waited as the static hissed back at me, and then called again. Still no reply.

"Are you sure the radio is okay, Jack?"

"Certain, yeah, it's working one hundred percent."

Then a voice crackled out of the earpiece. "Jurgen, is that you?"

"Johann, listen, and listen fast, we only have a little time before they triangulate our position. I need the Cessna brought to the following coordinates to bring out two casualties. Can do?"

"Of course, Jurgen. Where are you?"

I'd already calculated our position and worked out how to encode it. "Can you look up my birthdate in the files?" I asked him. There was a brief pause. "Of course."

"Good. Add that to our business bank account number, that's where we are."

There was a hesitation, then his voice came back, uncertainly. "Roger that, I'll do my best. I'll get the plane moving straight away, I prepared it ready, I suspected it might be needed."

"Don't leave today, you won't be here until after dark and we can't light the landing strip. Leave at first light and time your arrival for mid-morning.

We'll put down a smoke marker. Is the C-47 operational yet?" Another pause. "Yes, I think so."

What wasn't he telling me? Presumably that he wasn't confident about making it, but there was no time to discuss it.

"Johann, you are able to make the flight, aren't you? "Er, sure, I think I'll find it."

I checked my watch, time was up. I desperately wanted to ask about Helene but it could endanger our mission even more. "Hoffman out."

I cut the transmission and gave Jack the handset.

"That's it, we need to move fast, they'll be searching for us and we need to be as far away as possible."

He nodded and stowed the radio in his pack and we set off. When we reached the track that led back to our group we continued for another mile laying a false trail. Then we cut back to the original track and went on to find our group.

Through the rest of the day we waited under the shelter of the jungle at the side of the field. From time to time aircraft buzzed overhead, hunting for us but none came near enough to have seen us. When night fell we tried to get some sleep, the rain had stopped and we were exhausted after the previous sleepless night. I woke up at dawn, as I usually did. Two of the men were already moving around, Cady and Woltz, the others were still fast asleep. Paul woke up and together we went to make a final check on the landing field. It was the best we could do under the circumstances, Drexler wasn't an expert pilot, he had a pilot's license but only used it to enable him to maintain and test fly the aircraft if he was working on. He wasn't good enough, but he was all we had. Helene had a license too and she was a far better pilot than Johann, but she was in a hospital in the U.S., several thousand miles away and even if she wasn't I would never have suggested her coming this far north on a risky rescue mission. It was all up to Johann Drexler.

The rest of the men gradually woke up and the camp came alive as they busied themselves readying for the pickup later that morning. We brought Goldberg and Anderson to the side of the clearing on their litters. When the aircraft landed they needed to be loaded and sent away almost before the wheels stopped turning. Even if we allowed ourselves the luxury of a short break for the pilot, the Viets would definitely not. Their air patrols had increased and I became increasingly nervous that the Cessna might be

detected and blown out of the sky.

"He'll get here," Paul said, seeing my nervousness.

"I hope so, sometimes he doesn't seem to be able to find his way back to Tan Son Nhat." He laughed and clapped me on the back. "He'll be here."

An hour later there was still no sign of the aircraft, then suddenly we heard a low buzzing in the distance. I looked up and made out the shape of the Cessna flying just above treetop height, it was nearly on top of us.

"Smoke!" I shouted to Cady.

Someone popped the smoke marker and a plume of smoke rose into the air, bending to show the direction of the wind. The Cessna banked and went around again and lined up for a landing. Then it came over the treetops and dropped onto the field in a perfect three point landing. I was impressed, Johann must have been taking lessons. The aircraft expertly taxied to the end of the field and turned into the wind ready to take off as the men ran out with Goldberg and Anderson. The aircraft door opened and a man stepped out. It wasn't Johann Drexler.

The man that was piratical in appearance due to the black eye patch, collected during one of his numerous crash landings. Ritter von Schacht. I must have looked like a goldfish, my mouth opening and shutting. "Ritter, what the hell are you doing, where's Johann?"

He laughed. "Did you want an amateur flying over the DMZ, Jurgen? Johann came to see me, said that he didn't think he'd even find you let along land the aircraft. Naturally I offered my own expert services."

"So he's ok, Johann, no problems? He should have run this past me, Ritter."

"Of course he's ok, he's fine. He's just not a pilot, Jurgen, a fair engineer, maybe, but hell, did you want Johann to pilot this plane so far north? You know he'd never get here."

I grinned and we shook hands. "No, you're right, poor old Johann, he's not the best pilot or navigator in the world. Thanks, Ritter, I appreciate this." He shrugged. "Any time, my friend."

I could smell alcohol on his breath, but that was the man, he drank heavily though never when he was flying.

A shout came from the men, they'd loaded the casualties, Frank Burr was going to care for them on the long journey back to Saigon.

"You'd better go, Ritter, I'll see you back in Saigon."

"Take care, my friend. Johann is worried about you."

“Half the North Vietnamese Army is worrying about us, Ritter.”

He looked worried. “Will you get back ok, do you want me to get Johann to prepare the C-47 and we could fly back and pick all of you up?”

I grinned. “I’ve always got back in the past, haven’t I? Don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine.” He nodded. “Don’t be overconfident, Jurgen. Be very careful. Use the radio if you need me again. Where are you headed?” I told him about the old airfield outside Khe Sanh.

“Could you bring the C-47 to pick us up there?”

I could have asked Harkins to provide transport within South Vietnam, but his headquarters was riddled with leaks and I preferred to keep the operation to ourselves.

“Of course, just call up and I’ll come and get you, Johann can take the right hand seat.” I nodded and he climbed through the door of the Cessna, it seemed overcrowded already with the three men inside the tiny cockpit, Frank Burr sat in the front seat.”

“Can you fly, Frank?” I asked him as Ritter strapped himself in. He shook his head. “Sorry.”

I slammed the door, another pilot would have been welcome but Ritter was more than capable. He throttled up and the Cessna began to roll, he saluted and I waved back. Then it picked up speed, took off and headed due south, barely clearing the treetops as it left the clearing. I looked around, Cady was standing beside me.

“Captain, we need to move, fast. They’ll be down on us now, we don’t have long.”

“We’re all set, Hoffman.” He turned to his men, they were waiting expectantly.

“Let’s go.”

*****

*"Everything depends on the Americans. If they want to make war for 20 years then we shall make war for 20 years. If they want to make peace, we shall make peace and invite them to tea afterwards."*

*Ho Chi Minh*

People’s Army of Vietnam Militia Self-Defence Force Headquarters, Hanoi

It was a smoky room, windows grimy, the furniture worn and repaired many times. Quan glanced up at the two junior officers standing before his desk. One was Nguyen Minh, nephew of his sister's husband. His uniform was smart, polished, his attitude suitably deferential in the presence of his commanding officer. But he was useless, weak, despised by his men for his reluctance to take tough decisions and lead from the front as was normal in the People's Army. Sub-Lieutenant Van Thanh, standing next to him, ten years older than Nguyen, a tough, competent veteran who had fought in the French war as a private soldier but without connections would find it hard to advance beyond his lowly rank.

"You know about the Americans that have illegally crossed our border and kidnapped two prisoners of the State?" Both men nodded.

"These criminals should be hunted down and shot," Nguyen broke in enthusiastically.

Quan looked at him for a moment. "I totally agree, Lieutenant Nguyen, what are you doing about achieving that very desirable end?" Nguyen reddened and stammered. "Well, Sir, I am of course awaiting your orders."

"You mean you've done nothing?" Quan asked him.

Nguyen nodded.

"Sub-Lieutenant Van?" Quan asked the older man. "My men are all standing by for your orders, Sir. I've personally drawn weapons and ammunition from the armoury and rations for five days."

Quan nodded. "Excellent. Lieutenant Nguyen, perhaps you could follow Van's lead, if it's not too much trouble?"

"Yes, Sir, immediately. Nguyen inwardly cursed the junior man, he'd lined up a good night of cards in the city for tonight and his favourite girl would be waiting for him when he finished.

"Very good. You will leave in one hour." Nguyen felt his stomach lurch, it was a disaster.

"I want both of you in Dong Hoi as fast as possible," Quan continued. "Make yourselves available to the local militia commander, he is expecting you. Dismissed."

"Colonel," Van said suddenly. Quan looked at him irritably. "What is it, Sub-Lieutenant Van?"

"The Americans, if we find them, what do we do with them?"

"When you find them, Lieutenant, I want them dead. Is that clear?"

Both officers saluted and left the office.

* * * * *

# Chapter Seven

*If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich*

*John F. Kennedy 1961*

We pushed on fast, turning south to head for the DMZ, we were climbing now into a low mountain range. When we stopped for a rest Paul checked the maps and talked to Beckerman, we had less than seventy miles to travel. We were about to cross a rough track that led into the foot of the mountains when we heard the sound of a vehicle. Cady signalled for the men to take cover and we waited while the Russian built Zil came into view. We waited for it to go past but the vehicle stopped fifty yards from our position and the soldiers dismounted. We counted eighteen NVA regulars in all, fifteen privates, two NCOs and a lieutenant. The officer barked orders and the men began unloading their equipment from the lorry, a medium machine gun, a Soviet SG43 Goryunov and a mortar that they started to assemble on a stand. I looked across at Cady, he'd gone white, frozen into almost a statue. I inched over to him. "We have to take them out, Captain, we won't get past them," I murmured. "Either we kill them or they'll kill us."

He shook his head. "Christ, I don't know, there are a lot of them. An SG-43, a mortar, shit, I don't know."

His men looked across at him, they'd faced odds as bad as this earlier. The unstated feeling was like an axe hanging over us. He'd lost his nerve, bottled it. The taut infiltration and desperate fighting withdrawal from Son Tay had finished him, probably the forced landing was the end. But we had to deal with the soldiers or die here.

"Captain, if I may, I've been in this situation many times before. If you would maintain the perimeter, I'll organise the attack."

He looked bewildered, but after a few moments nodded. "Yeah, you do that Hoffman, you do that." I wormed across to where the other men were crouching down behind some rocks, Paul was peering through a narrow fissure to keep an eye on the Viets. "The captain has asked me to organise an attack on these soldiers, does anyone have any problem with that?"

They grinned and shook their heads. “He’s calling his broker to check his options, is he?” Woltz murmured. We all smiled politely.

“We need to destroy the mortar and the machine gun, we can’t get any further while they’re intact. What’s the grenade situation?”

They pooled their grenades, we had a total of seven. I explained my plan of attack, it was simple. Russo and Beckerman would take the machine gun, two others would hit the mortar, and in each case the second man would give covering fire as the grenades were thrown. Paul and I would pin down the rest of them with sub-machine gun fire.

“Is that clear, any questions?”

“Yeah. Jurgen, were you an officer once, you seem to know what you’re doing?” one of them asked.

“I was an SS-Sturmbannführer, that's a major, I commanded a company and later in the war a full regiment of the SS-Das Reich Panzer Infantry. I served on the Eastern Front and later in the French Foreign Legion as a Senior Sergeant.”

“Yeah, I reckon that qualifies you to take the lead. What about Paul?” Beckerman asked.

“He was also an SS-Sturmbannführer in SS-Totenkopf, after that we served together in the French Foreign Legion where he was also a senior sergeant. A company, Second Battalion, 13th Half Brigade, if you’re interested.”

“Right, so you’ve both seen some action?” I grinned. “Some.”

“And the lorry, what do we do about it?”

“Ride back across the DMZ on it, if we can deal with the soldiers.”They looked across at me. “They don’t look like beginners,” I warned them. “There are no guarantees on this one. We just don’t have a choice. We fight or we die.”

They crawled into position, Paul and I loaded our sub-machine guns and made ready with a pile of spare clips next to each of us. I wistfully thought about the old days when we’d have an MG34 general purpose belt fed machine gun in close support. But we were well armed, it would have to do. I looked around, they were ready. I nodded at Paul and we poked the barrels of our guns over the rocks and pulled the triggers.

The first bullets smashed into the Viets, they scattered instantly. Loud explosions sent shock waves back towards us, hurting our ear drums. The machine gun and mortar disappeared. The surviving Viets had taken cover

back in the rocks and began returning fire. I admired their skill, they were damned good to have recovered so quickly. Eight of them had fallen in our ferocious ambush but that still left ten to fight back, ten skilled and hardened communists who would probably be veterans of the Indochina war with the French. More to the point, they outnumbered us.

"We'll have to destroy the lorry," I shouted across to the men. It was not the way I'd planned it, but if they got away in the lorry we would be in lot more trouble. Two of our men shifted their aim and the lorry sagged on its springs as the bullets hammered into it. Every tyre was riddled, it wouldn't follow us south.

"Paul. Get Cady, we're pulling out," I shouted at him. He nodded and crawled away and came back with the Captain who looked almost as if he was sleepwalking. I gave the order and we retreated towards a gap in the rocks that led away from the battle, still firing at the Viets. We conducted a fighting withdrawal for half a mile, pursued by the vengeful Vietnamese. "What the fuck went wrong?" Russo asked as we ran.

"They outnumbered us three to one, that was the first problem and they were also very lucky. But we could have dealt with it if they weren't so good. They were veteran troops, Russo, you saw how quickly they responded when we opened fire. They still outnumber us two to one and will have called for reinforcements, possibly even air support. It was a risk worth taking and it didn't pan out, so we're running."

We dashed along the track and over the top of the low mountain range. The valley below us stretched far into the distance, a sea of thick, dense greenery that would help us to disappear from our pursuers. Bullets clipped rocks as we tumbled down the steep path, it was fortunate that Ritter had taken the casualties, if we were carrying Goldberg and Anderson we would have been finished. We reached the bottom and fought our way into the jungle along a small trail. After half a mile I saw a tiny opening in the jungle and told Paul to lead them away while I took Russo further along to lay a false trail before doubling back and following our group.

It was getting dark by the time I called a halt, we hadn't heard any sound of pursuit for over an hour and I assumed we'd lost them. We'd also lost our way. We made camp and spent a miserable night listening to the sounds of the jungle, the occasional roar of a wild animal, a shriek as a creature was taken for food and the incessant buzz of thousands of crickets. They were the primeval sounds of the forest, no different to what they had

been thousands of years ago. It was broken suddenly by the sound of Abe Woltz singing softly, a pop song called 'Duke of Earl' that had been on the radio stations recently. He had a surprisingly good voice, I think it cheered us all up, until Cady snapped at him to shut up in case the enemy heard us. We all looked at the officer sceptically but said nothing, his authority was slipping badly enough as it was. In the morning we prepared the last of our food and got ready to move out.

"You know where we're headed?" Beckerman asked me. "South," I replied. When I didn't say any more he shrugged and picked up his pack.

We pushed east through dense jungle for several hours, it was midday by the time we came across a trail that intersected out path heading towards the south. We took a short break and sat quietly, hungry and miserable, depressed by the unending green of the jungle that seemed to claw at our boots, our bodies and our very souls for every step of the way. Water was a problem and when we found a stream that looked less dirty than some Beckerman used water purification tablets to sterilise some water and we were at least able to fill our canteens. It was almost dark when we abruptly came out of the jungle and saw a road in front of us, by European standards it would have been a farm track but here in Vietnam is was something akin to an autobahn. I went forward cautiously with Russo and Woltz while the others followed at a distance. The road looked clear but after we'd walked along it for several hundred yards we nearly stepped into a roadblock.

It was only the smell of tobacco smoke that alerted us. We melted into the jungle and set up camp a mile away and settled down to wait for dawn. Cady insisted we mount a night attack on the roadblock, until I gently reminded him that we had no way of knowing where the Viets were deployed and that we could run straight into a much larger force. He persisted that we could get around them, until I pointed out that a large force of infantry in our immediate rear was not good military tactics.

We awoke at first light and crept forward. Two lorries were parked across the track to block it, soldiers were everywhere, possibly two platoons of them, with a pair of lieutenants in command. One of the lieutenants seemed to be more senior but oddly he was much younger than the other man, when I looked through my binoculars I could see the men looking at him with thinly disguised contempt. Half of them were to the east side of the track, the other to the west. The senior lieutenant joined the men to the east. They were poorly deployed, lounging around and smoking as opposed to the

older lieutenant's men who were skilfully deployed in good positions, alert and watchful. We doubled back to our group and explained the situation.

"Couldn't we go around them?" Jack Bond asked the question they all wanted answered.

I shook my head. "If they know their business, they'll have patrols out in the jungle and further down the track, we've no way of knowing who we're going to run into."

"We're fucked," Cady said loudly, "totally fucked. We should have attacked last night." We all looked at him, shocked by the deterioration in him over the past twenty four hours. He was unshaven like the rest of us, but his eyes were red rimmed and blazing, his skin pallid.

"Not yet, Captain, not yet, we've still got some options." He seemed to retreat into some kind of trance. I turned back to the men.

"We need an inventory of our weapons and ammunition. Let's see what we've got."

"You mean you think we can take them all?" Russo asked.

"Unless you have a better plan, I don't see any alternative. Even if we crept around them we'd have no way of preventing them from pursuing us if they found out. Believe me, they always do find out, this is their country, we are just the visitors. A passing peasant would sound the alarm, a hidden checkpoint, an unexpected overflight, we've no way to tell. They're fully mobile, they'd be on us in no time at all."

They looked at me for a moment, obviously wondering if I was making the right decision. All except Paul, who had been in this situation many times before and Cady, who was unable to fully reason things out.

We took stock of our weapons and ammunition. We had six sub-machine guns between us, as well as Woltz's sniper rifle and an assortment of handguns. There were two AR15s, early versions of the M16 and about a hundred rounds for each of us. The grenades had been used up in the previous attack. I outlined a simple plan, ideally we would use one of their vehicles but taking one might prove to be impossible.

"The platoon to the east of the track appears poorly led and I doubt they'll be effective when it comes to a fight. They've got a light machine gun each side of the track, a Degtyaryev DP. If we can take the platoon to the east we can turn the Degtyaryev on the platoon the other side, I'm hoping they'll be less than enthusiastic about firing on their own positions. But it'll mean a long crawl to get behind them and we'll need to take them in total

silence."

"That's what we're trained to do, Hoffman," Russo said. "Very well, Joe, it's time to earn your pay."

We left Cady ostensibly to guard our packs, in reality to keep him away from the action. I took Russo and Beckerman and Paul took the other two, I intended to hit them from south of their position, Paul from the north and work towards the middle of the platoon. If one soldier cried out, fired a shot or shouted a warning, the plan would go awry. We crawled past them, about fifty yards back in the jungle. The smoke alerted me first, a hidden sentry was enjoying a cigarette behind a thick bush. I nodded to Beckerman and he drew his fighting knife and crawled around the other side of the bush to take him from behind. I heard a slight rustle of clothing, otherwise it was a totally silent kill. Beckerman crawled back to us and we continued towards the main group. As I had anticipated, they were poorly deployed, the two men at the most southerly end of the line were murmuring quietly to themselves. While I waited, Russo and Beckerman crawled quietly forward and I saw each of them put their arm around the neck of one of the soldiers and drive the points of their knives through the eye and straight into the brain. They pulled the bodies down and laid them out of sight. I heard another soldier whispering to his comrades, calling them and I crawled forward. His voice grew louder and he stupidly stood up and walked towards their position. As he came up to where he probably assumed his comrades were sleeping I stood up, clamped my hand over his mouth and slit his throat.

We crept quietly towards the officer and left two more Viet soldiers bleeding into the damp soil of the jungle. So far, none of the troops the other side of the track appeared to have noticed anything. The lieutenant our side of the track suddenly shouted across to the other officer, who hissed at him, I didn't need to speak Vietnamese to know he was telling him to get out of sight and shut up. But it made no difference, the lieutenant, smartly dressed but soft and oily looking, spoke more sharply to the other officer who shrugged and ran across the track towards him. It was too good an opportunity to miss, I'd warned Woltz to hit any target of opportunity that presented itself. The two officers were stood together with three of the soldiers from our side of the track. I prayed that our sniper would recognise the chance. There were five soft 'thunk' sounds, they couldn't have been more than a second apart. All five men dropped and lay still. There was an outbreak of confused shouting from both sides, three more men stood up on

our side of the track and also half a dozen from the other side who looked suspiciously around the greenery that embraced them. The three men on our side went down, three 'thunks' in quick succession. Woltz switched aim to the soldiers the other side of the track and five of the six who had stood up went down, the sixth man scrambled away before Woltz could move his aim.

I heard the Vietnamese soldiers shouting to themselves and across to their comrades our side, but there was no answer, we'd got them all. Shots cracked out and a bullet whistled close to my head. I crawled away and came across the Degtyarev, Russo and Beckerman had already secured it and were checking the magazine. More shots cracked out from across the track, several sustained bursts of AK47 fire spattered around us, then Russo and Beckerman opened up with the Degtyarev. It was a slow rate of fire but devastating, they'd aimed at the Degtyarev opposite and hit it with several bursts. The two man crew, scrambling to bring their weapon to bear, went down in a hail of bullets, several of which smashed into the machine gun and I saw the pancake magazine spin away into the foliage as it was hit. The gun was out of use, we'd reduced the odds. The Viets had recovered well now and were pouring fire into us, so far no one had been hit but it was more by luck than skill. The Degtyarev kept firing, Russo furiously changing magazines as they emptied. I estimated that we'd killed or wounded around twelve of the enemy, which still left a good number to return fire. Then the Degtyarev jammed. They banged furiously on the breech to try and free it but I could see it was useless. They abandoned the gun and started using their sub-machine guns to continue the fight. We were outnumbered by perhaps three to one which was not healthy. Even worse, they only had to hold on for reinforcements to arrive which they inevitably would. We needed a miracle to turn this fight to our advantage and Cady gave us one. He ran onto the track, his hands in the air clutching a white cloth, I could hear him shouting "I surrender, don't shoot."

We all ceased fire, both sides, astonished by the incredible spectacle of an American officer wild and dishevelled, running towards the Viets. Several of them stood up, I assumed they thought that we were all giving up. It was too good an opportunity to miss. I stood up and ran, shouting, "Charge!"

The others needed no more encouragement, they rose up and ran towards the enemy only a few yards away across the jungle. The Viets looked towards us, alarmed as it dawned on them that we weren't surrendering and they started to aim their weapons at us, some dived for

cover, but it was too late. As I sent a burst hammering into them, I saw Cady go down under a long burst of AK47 fire. Then we were amongst them and it was fierce, bloody work that we had all been trained for. Woltz was still firing, knocking down the enemy one by one as they came within his field of vision. Beckerman screamed and fell as a bullet hit him, but the rest of us crashed into the enemy and it took little more than a minute to scythe them down with sub-machine gun fire. Two of them threw up their hands to surrender, but Russo hit them with another burst. A sergeant loomed out of the scrub in front of me and I shot him as I moved past. The jungle went silent, we'd finished them all. We hoped that none had escaped into the jungle but we couldn't do anything about that, time wasn't on our side. The Special Forces men looked around, awestruck by what we'd achieved.

"Damn, if that don't beat all," Jack Bond said as he looked around at the carnage.

"Did anyone check Captain Cady?" I asked.

Woltz was walking towards me. He nodded. "Yeah, he's dead, that burst ripped him apart."

I came across Beckerman, he was lying against the trunk of a tree, blood stained his combat jacket. Bond had gone over to him to dress the wound.

"How is he?" I asked him. "A shoulder wound, he'll be ok."

"Paul, would you check out the trucks, see if they're useable. Joe, could you take a look too?" They nodded and quickly went to check them over. I heard the rumble of an engine starting, Paul came back to me shortly after.

"One of them is useable, Abe and Joe are changing a tyre that got shot out. The other took several bursts into the engine compartment, it's useless.

"Right. Would you help me to get Cady's body into the truck and we'll see how far we can drive towards the DMZ. I don't want to bury him here, we'll find somewhere quiet along the way."

We hoisted Cady's bloody body onto the bed of the truck and covered it with a tarpaulin. The men were gathering as much ammunition and weapons as they could find and they threw them in the back beside Cady's body. Finally they climbed aboard and Paul drove us along the track. We were back on our way to the DMZ.

We travelled for another fifty miles without incident, as we passed peasants along the track the men in the back put their heads down and Paul and I covered our faces with our hands. It may have fooled one or two, maybe more, but not all of them. It was all we had. I told the men in the

back to watch for aircraft and we continued along the track, lurching and bumping on the ruts. Beckerman's wound re-opened but although he was in pain he gritted his teeth and didn't cry out as Bond re-fastened the dressing.

"Why do we always wind up fighting wars in these sub-human countries, Jurgen?" Paul said abruptly.

I started. I was miles away, I'd been thinking of something else, my mind had wandered to Helene. She'd smiled at me in that beautiful, sensuous way as I came to her and started to remove her blouse. Her breasts were still firm, the skin smooth and creamy. I was touching them gently, when Paul spoke I realised that I had begun to get an erection. I brought my mind back to the present with an effort, daydreaming would get us all killed. I had to survive, had to get back to Saigon and do everything in my power to help her. I focussed on what Paul had been saying to me.

"Germans have been fighting other people's wars since the beginning of time, almost. Even these Americans used our Hessians during their war of independence. I think it must be our destiny to be the world's military reserve, to be called on when anyone needs us."

Paul grunted. "Maybe we're just too stupid to stay at home when the bullets start flying." I grinned at him. "You'd prefer that, married to a fat Bavarian farmer's daughter and rearing a brood of little Schusters?"

He shuddered. "A good point, Jurgen, the Viet Cong sound positively inviting compared to finishing up like that." I laughed, about to make a reply when someone shouted from the back. "MIG coming in!"

The pilot must have been flying at low level, they hadn't seen him until the last moment. His aircraft shot past us and climbed ready to make a banking turn in the sky. He may or may not have identified us as the stolen lorry but I didn't intend discussing it. I saw a gap in the jungle and pointed it out to Paul, he swerved off the track just as a stream of cannon fire erupted on the part of the track we'd just left. As the MIG banked again for another attack run, we jumped out and scrambled to escape into the deep jungle.

I crouched behind a clump of trees as the MIG roared in again, this time the cannon fire riddled the lorry and it erupted into a ball of fire.

"That's Cady's funeral pyre taken care of," Paul said grimly. I nodded. The MIG came around yet again and gunfire smashed into the jungle all around us, he couldn't see us but was saturating the area with gunfire to try and hit some of us. Or contain us, of course, until the North Vietnamese army could reach us.

“We need to go deeper in the jungle, he’ll have called for ground troops to surround us. Call...”

As I spoke there was a renewed burst of firing. A second MIG had arrived and came directly in for a strafing run as the first one circled overhead. Then a third one screamed in to attack and the jungle erupted once more all around us. I shouted for the men to regroup five hundred yards to the east and we crawled away. Behind us the MIGs were still searching, firing occasional bursts to remind us that they were still around. We didn’t get five hundred yards, after two hundred yards the jungle petered out and we were left standing on the edge of a deep ravine, the cliff top dropped several hundred feet to a swirling river below. A circling MIG spotted us and roared down into the attack, we jumped for cover as the cannon fire shredded the jungle over our heads. The river meandered sharply to the west and curved out of sight two or three hundred yards away from us, I realised there had to be a bridge for the track we had been following, it would of course be guarded. We were trapped in a pocket, the only direction we could go was back to the north, which was not an option.

We pulled back into the dense jungle. The MIGs had stopped shooting up the jungle, presumably to save their ammunition until they could see us. We were a miserable group, crouched under the jungle canopy out of sight of the MIGs.

“Any ideas, Jurgen?” Russo asked me. I shook my head. “It’s a tough one, we can’t go east or south, if we go west they’ll shoot us up on the track and if we go north we’ll run straight into an ambush party, they’ll have a regiment on the way already, we’ve stung them pretty badly.”

They all laughed. “That’s one way of putting it,” Jack Bond said. He looked at the sky. “Anyone know how long we have to go until dark?”

“About four hours, I think,” I replied. “They’ll be here before then.”

“You’re sure about that?” Abe Woltz said. “Isn’t it what you would do?” He shrugged. “I guess so. How far to the DMZ?”

“Maybe fifteen, twenty miles. I think the best move for us is to head south for the bridge, it can’t be far away. At least we can see what we’re facing there. Who knows, it might be possible to get across if it isn’t too heavily guarded and if it’s not too visible from the air.”

“And if the MIGs don’t see us,” Bond added unhappily. No one replied, everything depended on the Viets not getting a battalion to the bridge before we crossed it, assuming that there was a bridge and it was even still standing.

We crept through the jungle, careful to keep under the overhanging canopy. It took us half an hour before we came back to the edge of the foliage. The river was in front of us, curving around as I'd thought. At this point it was about fifty yards wide, not a huge distance and it was spanned by a rickety looking wooden bridge. We could see four guards the other side, they had a Degtyarev light machine gun set up pointing towards the track that they expected us to travel along. Woltz came up to me.

"I can take them, Jurgen, at this range it shouldn't be too much of a problem." I looked at the other men. "What do you think? If Abe takes out the guards we'd have to rush straight over the bridge, if the MIGs see what we're doing they'll be waiting for us so it would have to be straight away."

We got as close to the edge of the jungle as possible and crouched in our jumping off point. Abe had positioned himself with a good field of fire, he was as confident as he could be of taking out all four of the enemy.

"I'm ready," he said, "just say the word." I looked up at the sky, there was a MIG near enough to spot what we were doing. "Nearly there, hold tight, Abe." I jerked around at the sound of an engine coming from the other side of the river. A ZIL was slowing to a stop by the bridge and as we watched, an officer climbed down and spoke sharply to the guards. He shouted and waved at the MIGs, at the track that led north from where we had come and then swept his arm over the expanse of jungle that hid us. His meaning was obvious. He inspected the Degtyarev, barked some orders at the soldiers and they unloaded six small wooden cases from the vehicle. Then he mounted the lorry and it drove across the bridge.

We almost held our breath, praying that it would pass our position and our prayers were answered as it continued up the track and we heard the sound of its engine receding into the background. Their intention was clear, they were to be the beaters that drove their quarry, us, down onto the machine gun waiting at the bridge. It was a simple plan but it could be effective. The problem we faced was that when the MIGs noticed their guards shot up on the bridge, they'd call the troops in the lorry back to pursue us and they'd run us down like dogs.

We slumped down again, the obstacles were getting worse and worse.

"We could set fire to the bridge," I said absently. "Christ, you never give up, do you Jurgen?" Joe Russo said. "Give up? Why would I do that?"

"Jurgen, admit it, we're fucked. Totally fucked. What's the alternative?"

I looked at the others, all except Paul were hanging on my every word. I felt angry, what the hell was the matter with these supposed elite troops. I tried to imagine them in the snows of the Eastern Front, fending off countless Soviet attacks, counter-attacking to regain lost ground. Did they think this was some kind of game, to be played until the other side appeared to have gained the upper hand then tamely surrender, hoping for a warm bed and hot food in a prison camp?

"If that's the way you think, that's your choice. But I strongly suggest you consider shooting yourselves in the head first, it'll save them the trouble of doing it afterwards. Don't you realise, they're going to kill us all? These people are savages, we've hurt them badly, not just militarily but their pride, the invincible People's Army of North Vietnam. There's only one way they can get that reputation back, it's time you men understood that. They want us dead."

They were shaken by my words, but they heard the truth in them. We had to escape or die, there was no third option. We made plans to rush across the bridge as soon as Abe shot the guards. Once across, we'd try to set fire to it, but it seemed unlikely under the noses of the MIGs. Either way, we could dive into the jungle and set a course to the DMZ, away from the direct line of travel that they would be watching. Bond watched the track to see if the motorised infantry returned. Abe sighted on the guards once again. I opened my mouth to give him the order and another flight of fighter jets flew across. They disappeared out of sight and I shouted the order to go. Shots cracked out of the sniper rifle and we were up and running. Ahead of us I could see the guards were all down, crumpled into heaps on the ground. We hit the start of the bridge and ran onto the first wooden section. Then the roaring sound came back, the sound I'd hoped and prayed we could avoid with good timing and a little bit of good luck. Whatever else, our luck had run out as a stream of cannon shells sprayed the woodwork.

*****

*Should I become President...I will not risk American lives...by permitting any other nation to drag us into the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time through an unwise commitment that is unwise militarily, unnecessary to our security and unsupported by our allies.*

*John F. Kennedy*

MACV Main Headquarters, 137 Pasteur Street, Saigon

Major General Victor H. Krulak, the special assistant for counterinsurgency for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, looked around the smoky room with distaste. He noted that the sole Vietnamese present, Madame Nhu, President Diem's sister in law, was smoking cigarette after cigarette, indicating how nervous she felt. That was surprising, the Dragon Lady normally exuded confidence. Madame Nhu's brother-in-law, Diem had been appointed Prime Minister of Vietnam by her mother's distant cousin, Emperor Bao Dai after the French had been defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. When French Indochina was dissolved Diem was left in control of South Vietnam and became President. She was regarded as the First Lady of South Vietnam, her mother, a former beauty queen, was South Vietnam's observer at the United Nations and two of her uncles were cabinet ministers. Some said that Diem and Nhu would have invented the word nepotism if it hadn't been invented.

So why was she so nervous? Certainly not with the company present. Colonel Ted Serong, a guerrilla warfare expert who headed the Australian training mission in South Vietnam, General Harkins, the supreme commander in Vietnam and American Ambassador Nolting were all giving optimistic reports about the conduct of the war. If they were to be believed, they were winning. It certainly wasn't a clear picture, but CIA led actions that included organising the Montagnards into fighting units had done well. The Australian Colonel Serong had reported that "the big success story in Vietnam was the strategic hamlet program and this story has not yet been fully told."

It was clear for everyone to see that offensive operations against the Viet Cong were widespread and were growing steadily in intensity. True, the communists were infiltrating men into the South at an alarming rate, CIA estimated over five hundred a month, although Krulak had seen intelligence that put the figure higher, much higher. Some said that the monthly infiltration average was closer to fifteen hundred men. Chinese heavy weapons, including recoilless rifles and .50 calibre machine guns, were popping up throughout the country. Some of this ordnance had been carried overland through Laos, while other weaponry had been moved either by sea or other routes to South Vietnam through Cambodia.

So it was a mixed picture, but not one to be especially concerned about. Even the ARVN, shocked after the disastrous action at Ap Bac, were regrouping and beginning to show a more aggressive fighting posture that was showing results. No, there was something else. Diem, her brother-in-law, of course. A Catholic, there'd been a great deal of publicity describing how Diem's brutal treatment of the majority Buddhist population had caused the latest outrage. Quang Duc, a seventy three year old Buddhist monk had set fire to himself in the street by the Xa Loi pagoda. The newsmen alerted by the Buddhists covered the event in lurid detail, sending reports and film of the suicide for the world to see. Many of the Vietnamese military were Buddhist, in fact the overwhelming majority, in spite of Diem appointing Catholics to the most senior positions. If Diem fell, of course Madame Nhu, the Dragon Lady, would fall with him. Ambassador Nolting was on record as being vigorously opposed to the Americans becoming involved in any plot to oust the South Vietnamese leadership, including Madame Nhu and her husband Ngo Dinh Nhu. The Dragon Lady would know this through her spies. He shrugged mentally, it was an internal matter and they'd have to resolve it themselves. Krulak just prayed that they weren't aware of how enthusiastic some of the Washington people were for a change at the top in South Vietnam.

"Colonel Serong," Madame Nhu said abruptly, "you have reported that the Strategic Hamlets plan now numbers a total of three thousand five hundred villages, is that correct?"

He nodded his head. "It certainly is, Madame. A very successful programme that has denied the enemy access to food and supplies."

"Good. Things have changed, Colonel. My brother-in-law, the President of South Vietnam, now requires the strategic and military emphasis to be switched to internal security. There is no point in defending our country against the communists when the real enemy is already here."

"You mean the Buddhists?" General Krulak asked her.

"That is correct. Their demonstrations are becoming dangerous and rock the very stability that we are fighting for."

And of course, they were not Catholic, Krulak thought. President Diem had effectively raped the population of Buddhists to distribute the plum jobs and plantations to his Catholic cronies. No wonder the Buddhists were up in arms. He sighed.

"Madame Nhu, to shift resources away from the Strategic Hamlets

Program now would be a disaster. You mention that over three thousand of these hamlets are in existence, well, that's true. But my staff reports that barely six hundred are in fact fully operational. The rest balance on a knife edge until they are fully established."

"Fuck the hamlets, General, my brother-in-law wants measures taken to control the Buddhists. Maybe you can put them in hamlets and surround them with barbed wire."

Her eyes were blazing, her voice slashed across the calm of the room, the atmosphere had changed to one of crackling tension. No wonder she was nicknamed the Dragon Lady, Krulak reflected.

"Madame, what you describe is concentration camps, I hardly believe the President wants…"

"I'll tell you what the President wants, General. He wants these heathen priests, these bonzes stopped. If that means putting them all in concentration camps I don't care."

The men in the room looked at each other, embarrassed by her outburst.

"Madame Nhu," General Harkins interceded, "we are fighting the communists from the North, if we dilute our forces to support the President's internal struggles, we'll have no chance of beating the communists. Can President Diem not make some kind of peace with the Buddhists?"

"Peace with those heathens, is that what you are suggesting? Perhaps they are working with the communists, we should treat them all the same, fight them as one enemy."

Ambassador Nolting leaned forward. "The Buddhist populist population of South Vietnam constitutes the majority of your people, Madame. Surely it is unrealistic to expect to be able to contain them all. There really does have to be some kind of dialogue with them," he said.

"Dialogue? I'll give them dialogue, we need to send troops into the monasteries and kill some of these traitors who undermine the lawful authorities. They don't need dialogue, they need the leaders to be taken out and shot. Kill them, kill them all!"

She'd totally lost control, flecks of spittle came out of her beautiful mouth. The door flew open and one of her bodyguards rushed into the room, his hand drawing his weapon. She looked up.

"Get out, get out, you fool. If you want to shoot someone, go find some fucking Buddhist priests."

She stood up. "The Buddhists, they must be dealt with. Perhaps you

can send some of your precious bomber aircraft to destroy their monasteries."

"Madame, I hardly think," Nolting said placatingly. But she slashed him down.

"I don't care what you think, Ambassador. The President is threatened, these people should be killed. Kill them!" she shouted as she stormed out. They looked at each other, there was little to add to her tirade.

"Well I guess that screws our South East Asia program," Colonel Serong muttered. He got up and left.

General Krulak turned to Harkins. "General, any news of our people in the North? Washington is interested in the progress of your rescue mission."

Harkins winced. It was now 'his' rescue mission. Well, that was the way Washington worked. He shook his head.

"Nothing concrete, I'm afraid. Their aircraft was destroyed on the ground, we've had some intelligence that suggests they escaped from Hanoi and were making their way south, but the communists know they're there, of course. I guess it's just a matter of time."

"So you don't hold out any hope?"

Harkins smiled. "There's always hope, who knows, maybe they'll pull it off. But no, I'm not optimistic."

"No chance of sending them any help?"

"Does Washington specifically want me to invade North Vietnam, then?"

Ambassador Nolting looked up sharply. "What, what was that? Did you say what I thought you said?"

Both generals laughed.

"Don't panic, Ambassador," Harkins said, "we've got enough problems in South Vietnam. No, I think the Nhu's want us to widen our war here to include the Buddhist population."

As they walked out, Krulak spoke quietly to Harkins. "I need an answer for Washington, General Harkins, about that rescue mission."

Harkins thought for a moment. "You can tell them that if they're not already dead, they're probably back in custody. Personally, I would think they're dead. Once the Viets destroyed their aircraft, they were finished. Sorry, General Krulak, but that's the truth. They only ever had a slight chance, and that chance has gone."

Krulak nodded and they went out.

* * * * *

# Chapter Eight

*In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility - I welcome it.*

*John F. Kennedy*

"Keep running, faster!" I shouted at them.

But they could see the shells taking huge splinters out of the woodwork, and hear the noise of the three MIG 17s, their Klimov VK-1 engines roaring as they screamed out of their dive ready to turn and bank for a second pass. So far not one of us had been hit, but it was only a matter of time. They'd have time for at least one more pass before we got into cover and their formidable array of cannon would shred us, it was only because we had caught them unawares that they had missed on the first pass. There was the sound of more jet engines and we knew then that it was the end of the road. The thunder of the jet engines mixed with the whoosh of multiple missile launches, yet no missiles hit the bridge. I looked up to see the most wonderful sight I'd ever seen, a flight of four F-102 Delta Daggers, pouring missiles down onto the MIGs. Two were hit immediately and went down trailing smoke and flames. They hit the jungle almost side by side and there had been no ejections, just a pall of black smoke to mark their funeral pyre. The third MIG switched on his afterburners and rocketed north, pursued by two of the F-102s. Then there was an explosion less than five miles away and another plume of black smoke soared over the jungle canopy.

We were so stunned by our miraculous escape that we stood, mouths open, looking up at the sky. Then I remembered the troops that were coming up behind us.

"Run, get across the bridge and under cover, they'll be along any second," I shouted.

We ran off the end of the bridge, skirting the bodies of the machine gun crew and took cover in the jungle to the side of the track. Overhead the F-102s came back, circled for a few moments and roared off, the leader waggled his wings and the back marker did a three hundred and sixty degree

roll that I was certain would get him grounded if the flight leader had seen it. Maybe not, fighter pilots were notorious show-offs. But every one of us would gladly have stood their drinks' bills for the next month. I only wished we could have communicated with them, one well aimed missile would have totally destroyed the bridge. With the bridge left standing the enemy would be after us in minutes and they had a vehicle whilst we were on foot.

Paul was checking our map. "The jungle looks bad, Jurgen, it's thick foliage, it'll take us forever to hack through. The track would be faster."

"Faster for them too and they've got the Zil."

A shout from Joe Russo distracted us. "Hey, take a look at this." He was standing next to the boxes we'd seen unloaded from the lorry. We went over and looked at the one he'd opened. Hand grenades, Soviet made, twenty of them. If the other boxes held the same, and it looked as if they did, we had a hundred and twenty small bombs.

"Can you do anything with those on the bridge, Joe?"

"You betcha ass, Jurgen. When those Viets come back they'll be in for a shock."

"Why not blow it when they're on the bridge?" Paul asked. We looked at him, of course, it was the obvious answer. If they were all dead, blown into the river below, there'd be no one to report that we were still at liberty, it could buy us a little time.

"If it doesn't work we'll be sitting ducks, Joe," I said to him.

He grinned. "It'll work, I've done it a few times before."

I nodded. "Let's make it work then."

He started modifying the grenades, linking their fuses together. He had his own electrical detonator and thin cable in his pack and he planted the remote detonator in one of the boxes and we carried them out onto the bridge. Joe climbed over the wooden struts and balanced on the cross beams below the roadway. One by one we passed the boxes down to him and he tied them firmly to the bridge support structure. Lastly, he passed up the cable and we took it to the side of the bridge and out of sight to the trigger that was hidden at the side of the track. Joe climbed back underneath the bridge, taking loops of the cable from us and fixing them to the woodwork out of view, then he crawled back onto the bridge and we ducked into the jungle. The men had cleared the bodies of the enemy from the bridge and hidden the machine gun, now it all looked innocent. We didn't have long to wait. We all heard the engine of the Zil and then it came into view. They

didn't even stop at the start of the bridge, the officer waved to the driver to proceed to our side, obviously he wanted to know where his troops were. Joe let them get to a point a few feet before the explosives and hit the switch. He was true to his word, the bridge exploded with a huge roar, sending a shock wave that hurtled towards us and almost threw us to the ground. The troops in the lorry never knew what hit them, they went crashing to their doom into the river below, body parts mixed with fragments of metal and wood. Thousands of birds took flight as the jungle all but emptied of wildlife.

We stood up and took a look at the river. There was nothing to be seen, most of the bridge, the lorry and its troops had disappeared into the torrent. Of the bridge itself, all that was left were the wooden stanchions either side.

"Let's move out," I called.

We kept up a good pace down the track, confident that at least for the time being there would be nothing coming behind us. When we stopped for a break Paul checked the map, we were less than ten miles from the DMZ, although we had no way of knowing whether we were being pursued or from which direction the enemy might come. We rounded a bend in the track at the top of a low hill and saw stretching before us the long silver ribbon of the Ben Hay River marking the centre of the DMZ, a strip of land that extended from the Laos border to the coast, roughly three miles either side of the river. We didn't stop, there was a palpable feeling of excitement that surged through our group. We'd done some bitter fighting, had some good luck and some bad luck, but the payoff was staring at us only a few miles away. We started off again and got barely four hundred yards before a stream of machine gun fire spat out towards us. We jumped to the side of the track and kept our heads down while more bullets rattled overhead.

"I doubt that it's North Vietnamese regulars, although it's hard to tell," Paul said quietly. "Probably Cong, they're not very well trained, they could have taken us all if they'd waited a few moments."

I nodded. Abe Woltz had already prepared his rifle and was lying prone, looking for targets. He was almost completely hidden in a clump of bushes. The other men were lying close to the ground within a few yards of where we lay.

"Russo and Beckerman, would you circle around through the jungle and try and get behind them. Are you good to go, Tim?" It wasn't long since he'd taken the injury to his shoulder, but he nodded. "No sweat, I'm good."

"Ok then. See if you can pick them off one by one with the knives or silenced pistols." They waved acknowledgment and crawled away. All we could do now was wait. We lay there for almost half an hour, popping up every few minutes to keep their minds occupied and let them know that we were still pinned down. I knew it was time in which the enemy could be bringing up more reinforcements, but Russo and Beckerman knew their business, they would be as fast as the job allowed. Abe was still sighting along the track to the estimated positions of the Viets when suddenly two of them leapt out into the open and turned to fire back into the jungle. The sniper picked them both off instantly and they were thrown to the ground. Russo and Beckerman stepped out and waved. We rushed forward as they were pulling the bodies off the track.

"Eight of them, Jurgen," Russo said, "We got them all except for those two that ran out."

"Well done, Joe, you and Tim did a good job. Let's push on to the river." We picked up the pace once more and in less than an hour were standing on the bank of the river. We had arrived in the middle of the DMZ. Not home yet, we still had a long way to go, but we were out of North Vietnam. Technically. The reality was that the communists in Hanoi regarded all of Vietnam as their territory, the government in the South and the Americans were just unwelcome visitors. What wielded authority in this land broken by constant war was the gun and the bomb, the tank and the fighter bomber.

Beckerman came up to me. "Jurgen, how the hell do we cross this river? I can't see any sign of a bridge."

"The bridges were all destroyed, Tim. The communists have tried once or twice to build temporary structures to ferry men and supplies across to the South, but the American and South Vietnamese aircraft always find them and destroy them. We'll need a boat, it shouldn't be a problem. There will certainly be fishermen who make their living from the river, we'll need to buy a passage across. I suggest we head west until we find someone with a boat, we'd better get moving before more Viets turn up with reinforcements."

We picked up our packs once more and pushed on, I led the way back to the high ground so that we could keep alert for the enemy. We travelled for hour after hour, eventually the light faded and we had to make camp, there'd been no sign of any kind of fishing village or boat. I discussed crossing the river on some makeshift raft with Paul, but we concluded that the risk would

be too high, we'd be sitting ducks for any Viet that fancied taking a pot shot at us while we slowly crossed.

"There's a village marked on the map several miles to the west, when we cross over we can make our way south to the village of Khe Sahn. There's a Special Forces camp nearby with some kind of an airstrip, those camps always have provision for flying in men and supplies. Johann and Ritter are expecting us to call to be ferried out, they'll bring the C-47 out to pick us up."

"What about the military?" Paul asked. "These are Americans, after all. Why not contact them and get them to arrange transport back to Saigon, why risk our own aircraft?"

"Why indeed? I've asked myself that question a hundred times since we were at Son Tay. They knew we were coming, Paul, there's no doubt about that," I replied.

That night was even more dismal than the night before, we were in sight of friendly territory yet were still inside the danger zone. In the morning we hid all signs of our camp and pushed on. We were increasingly hungry, the food had run out and it started to rain again. It was cold and miserable, but at least the going was easier as there was a clearly marked path alongside the river bank. A river mist was swirling around us that at least partially hid us from enemy surveillance and we all silently thanked whichever Gods we prayed to for that useful cover. Then we saw the village. A typical Vietnamese fishing village with wooden huts that extended down to the river bank and some even overhung the river itself, supported on sticks. On the river several boats sat serenely in the water. I was nominally in charge now and there were no questions when I detailed Abe Woltz to cover us with his rifle, then sent Paul Schuster and Joe Russo on point to check out the village for any signs of the enemy. The rest of us followed at a distance of a hundred yards. We needn't have worried, Schuster and Russo entered the squalid collection of huts, while we lingered outside, and emerged a few minutes later with an elderly Vietnamese.

We followed them into the village, a sad, poverty stricken place. A few men and women emerged from the huts to look at us, then several children. All were ragged and filthy and covered with sores. We managed to make them understand that we wanted to buy passage across the river and when we gathered together a few valuables to show them as payment, they nodded their heads in ready agreement. Paul parted with a folding knife he'd owned

for many years and Russo found a pair of gloves he carried in his pack. Jack Bond had a gleaming combat knife to throw into the pot and they seemed happy with the price on offer. I got out my wallet and showed them an American ten dollar bill, but they shook their heads, unable to fathom what it could be. Two of the women brought out some food which we fell on immediately, some kind of foul tasting stew with pieces of fish floating in it. It was the first food we'd tasted in a long time and we ate it ravenously, trying to ignore the rancid aftertaste and the stench coming from the pot. Then we boarded two of their boats and they poled us across. At last, we were in the south, the Republic of South Vietnam. Friendly territory, at least in theory.

We followed a direct route towards the Special Forces base at Khe Sanh, I estimated we were within two or three miles of the base when a soldier stepped onto the path.

"Halt! Stop there and identify yourselves."

We breathed a sigh of relief at the American accent. Tim Beckerman pushed to the front and explained who we were and where we were headed. As soon as he heard Beckerman's explanation he lowered his rifle, simultaneously three more American soldiers stepped out of the jungle, all Green Berets. One of them, a corporal, carried a backpack radio with a long aerial.

"Corporal, would it be possible to patch us through to Saigon on your radio?" I asked him. He looked at the master sergeant in charge who nodded.

"I can get you through to anywhere in the world if you like, well, normally anyway. What did you have in mind?"

I told him that I needed to make contact with my operational base in Saigon, at Tan Son Nhat Airfield. He thought for a moment.

"Will they be monitoring their radio, do you think?"

I nodded. "Certain to be, they'll be waiting to hear from us."

"In that case we'll give it a try." He took details of our call sign in Saigon and warmed up the radio set. In less than a minute he was through to Khe Sanh and five minutes later I heard the voice of Johann Drexler.

"Jurgen, it's good to hear your voice, we were beginning to worry."

"They've been trying to kill me for a long time, Johann, they haven't succeeded yet. Any word on Helene?"

"Nothing yet, Jurgen, sorry."

"Never mind, I want a pick up. Is the C-47 operational?"

“She’s all serviced and ready to go, Ritter is waiting to fly out? Is this to bring you all home?”

“It is, Johann. I don’t want to involve MACV, they don’t seem to be very secure. Too many things have gone wrong with this mission and I don’t want any more accidents.

“Where exactly are you?” he asked. I hesitated. This was an unencrypted radio channel and the Viets were sure to be listening in. I had the map coordinates of the airfield supplied to me by the radio operator, I had an idea.

“Johann, here are the coordinates. Remember last time, my date of birth?”

“Yes, I do, Jurgen. It’s...”

“Do not say it over the air, this time I want you to subtract the day, month and year from the figures I give you, that’s all. That will be the map coordinates for where we are.”

I gave him a set of figures. “Is that clear to you, Johann?” The radio was quiet for twenty seconds, and then it crackled back into life.

“I’ve got it, I’ll make a start straight away. We’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Very good, Hoffman out.”

I handed the microphone back to the operator and thanked him.

“That’s no problem...” He didn’t finish, toppling into my arms as a red hole appeared in the middle of his head. I heard the shots almost immediately, several of them went through his radio as he fell, smashing it beyond repair. A burst of gunfire crashed through the jungle and we dived for the ground. Beckerman was hit, riddled by a machine gun burst, and then the rest of us were in cover. We looked around for targets, but there was nothing to see, whoever had organised the ambush knew their business. All was quiet for a few minutes, almost as if whoever had fired on us had disappeared, but of course they hadn’t. Joe Russo peeked out from behind the log he was sheltering behind and ducked back as a volley of machine gun fire rattled around him. He turned to speak to me.

“Any ideas, Jurgen? They seem to have us pinned down, we don’t know how many of them there are, or what weaponry they have.”

I shook my head. “None whatsoever, they’ve caught us with our pants down,” I replied. I could have kicked myself. Although these were Special Forces, Paul and I were the old Vietnam hands, we’d thought ourselves

relatively safe when the American Special Forces had appeared and for once I'd neglected to put out point guards. But once was all it took.

"It's a long time until darkness falls so we need to work out how to hit back quickly." I squinted from the side of the tree I was sheltering behind, my flesh crawled as I waited for the sound of a hail of gunfire. What I heard was far worse, the whistle of a mortar.

"Incoming," I shouted and threw myself flat on the ground.

I hoped the others had followed suit, the bomb exploded with a shattering roar that stripped much of the foliage from the trees. I could hear screaming, they'd certainly hit one or more of us. Then more mortar rounds started exploding, one after the other. I could see Russo and Schuster, but of the others there was no sign. After about fifteen mortar bombs ceased as quickly as they had started. There was a silence for a couple of minutes, then the electric 'click' as a loudhailer was switched on.

"American soldiers, we know who you are. You must surrender immediately or we will continue sending in our mortar bombs until you are all dead. If you surrender you will become prisoners and will not be badly treated. You have five minutes to decide. Then we will continue firing. That is all."

Paul and Joe Russo crawled over to where I was sheltering.

"Any thoughts, Jurgen?" Paul asked me. I smiled. "I think we're in trouble, my friend. We know they have mortars, but the real question is how many of them are there? If there are only a dozen we might be able to do something, but if they're in company strength or more, we could be better off surrendering." They both winced.

"Surrender to these fuckers, are you serious?" Russo said with a grimace. "You said they'd hang us from the nearest tree and gut us too. Personally I'd sooner go down fighting."

"Point taken, Joe. Do we know how many of our people there are left?" I asked him.

"One of those mortar rounds hit those three Green Berets, a direct hit, must have shredded them, poor bastards."

I reflected that it was too late for them to learn lessons about posting adequate sentries.

"What about our people?"

"Abe Woltz is okay, he's behind those trees about ten yards away. Jack Bond is on the other side of him, as far as I know he's unhurt too. You know

about Beckerman."

"I know." I had an idea, the chances of success were remote, but anything was better than nothing. "I need to get to Abe and have a word with him, can you cover me?"

They both looked puzzled, but nodded. I crawled away quickly and they kept a sharp eye for any enemy, but there was no more gunfire. I reached Abe and explained it all to him. Jack Bond looked sceptical. "It's a bit of a long shot, Hoffman. Not much chance of bringing it off," he said.

"Jack, I totally agree with you. If you have a better idea, now is the time to spit it out." I waited for him to respond, but he was silent.

"Well?" He shook his head. "I guess not."

"You'd better be ready then, about two minutes and I'll tell the Viets we're surrendering," I whispered.

"We'll be ready," Abe said. I crawled away, back to Paul and Joe. I explained my plan to them, we went over the details and then I stood up, threw down my rifle and shouted that we were surrendering.

"All of you, come out and throw down your weapons," a strongly accented voice called out.

This was the moment, would they fall for it? Joe and Paul warily stood up and tossed their assault rifles to one side, then Jack Bond stood up and followed suit. They waited patiently, their hands in the air. Around us, a dozen Viets came into view, their rifles pointed at us. Was that all of them, I wondered, did this include the mortar crews, or were there more waiting under cover of the trees? Then a man stepped into view who was obviously their leader. He wore no badges of rank, but his clothes, unlike those of his men, were of much better quality. A smart olive green military shirt and matching trousers, all immaculately pressed. I wondered how the hell he kept things looking like that in the jungle guerrilla war these people were fighting. His boots looked new, high, lace up jump boots, almost certainly American airborne issue. He carried a Soviet automatic, a Makarov, this guy was much too conscious of his position to carry an assault rifle like his men. On his head he wore the solar topee of the North Vietnamese Army, around his waist a highly polished Sam Browne leather belt with a pistol holster. And on his face the sneering smile of the bully, one who knows that he is about to deliver a good kicking to his victims and is relishing every moment of it.

"My name is Phan Trong. I am the People's Commissar for the Khe

Sanh region. Is this all of you, only four?"

"My name is Jurgen Hoffman, Commissar. What you see is all of the survivors of your attack, the rest are lying dead in the jungle," I replied, allowing a depth of bitterness into my voice. He smiled broadly.

"You Americans think you can come to my country and walk unmolested, but you are mistaken. Wherever we find you, we will harass and kill you all until you are driven into the sea," he said.

He peered suspiciously at my tattered jungle greens. "I do not recognise your uniform, which American unit are you from?" he asked.

"I am not a soldier, Commissar. I run a small airline, our aircraft crashed and I was leading these men to safety," I replied. I could see him thinking. "So you are a spy," he said abruptly, "anyone carrying a weapon out of uniform inside a war zone is to be shot as a spy. Those are the orders of Comrade Giap."

"I am not a spy, Commissar, I am a pilot. This is not a war zone, it is the Republic of South Vietnam and I am not American, I am German." His eyes shot up. "German! Where have you come from? From the North, yes?"

I looked at him steadily. "Yes," I replied.

"So, you're the ones we were told might be coming this way. You illegally entered The People's Republic of North Vietnam and helped convicted war criminals to escape. You!"

His voice was harsh and withering, but his eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "My orders are to apprehend you and sentence you all to death. Have you anything to say?" he asked.

"Do you mean about the fairness of communist justice?" I said. He didn't understand my sarcasm. "Very well, comrades," he shouted, "prepare to execute the prisoners."

He looked at me again, obviously waiting for signs of terror, the fear that would sate his bullying lusts. I ignored him and looked at his men, lining up in some semblance of a firing party.

"You men, get into line," he barked at us. "Fuck you," I replied.

His eyes bulged with rage and astonishment that his victim has dared to insult him. He stepped forward and his hand swung across to punch me in the face but I was ready for him and I grabbed him and twisted around so that he was between me and his men. It was the signal for Abe to open fire, we had other arrangements if I couldn't grab their leader, but this was the best

chance. As the startled Viets swung their weapons up to point at me, too confused and frightened to fire in case they hit the Commissar, Woltz fired his first silenced shot. It was an amazing pieced of shooting, the soft sounds went unnoticed in the jungle, especially when the Viets started shouting for orders, their frightened voices echoing along the track. But it made no difference, it was as if they had been hit by some deadly gas, they had no idea where it was coming from. One by one they dropped where they stood, twelve dead Viets until there was only one, Commissar Trong. As I relieved him of his pistol, he started to shake violently with shock and terror, as is the way with bullies all over the world.

"How...?" was all he could gasp. He went even paler when Abe stood up, almost like a ghost, covered in jungle greenery so that it was like a jungle spirit that suddenly sprung up where nothing had been before. A jungle spirit with a hot, silenced sniper rifle. I ignored him.

"We'd better destroy those mortars, I don't want the Viets coming to retrieve them and using them again. Get any weapons and ammunition you need from the dead bodies, then smash or destroy anything we can't carry. Commissar," I turned to the shocked Viet, "how far is it to the Special Forces base at Khe Sanh?"

"I, I, I, can't give information, it is..." He stopped when I screwed the pistol barrel, his pistol barrel, into his balls.

"Commissar, you've seen what happened to your men. If you want to join them, that's fine with me. If you prefer to come with us as a prisoner, I need to know how far it is to the Khe Sanh Special Forces base." It only took another couple of minutes of coaxing. His world had been destroyed and like all bullies, when his power had evaporated so had all his strength and bluster.

"It is approximately three kilometres," he said abruptly, "the track forks one kilometre further south, you take the right fork. The Special Forces base and airfield will be visible to you almost straight away." That made sense, a clear field of fire and a flat base of operations on which to position a remote airstrip. I gestured to Jack Bond.

"Tie his hands, would you, Sergeant. We'll hand him over when we get there." Bond nodded and rummaged in his pack for some electrical cable to secure the Commissar. I looked around at the remnants of the short action. It was sickening, the twelve Viets lay close to each other, reminding me almost of old photographs of the First World War, when men were mown down in

lines as they left the trenches. I also recalled the Duke of Wellington's famous quote after Waterloo, 'Next to a battle lost, nothing is so sad as a battle that has been won'. Sad indeed.

The Americans were shredded heaps of flesh after the mortar hits, unknown to us and unnamed. We would need to collect their tags and I asked Abe Woltz to do the job. Beckerman's body lay where it had fallen and I asked Paul Schuster and Joe Russo to take his tags and bury him. The Viets we left where they were, their own people would be along to deal with them soon enough, they usually came. I remembered battles from the Indochina War when we would leave a battlefield with a hundred or more Viet casualties, the following morning they would invariably have disappeared. It wasn't altruism, they merely hated to let anyone know that the invincible communist fighters had suffered so badly, it was bad for morale.

We advanced along the track, forked to the right and before long we were walking towards the barbed wire fence that marked the boundary of Khe Sahn Special Forces camp. I thought of the idiotic French policy of small, armed outposts, and how each had slowly fallen to the Viet Minh forces, finally ending with the disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu. How long would it be before this camp was finally abandoned I wondered, and how many bloody battles would be fought until that day dawned?

Half an hour later we went into the radio shack. The operator had AFN radio tuned in, it was playing 'Hey! Baby', the Bruce Channel smash hit. The operator turned it down and shortly I was on the radio to Tan Son Nhat, talking to Johann. Ritter von Schacht was almost sober, which was a miracle, and they were already fuelling and pre-flighting the C-47 to fly out and pick us up. We could expect their arrival within four hours, maybe five.

Most importantly, the report from MACV about Helene was positive, she was showing signs of responding and had regained consciousness. I thanked all the Gods for the news, it made everything worth it. We walked out of the radio shack and while we waited, the Special Forces made us welcome and treated us to a meal of C rations. It was delicious. At last, I thought, we were going home. How many men had died to get us here, to effect the rescue of the two Americans? Probably hundreds, we would never know. And there were of course questions to ask when we reached Saigon, the answers would be very interesting.

*****

*'The ARVN soldiers themselves are good fighters, but they are very underpaid, and poorly led. Their morale is poor, and this brings about the biggest problem in the Army AWOLS [soldiers absent without leave] and deserters. The Government just doesn't look after their soldiers well enough to keep them happy. All soldiers' housing is terrible, dependents are not thought of in the least - they have no provisions for getting pay home when the husband is off on a big operation, maybe for over a month. Next - poor leadership. The commanders of the Army units are usually inexperienced, and only worried about staying alive, and getting a soft job back in Saigon somewhere. The high level commanders are more worried about political things than military considerations. District chiefs are the same way - they usually plan and go out on as few operations as possible, mostly worried about keeping the province chief happy from a political viewpoint. Nobody is really sure who to support - maybe tomorrow there will be another coup and the guy they supported will be thrown out. It's all highly confusing, but one thing is sure - it really hurts the military effort.*

*Captain James B Lincoln, American Advisor to ARVN*

"William, what's the word from the Palace? These problems with the ARVN are not getting any better, have you been able to talk to the President?" Harkins looked across at Colby, the Chief of Station and someone who generally claimed to have influence with Diem through the President's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Since 1960 the communist insurgency had been growing substantially, yet Diem and his cronies seemed to regard it as a uniquely American problem while they concentrated their efforts on controlling the country's very unhappy Buddhist majority.

"We've been doing a lot of work in that direction, General. The Strategic Hamlets Program is doing well and after that last disaster at Ap Bac the ARVN are working hard to regain their reputation."

"Christ, what reputation? They damned well need to do something, Bill. Jesus, what a mess that was."

"It wasn't all ARVN, General, there were some of our own guys there too," Colby retorted sharply. Harkins looked at him keenly. "What are you saying, that our boys can't fight?"

Colby sighed. “No, General, not at all. Our soldiers are amongst the finest in the world, well equipped and motivated. No, what I’m saying is politics, a question of where we’re headed with this. Who is leading the army, what are their objectives, stopping the communists or the Buddhists?” Harkins interrupted.

“Christ, I hope you’re not suggesting we take on the Buddhist population of South Vietnam too, Bill?”

Colby laughed. “No, I’m not. But why are we really here? I recall Eisenhower’s famous quote, ‘Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.’ Is that what these people are to us, just a bunch of dominoes or are they valuable allies? We need to streamline the army leadership, to help them establish good government and infrastructure and protect them from the communists.”

“Is that right?” Harkins sneered. “I thought MACV was here to fight and more importantly win a war. Am I correct, the M part of the title of my command does stand for military?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Colby said hastily, “but…”

“So forget the dominoes, forget the cosy fireside chats with your friends in the Presidential Palace, I need more cooperation from the ARVN, you must make it your number one priority.”

Harkins sat back. He rarely raised his voice, but the smooth Ivy League man seemed determined to make the simplest of matters more complicated than they needed to be.

“General, I think you overestimate my influence with the Palace,” Colby continued warily.

“Even the influence of the Palace over the ARVN is not necessarily as, er, straightforward as we would hope.” Harkins brought his mind to sharp focus.

“What have you heard? That sounds ominous, is there any chance of a coup?” he asked.

The CIA man hesitated. “I’d be lying to you if I said no chance at all, there has been talk. But overall, I’m hopeful that things will stabilise along lines that are mutually beneficial to all of us.”

What the fuck did that mean, Harkins thought?

"Have you debriefed your men, the two guys that were rescued from the North?"

Colby nodded. "Yes, we have General. Sadly, they were caught before they achieved anything useful to us, so it was something of a wasted effort."

Did he mean mounting the mission, or bringing back the two Americans? Again, Harkins wondered what went on in that Machiavellian mind. Almost certainly nothing that wasn't to the direct benefit of William E Colby.

"And the rescue party, the two Germans and the Special Forces guys?" Harkins continued.

"Well, we've had a report that they may have crossed the DMZ, but we're not certain."

Harkins finally lost his cool. "Colby, listen to me. You're not sure about anything, are you? About the politics and intentions of the government, the ARVN, even our own people. Could I ask you to come better prepared to our next meeting, or do I need to arrange for someone who can be better prepared?"

The two men looked at each other, both swallowing the anger that they each felt at the other's perceived inadequacies. Finally Colby looked away, intimidated by the iron resolve of the soldier.

"I'll do as you ask, General, I'll get my people on it right away."

Harkins nodded, stood up and stalked out of the room, startling his two aides who were waiting outside the door, and stomped towards the exit.

* * * * *

# Chapter Nine

*Once upon a time our traditional goal in war and can anyone doubt that we are at war? - was victory. Once upon a time we were proud of our strength, our military power. Now we seem ashamed of it. Once upon a time the rest of the world looked to us for leadership. Now they look to us for a quick handout and a fence-straddling international posture.*

*Barry M. Goldwater, 1962*

The most welcome sight of all greeted us several hours later when we first heard the drone of the engines, then our C-47 came into view. Whoever was flying it was an expert, it could only be Ritter. It banked neatly and flared in for a landing on the tiny, rough airstrip. Johann would have needed at least one pass to line up correctly and even then would have bounced several times when he made contact with the ground. The aircraft stopped and

the side door slid open, framing Ritter von Schacht in the doorway. The piratical former Luftwaffe airman stood there, as ever his missing eye covered by the black patch that many of us had sometimes wondered whether it was assumed, but none would dare to ask him to remove it so that we could check. Johann appeared alongside him, pushed out a boarding ladder and the two men climbed down. I ran up and shook hands with Johann, and then Ritter literally hugged me, careful to keep his cigarette in its holder to one side.

"Jurgen, my friend, how are you?"

"How am I? You old bastard, we've been shot at and chased the length of Vietnam and you ask how am I?" Paul was embracing Johann, the relief we felt at getting back to our own people was beyond belief.

"Ritter, I've arranged for some fuel to be supplied to get us back, I'll get them loading it straight away and we can take off again."

"What? He looked dismayed. "Don't I get a chance to look at the nightlife, I've never been here before, to Khe Sahn. I need to find a bar."

"Time for that when we get back to Saigon, my friend, for the time being we just want to get out of here," I laughed. He sighed heavily. "As you wish, my friend."

A number of soldiers were rolling fuel drums across the flat ground towards us, Ritter went towards them and started bellowing at them to hurry up.

Within half an hour the aircraft had been refuelled and was ready to go. We climbed aboard, those of us left alive, the Special Forces, Abe Woltz, Joe Russo and Jack Bond. Then Paul Schuster and finally I shook hands with the base commander and closed the door. Ritter and Johann were already running up the engines and doing their final checks, less than a minute later and before I had a chance to strap in, the aircraft was rattling across the strip and took to the air. I went forward and checked that everything was good with Johann and Ritter, than I went aft and found a soft canvas tarpaulin that

made a useful bed. I lay down and within seconds was fast asleep. The sound of the engine note altering woke me and I looked out of the cabin window to see the late afternoon landscape of Saigon appearing before me. I went forward to where Ritter was talking to the tower, in the background I could hear the sound of the radio playing 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight'. I put on a spare headset and listened to the familiar cheery voice of Nguyen Cam Le manning the tower as usual at Tan Son Nhat.

"Hey guys, where have you popped up from, you been on a mission to the North, dropping a bomb on Ho Chi Minh's bedroom?"

"Ritter laughed. "Ja, one day, my friend and we'll take you with us. Do we have clearance to land?"

"You sure do, winds are north easterly, speed ten knots, visibility is clear to two thousand metres, patchy cloud at five thousand metres, and it's a nice day here in Saigon. Come straight in, traffic is clear."

Ritter turned to me. "He's a good guy, that Nguyen Cam Le, hates the commies."

"Does he?" I nodded. He looked at me curiously. "Have you got some kind of a problem with Le?" he asked. I shook my head. "I don't know, maybe not. He seems friendly enough."

He focussed on flying the aircraft as the strip at Tan Son Nhat came into view. Expertly he trimmed the aircraft for landing, throttling back, gear down, flaps down and a smooth bank into final approach. Soon we touched down, a feather light landing. Ritter taxied us across to our company hangar and we disembarked, grateful to be back on friendly territory again. Or was it friendly, I had my suspicions? We shut the aircraft down, secured the ground anchors and went inside to the office where I found a bottle of Jack Daniels. We all toasted our safe return, the three Special Forces soldiers, Jack Bond, Joe Russo and Abe Woltz. Paul and I poured each other a hefty shot, Johann poured a modest glass and Ritter grabbed the bottle and literally poured it down his throat. It was a moment to savour, yet I stopped them for a moment and proposed a toast to those who had not made it back, Cady and Beckerman.

Almost immediately the telephone rang, it was MACV Saigon. Johann answered it, and then handed the phone to Jack Bond. We couldn't help but overhear his side of the conversation.

"Yes, Sir, we're fine, Russo, Woltz and myself. No, Sir, Captain Cady was killed, Beckerman too. You want us now? Right, we'll be ready. Mr

Hoffman? Sure thing."

He handed the phone to me. "It's MACV, they want you." I picked up the phone.

"Hoffman here." I heard a crisp, military voice at the other end.

"This is General Harkin's office, Mr Hoffman, he wants you here right away. Could you come with the car we're sending for the other men?"

I had a deep, sinking sensation in my stomach. For every waking moment over the past few days I had wondered about Helene, would she survive, would the baby survive? "Is it about my wife, Helene, has she taken a turn for the worse?"

There was a hesitation and I died a thousand deaths in that short space of time, I felt myself growing dizzy again, the room going dark. "Your wife, Sir? No, I'm not aware of that situation. The General wants to discuss your recent mission to the North."

I let out the breath I was holding, it was to be a debriefing, for God's sake, I had to know about Helene. "Who am I speaking to, soldier?"

"Er, this is Captain Jane, Sir. I'm one of General Harkin's aides."

"Well, listen to me, Captain. I have to have some information on my wife's condition, I want you get that for me now. You do know she's in a military hospital stateside?"

"Er, yes, Sir. I do. I'll get onto that as soon as I can." I nearly lost it then. "Captain, if the General wants to debrief me you'd better make sure I have that up to date information when I get there, otherwise he can wait until you do. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir, I'll contact Washington right now."

"Thank you, Captain, I'll speak to you when I arrive. Give me a short time to grab a shower and change, when is the car due to collect us?"

"He just left, Sir, about fifteen minutes, I'd guess."

"Well he'll have to wait, see you later, Captain."

I hung up, they could wait. For a few moments I felt my mind blank with the tension of the mission, the worry over Helene and the task I still had to achieve in front of me. I pulled myself together and finished my drink, thanked Ritter and Johann and asked the soldiers to wait while I changed. Ritter left to drive back to Saigon, I ran over to my damaged bungalow and found some clean clothes. I took them back to the hangar, showered in the basic facilities we had there and felt better with clean clothes on, chinos, a button down shirt and a pair of leather deck shoes.

The vehicle from MACV, a Willys jeep, was already waiting with the three Americans on board, I jumped in and found a cramped space on the back seat and we roared off to Saigon. The Willys pulled up inside the gates of 137 Pasteur Street and we climbed out and went in. I was ushered up the stairs and into the office of General Paul Harkins, the three Special Forces men were separated and led to another room, which surprised me. Inside the office were Harkins, a captain who I assumed to be his aide Jane and Miles Anderson. Harkins came forward, his arm outstretched.

"Mr Hoffman, my congratulations on your escape from the North."

"Thank you, General, but I explained to Captain Jane that I needed an update on my wife before I could be debriefed." He smiled. "Captain Jane has checked with Washington, she's doing well, the baby is safe and the surgeon expects her to make a complete recovery." He nodded to the Captain.

"Yes, as the General says, she's looking good. Their best guess is she will be okay to be flown back in about two more weeks."

"Thank you, Captain," I said to him. I felt a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. "Now, how can I help you, General?"

"Tell me about the mission, Mr Hoffman, especially anything that may be useful to us for future operations." I told them everything, except for the parts that I didn't want them to know just yet.

"So you think we have a traitor, here in Saigon?" Harkins asked. I nodded. "At least one, General. They knew we were coming, if they'd been better organised we wouldn't have got away with it."

"Any ideas, any names you have in mind?" he asked. I hesitated. "Miles, how's your leg?" I asked the CIA officer. They all looked startled at the sudden change of subject.

"My leg?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, your leg, the one that was broken during your capture in the North, along with the cracked ribs. Hard interrogation, as I remember, that's what you said." He suddenly looked wary. "Yeah, well, it's starting to ease, still a bit painful, but yeah, it's not too bad."

"Show us, Miles."

"What?"

"Show us the leg, the broken leg. Maybe we should talk to the medic that fixed it for you, who did you see?" I asked him. "Right, it was one of our CIA guys," he finally said.

General Harkins was looking around suspiciously. “What’s going on here, Hoffman? Why are you asking Mr Anderson about his leg?”

I didn’t take my eyes from Miles Anderson. “General, give me a moment, will you? My reasons will become obvious once we can see the damage to his leg.” Harkins hadn’t got to where he was without being as sharp as a tack. He understood immediately.

“Miles, show us the leg, would you?” he asked him.

Anderson looked around the office, then shrugged and pulled the leg of his trousers up for us to see the dressing. “Satisfied?” He said with a smirk.

“Why isn’t it in a cast, Miles? Broken legs need to be in a cast. Take off the bandage and let’s have a look,” I said. “Fuck you, Hoffman, I’m not taking off the dressing for anyone, you included,” he said defiantly.

“Take off the dressing, Mr Anderson,” Harkins said icily. Anderson looked around the room, I’d seen that look before, the look of a trapped animal, the most dangerous of the species. He bent to remove the dressing with one hand and I saw his other hand reaching under his jacket. He was much too slow, I’d been waiting for him to do exactly that. I took two quick steps across to him and reached under his coat and removed his pistol, a snub nosed Colt .38 revolver, before he had the chance to pull it. Harkins picked up the phone and called in the MPs, while Jane and I held the CIA man. Four burly soldiers with steel helmets and clubs drawn bustled into the office and at Harkins’ orders, took over holding Anderson while I removed the dressing on his leg, then took off his shirt. No bruises, no broken leg, no cracked ribs. Harkins looked grim.

“So you’re saying that Anderson is the traitor?” I nodded. “I am, General. He’s been passing information to the communists about my mission, God knows how many other missions before this one.”

“But why, why did he do it?” Anderson smirked at me. “That’s bullshit, Hoffman. Just because I exaggerated a couple of injuries to look a little bit brave doesn’t make me a traitor.”

“That’s true,” Harkins said.

“Yes, it is General. But if you question his lover, you might find a different story.”

“His lover, who the hell is she?” he asked. Anderson has gone white, the smirk fading rapidly from his face. “You mean he.” I replied. “Nguyen Cam Le, the tower controller from Tan Son Nhat.”

“But I’ve met Nguyen Cam Le and he hates the commies.”

I smiled. “Really? If you check into his story I think you’ll find it’s the biggest load of bullshit you’ve ever been forced to swallow, General. He’s a communist sleeper, prepared by Hanoi and fed into the system to do exactly what he’s done, spy on your military. What better job could he have other than the man with access to every single take-off and departure from Tan Son Nhat? There’ve been so many leaks lately, everything points to him, especially with his relationship to this traitor. Think about it, the air traffic controller for Tan Son Nhat and a senior CIA officer.”

“But that’s crazy, Le’s not even a woman, he’s a man...” He tailed off as it all started to fit together, the awful treachery. “Jesus Christ. Are you a homosexual, Miles?”

The CIA man slumped. The way Harkins had said it almost made me laugh, as if that was by far the greater betrayal. Personally, I’d known a number of queers in the Foreign Legion during the 1950’s, even in the SS during the Second World War, despite the awful penalties that Hitler insisted on if they were caught. I couldn’t give a damn about their sexuality, but I knew that not all men were quite as liberal and Harkins was probably less inclined than most to make allowances. A story had gone around when he first took over in Vietnam that when he was commandant of cadets and head of the tactical department at West Point, he was informed that there was a group of cadets, mainly among the football team, who were involved in a cheating ring. Harkins had made it plain that he felt that the behaviour was not in line with his vision of the academy. In a controversial decision he asked the cadets to gather information about the cheating. Eventually a formal inquiry was held and ninety cadets were dismissed from the academy, some of those had not participated in the cheating but knew of it and had not reported it, which was considered a breach of the Cadet Honor Code, ‘a cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do’.

A true hardass, for whom homosexuality was a breach of every honour code known to man. I almost felt sorry for Anderson, but only almost, he had done his best to get us killed.

“Take this man to the cells,” he ordered the MPs. “Then get an arrest warrant for Nguyen Cam Le, the tower controller from Tan Son Nhat. I want him brought in for interrogation, we’ll check out their stories properly. Let me know when you’ve picked him up,” he ordered. The MPs saluted and dragged out the hapless CIA officer.

“Jesus Christ, I can’t believe it,” Harkins said, “one of our own people,

a CIA officer, this could be messy. Any idea how long it's been going on?" I shook my head. "None, but I would assume the worst."

"Damn, you heard about Colonel Vann?"

"The advisor to Colonel Huynh Van Cao, the ARVN commander?" I remembered speaking to Colonel Vann over the radio when I had overflown Ap Bac with Anderson and Goldberg during the battle.

"Yeah, him. Vann started to criticise the progress of the war, MACV and myself especially. He even attempted involve the press with the supposed problems and went so far as to talk to New York Times reporter David Halberstam. I'm having Vann removed from his advisor position and sent home. Now we've got this, it's a fucking mess."

I made sympathetic noises. In truth, I thought the Americans were just as doomed as the French had been ten years earlier with corruption on a grand scale, theft, criminal gangs and nepotism. The communists seemed to have few of these problems, they simply shot anyone who didn't agree with them. Maybe they had a point.

Then the phone rang, Anderson had got away. Apparently he'd seized a gun from an unwary guard and shot his way out, leaving two dead and one wounded MP in his wake. Harkins erupted in rage, barking orders over the phone and I thought it time to leave. I said I'd call back the following day, and then left and went to a bar for a meal and something to drink. As I sat eating, I remembered the old French proverb, 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'. The more it changes, the more it's the same thing. I finished up and got a taxi back to Tan Son Nhat, with Anderson on the loose I felt vaguely uneasy and wanted to check that everything was secure.

When I walked into our hangar I should have known that something was wrong, it was silent when normally Johann would have been pottering around fixing some piece of machinery. But as I reached for the light I felt a piece of metal pressed to my head.

"Turn on the light, Hoffman, then put your hands up." It was Anderson. I did as he said, when the hangar was flooded in light I saw the Johann's body lying in a pool of blood on the shabby office carpet. Paul Schuster was tied to a chair, his mouth gagged with a piece of rag. He was covered by Nguyen Cam Le, the air traffic controller, who was holding an American Colt .45 automatic pistol, the same as the one Anderson had pressed to my head.

"You've killed Johann," I said coldly. It wasn't a question. Anderson

giggled, it sounded strange.

"He wouldn't cooperate so I had to put him down. Your friend Schuster will go the same way if you don't do as we say."

"So you want a flight out of here?"

"You'd better believe it, buddy. The sooner the better, so you'd better get your aircraft cranked up and ready to go." "Where to?" I asked him. "I'll need to request clearance and file a flight plan."

Le nodded. "Yes, Miles, that is correct, it is the proper procedure."

"We're heading north, the CIA man said. "Tell them Hue."

"We won't make it before nightfall, they won't believe me," I said firmly, "you'll need to choose somewhere more local." They conversed between themselves in low tones. I imagined their actual destination would be Hanoi, where they would be treated as heroes. The trouble was, they weren't getting to Hanoi, not now, not ever, not in my aircraft.

"I need to check Paul and make sure he's ok," I said to Miles. He nodded.

I went and looked Paul over. He couldn't speak but his eyes spoke volumes. They raked to the right, over to a battered old couch we had in the office. Behind it there stood one of the AK47s we'd brought back from the North, taken off one of the Viets we'd killed in the last action. As far as I knew, it was fully loaded. Paul managed to convey to me that he would create a diversion, at least I hoped I'd read him correctly. Then I stood up to the side of the couch. Miles and Le carried on talking, and then Paul started to groan. At first, they ignored him, but I shouted at them that he was choking and couldn't breathe. They looked at him suspiciously, Miles went over to check him out while Le covered the office with his automatic. I walked over to stand next to Paul while Miles checked him out, then when Anderson gave me an impatient look I moved to one side, behind the couch.

I squinted at them, they were both still checking on Schuster, Miles had removed his gag. Paul was giving a command performance, moaning and groaning, it was now or never. I scooped up the Kalashnikov, flipped off the safety, aimed at Le and pulled the trigger. The blast literally tore him apart, he was thrown to the floor in bloody, bleeding shreds. Miles whirled around, bringing up his own Colt. Before he could pull the trigger I emptied the magazine into his body, sending him spiralling to the ground to join his lover and fellow traitor in death. Then the hangar was silent, just a wisp of smoke curling out of the barrel. Both bodies were totally still. I released Paul and

he immediately went to look at Johann, and then shook his head.

"The bastards caught us unawares, poor Johann, he tried to fight back but he was an engineer, not a soldier. They shot him down like an animal. I knew what they wanted and hoped you'd see the AK47."

"I never thought I'd be so happy to see a Russian assault rifle again, Paul," I said. He nodded. "Me neither. But it was poetic justice, a communist gun to kill two communist traitors."

The telephone was still working and I used it to let MACV headquarters know what had happened and that the hunt for Anderson and Le was over. Half an hour later a convoy of vehicles drew up outside the hangar and a platoon of MPs stormed in and took charge of the bodies. Then General Harkins came through the door with a civilian.

"Mr Hoffman, are you ok?" he asked anxiously. "Yes, General. Sadly, my engineer was killed by Anderson and Le."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Gentlemen, this is Mr Colby, he takes care of certain interests here in Saigon for the United States government." I'd seen Colby once at a party when he was pointed out to me as the CIA Chief of Station. It was inevitable that he would be called in to clear up after Miles Anderson. We shook hands.

"Mr Hoffman, your engineer was killed by the Vietnamese traitor Le, no one else was involved," he said. "Let me assure you that the United States government will look unfavourably at anyone who suggests otherwise."

It was nothing new, I'd seen it happen countless times, the cover up to protect people's reputations. They called it politics, fighting soldiers called it bullshit. "And Miles Anderson?"

"He was killed while bravely trying to arrest the communist traitor, Nguyen Cam Le." We were silent for a moment while I tried to contain my rage. Johann was dead, yet all this bureaucrat could think about was covering his ass. Then I forced myself to calm down. Without doubt, Colby could cause trouble for my operations in Vietnam. Paul and I needed to run the airline and besides, I had a wife to worry about and a baby due, hopefully. I made myself a promise that if ever I got the opportunity I'd get some kind of payback for what happened to Johann, but how I would ever do it I had no idea. In the meantime, life had to go on. These people held the fate of my livelihood and my wife's health firmly in their greasy hands. It was not a time to make waves.

"Yeah, ok, I hear you." I turned away from him, Paul gave me a

bemused look but I shrugged, what could we do? We couldn't fight the whole U.S. government.

"Hoffman, we need a word," General Harkins said form behind me. I turned around just as a team of medics came into the office and started to remove the bodies.

"Could you give us a few minutes, General," I replied. I didn't wait for a reply, Paul and I went to Johann and gently closed his eyelids. Then we covered him with the best blanket we could find, a thick woollen rug that Helene had bought one winter for when we had long flights up to the DMZ and one pilot slept while the other flew. It was little enough, but the least we could do. I turned back to speak to Harkins. "General?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for the loss of your engineer, Hoffman. I'll speak about some compensation, unofficially of course." I waved the offer away. "It won't bring back Johann, will it?"

"No, it won't, I'm sorry. Now, about the aircraft you lost in the North, as you were on government business, I'll make sure that you are supplied with a replacement aircraft. Was the choice of the Junkers 52 a business decision, or was it, you know, sentimental?" I grinned. "You mean did it remind me of the Eastern Front, General. No, none of us that were there wanted reminding of it. She was a sturdy, reliable aircraft that we picked up for a song."

"Yeah, I understand. I'll authorise the location and supply of a replacement Junkers, or a C-47, as you already fly a Douglas it might be sensible for you to standardise."

I thought for a moment. My wife was in hospital several thousand miles away, the corpse of my engineer was being transported to the mortuary, at that moment I hated everything about Vietnam, the country, the communists, the CIA and the army. But I had made it my home, it was Helene's home, Paul Schuster's home too. "We'll take the C-47, thank you General."

Paul nodded his relief, I knew he'd thought for a moment that I was going to tell the General to go to hell. "Good, I'll make the arrangements. Now look, Hoffman, I need to talk to you about a contract to take some of our people North."

Paul walked over and joined the conversation. "We've only just come back from the North, General. Exactly what do you mean by 'north'? In relation to the DMZ, that is." Harkins at least had the grace to look embarrassed. "Well, er, North North."

As we both started shaking our heads, he hurriedly went on. "Now look, gentlemen, I know you feel sore about what happened, but we've caught the traitors now, everything is different."

"We've caught the traitors? Who is 'we' General?" He nodded wearily. "Yeah, ok. You caught them. Well, him. In the end there was only one who was passing information to the enemy, wasn't there? But whatever, your experience and non-military status means that you can operate where our own people, military people, cannot."

"And the CIA?" Paul asked acidly. He swept his hand aside, dismissing them. "Forget the CIA. They have their own agenda which is not necessarily my agenda, the military agenda. Between you and me, there is going to be a massive military build up here over the next few months and there'll be a pressing need for air transport, especially to the more sensitive areas. You understand that when I say a contract, I'm talking about a long term proposition, you'll be paid a retainer as well as a substantial bonus for each operation. I'm talking big bucks here."

I could sense Paul's excitement, it would be our big chance to turn the airline around and make us major players in South East Asia. Or it could get us killed. But you could get killed crossing the road. "Paul, what do you think?"

"Yes, we should take it," he replied. "It'll be good for us."

"Very well. General, you've got yourself a deal, provided we can hammer out the details. I want to get my wife back before we start any operations. We'll also need to replace Johann, that is urgent."

"I can get a list of available people if you wish, Hoffman." I smiled. "No thank you, General. I think we'd prefer to organise that ourselves, there are plenty of good people kicking around Saigon who would be interested."

"Ok, I have to get back. Come in to MACV tomorrow and I'll arrange for you to put a call through to Washington, to your wife. I'll get my people onto sourcing a replacement aircraft straight away, you'll have it within the month. Good day, gentlemen." He shook our hands and abruptly left. The office seemed strange, alien, just the two of us and all that was left of Johann was a dark brown stain on the floor.

"So, Paul. It seems we are to be mercenaries." He laughed. "At least the pay is better, if we're going to go into high risk theatres, we may as well earn the rate for the job." I got another bottle of Jack Daniels and broke the seal. I poured two glasses and gave one to Paul.

"To Johann, wherever he is now, you were a good comrade, we'll never forget you."

"To Johann." He raised his glass and we drank the fiery spirit down. Then we tossed the glasses against the wall in the old way. Time to get down to some work.

We still had an airline to run and after we'd cleared up we went into Saigon to try and find a good ground engineer. I knew just the person to ask, Ritter von Schacht. We found him in a disreputable bar, half drunk as usual.

"Jurgen, Paul, welcome, let me buy you a drink. You have more work for the best pilot in Vietnam?"

I laughed. "No, Ritter, not just now. Johann is dead. Shot by a Vietnamese traitor." I told him about Nguyen Cam Le.

"Scheisse, I knew Le quite well, I thought he hated the commies."

"So did we all, but he was a traitor. Anyway, he's dead now, but he killed Johann in the process. Ritter, I do need an engineer urgently, who can you recommend?" He smiled and spread his hands. "Me, of course. Jurgen, I was tinkering with engines when you were pussying around Russia with your band of SS sissies. I did real work man, dangerous stuff, I learned to do much of the maintenance and ground crew procedures, it was the only way to stay alive. I can do a good job for you. Besides," he paused for a moment to take a swig of his drink. "I need the work, regular wages, Saigon is getting to be an expensive place to live."

I looked at Paul. "What do you think?"

"I've no doubt that Ritter can do the work, it's the sauce that worries me." He eyed Ritter's glass worriedly. "Hah! Is that all?" von Schacht snorted. "I don't see your American friends doing a very good job, even sober. But if it worries you it's no problem, I will guarantee to never drink on duty or shall we say eight hours before reporting for work."

"Twelve hours," I said firmly. He sighed. "Ten hours, and that's more than I need."

"Very well, it's agreed. Welcome aboard, Ritter. We haven't discussed pay yet." He gave an airy wave. "I've known you guys for how long? And in all that time have we ever double crossed each other? No, I'll settle for what you decide is fair. Now have a drink with me to seal our new relationship."

The barman served up three whiskeys and we toasted the future of our airline, which looked as if it was going to be very promising.

“I think we’re going to be a lot busier,” Paul said excitedly, “with all of the increased American military activity we’ll be working night and day.” I felt sombre. “You know what that means, Paul? It means that the Viet Cong will be working night and day too, you realise that?”

I noticed the barman give me a keen look, he was a male Vietnamese of about twenty five. I wondered what he did at nights.

*****

*‘Any forces that would impose their will on other nations will certainly face defeat.’*

*Nguyen Giap*

“So Comrade Nhat, your nephew failed us,” Giap said sourly.

“My nephew gave his life in the pursuit of the American bandits,” Quan Nhat, the Area Garrison Commander shot back. “What more could he do?”

“I do not recall that his orders indicated he should give up his life, do you, Comrade Duan?” The older man present at the meeting shook his head.

“My orders were straightforward, Nhat, I wanted them stopped and the German taken alive. What could be clearer than that?” Nguyen Giap looked at the Hanoi garrison commander. What a stupid, weak, useless man. Did he not realise that this war was more important than favouring one’s relatives for petty promotions?

“Clearly my nephew was not sufficiently experienced for such a mission as this,” Quan continued. “On reflection, an older, more experienced officer should have been sent.”

“That is your opinion, is it?” Giap confirmed.

The garrison commander nodded, sweat starting to appear on his face. “Yes, yes, it is.”

“In that case, Comrade Quan, why did you suggest sending your nephew when you knew how little he was experienced? You knew how important this mission was, how important to me personally, Comrade Quan. So why did you make such a flawed decision?” Quan looked down at the table unable to meet the gaze of the General.

“So, Comrade Le Duan, do you have anything to add?”

Le shook his head. Giap looked at Quan. “Comrade, you have been

found guilty of acting improperly by criminally favouring your nephew and assisting the enemies of the revolution to escape justice. Guards!"

The door was flung open and four PAVN soldiers came promptly to attention. The first, a captain, saluted. "General."

"Take Comrade Quan to the cells, he has been found guilty of crimes against the state and will be detained pending our decision on his sentence."

"Yes, Sir. At once."

The captain barked orders and the hapless Quan was dragged from his chair and frogmarched out of the room. The door closed and silence returned to the room.

"You dealt with him severely," Le said to Giap. The commander of the People's Army of Vietnam, the PAVN, shrugged. "He was a weak fool, he was sure to fall sooner or later. We're better off without him and his idiot nephew."

"Yes. This business with the Americans, you seem to be taking it personally, Comrade."

"It's not the Americans, Le, it's the German who was with them. We go back a long way."

"I see," Le said uncertainly, although he didn't see at all. "Do you wish to mount an assassination mission against him in the South?"

Giap shook his head violently. "No, definitely not, he is not to be touched. Unless he comes North again, in which case this time he must be stopped and if necessary killed. But until then, he is an honourable man, a soldier, I want him left alone."

"We are all soldiers, Comrade Giap."

"True, but I want him left. Do not press me on this, Le."

Le Duan bowed his head in assent. General Giap was not a man to cross, not ever. It would be as he said. Briefly, he wondered how Quan would fare in the cells. Still, it wouldn't be for long, his sentence would be the usual one ordained by North Vietnam's leaders on those they regarded as criminals against the state. He would not live long enough to really suffer much at all.

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# Chapter Ten

*'Our numbers have increased in Vietnam because the aggression of others has increased in Vietnam. There is not, and there will not be, a mindless escalation.'*

*Lyndon B. Johnson*

We came into land in Hue, the most beautiful city in Vietnam, perhaps in all Asia, on the 8th May, 1963. On this occasion, Helene sat in the co-pilot seat. She was fully recovered from her injuries, the American military hospital had served her proud. In addition, she was heavily pregnant and her stomach was starting to bulge noticeably, before long a trip like this would be impossible. This was to be her last trip before she wouldn't be able to fly any more until after the baby was born. I was flying the newer of our C-47s, the one supplied by MACV to replace our Junkers 52 lost in North Vietnam. The army had done us proud, unlike our first C-47 this one had seen little use, probably it had been kept in reserve at an Army Air Corps base. Everything worked as it should, the upholstery was still comfortable and showing no signs of wear and most importantly, the engines ran smoothly and reliably. We shut off the engines and gave instructions for the unloading of our cargo, and then we went into the city for a meal. Almost immediately, we ran into trouble.

It was the birthday of the Lord Gautama Buddha, a day very sacred to the majority Buddhist population. We asked the taxi driver taking us into the Citadel what was the reason for the obvious tension between large groups of sullen Buddhists and the many armed patrols who watched over them. He chatted away happily and explained what was obviously going to be another backward step in our adopted country.

"Under the 1958 law known as Decree Number 10, it is prohibited to display religious flags. This disallowed the flying of Buddhist flags on Phat Dan, the birthday of Gautama Buddha. The deputy chief in charge of security is a Catholic, Major Dang Sy. He is charged with maintaining public security and was commander of the Hue garrison. Major Dang has made it clear he will deal very harshly with any Buddhist demonstrations."

We looked at each other. "Will there be trouble, do you think?" I asked him. Trouble in Vietnam meant only one thing, shooting.

He laughed and shook his head. "No trouble, Sir. They will shout and

rave at each other and threaten mass protests but in the end the Buddhists will back down, they are people of peace," he said, somewhat contemptuously.

"I take it you are a Catholic," Helene said to him.

"Yes, of course, like our President Diem."

We exchanged glances again, this was no way to unite a divided country threatened by a communist insurgency from the North.

We were dropped off at the Citadel, the old centre of Hue and found a good restaurant for lunch. We had been considering overnighting in Hue but, in view of the obvious tension in the city, decided against getting a hotel room for the night, it would be safest to make the run straight back to Saigon. The restaurant was almost deserted, as if the locals knew that today was not a good day to be away from home.

"Diem must be a total fool if he thinks that oppressing the Buddhists will do anything, other than play right into the hands of the communists," Helene said abruptly.

I smiled at her. "You are right, my darling, it's totally stupid. Sadly, being a total fool does not stop men from becoming heads of state. Look at your Napoleon in France, our own Hitler in Germany. Clever politicians, yes, but in many ways they were complete idiots. We just have to live with their idiocy."

"That's sad, Jurgen, to think that so many people have to suffer because of it. The Vietnamese, the American soldiers, even us, we nearly lost our baby because of it."

And you, I thought. Our meal was a sombre affair, there was little to be cheerful about. Something bad was brewing in this city and all we both wanted was to finish up and get out. We called a taxi and started back to the airport, it was then that the trouble began. We were stopped just before a bridge, a squad of steel helmeted troops had set up a roadblock and were turning everything back. A young lieutenant looked inside the cab and when he saw us white Europeans, told the driver to turn around.

"The road ahead is closed," he said angrily.

I leaned forward and spoke to him calmly, the situation looked tense and I didn't want to ignite any fuses.

"Lieutenant, I am a pilot under contract to the American military, I need to return to the airport to fly back to Saigon."

He sneered. "The Americans can take care of their own, we have our own problems here, the Buddhists are rioting all over the city. You must turn

back."

As he spoke, he lifted his assault rifle in a way that stopped short of being threatening but was an unmistakable warning. I nodded and told the driver to turn around. As we started back, he said he knew an alternative way back to the airport if we didn't mind paying the extra fare. I told him to get us there by any means possible. I wanted Helene out of this tinderbox.

We drove through a series of back roads, tracks and lanes and seemed to be making progress back to the airport when we hit the second obstacle. This time it really was serious, a group of saffron robed Buddhist monks leading a procession of demonstrators. Their route had been blocked by a line of grim face, steel helmeted police. Their officer was shouting at the Buddhists through a loudhailer.

"What is he saying?" I asked our driver.

"He's telling them to disperse, that they do not have an official license for their demonstration. If they do not go back immediately he is threatening to shoot."

So far, the police had not levelled their rifles at the crowd and I had high hopes that people would see sense and both sides quietly back down. But neither side did back down. The officer stopped talking through the loudhailer and barked an order at his men. The sound of more than twenty rifles being cocked was like a roll of thunder. The barrels were levelled at the demonstrators, who as far as I could see were unarmed. For a few minutes there was total silence. The lieutenant shouted at them again, his face turning red with anger. There was no need to translate, he was clearly telling them to disperse or else. The crowd had gone silent, they just stood defiantly refusing to move. He shouted again, then again. Still nobody moved, then he turned to his men, shouted a single word and the gunfire started.

It was a slaughter, men and women screamed, the leading demonstrators crumpled to the road as dozens of them were wounded or killed outright. Astonishingly, the shooting didn't stop, they just kept firing and firing at the demonstrators, most of whom by now were running for their lives. Some stood too shocked to move, like rabbits caught in a vehicle's headlights, a few moved amongst the fallen, trying to help them until they too were hit and fell to the ground. Eventually, the shooting petered to a stop. We sat shocked into silence. The lieutenant started shouting more orders to his men who incredibly began to arrest some of the frozen survivors. The dead and wounded they left where they had fallen. I murmured to the driver to back up

slowly and move away. This had all the hallmarks of a war crime and if the officer realised that we were witnesses he could turn his attentions to us. In the event, he took no notice and we managed to beat a hasty retreat. Helene, who was a trained doctor, was trying to persuade me to stop the cab so that she could give help to the wounded, but when I explained to her that her unborn baby would be at risk if the Vietnamese police decided that we were unwanted witnesses, she kept quiet. The driver continued to wend his way through the backstreets of Hue and eventually we got back to the airport unscathed. The air traffic controllers were unhappy about clearing me for takeoff, there was talk of a military clampdown until order was restored, but I played the trump card of U.S. military business and managed to get away. At last we were climbing into the air and I breathed a sigh of relief. Helene tuned the radio into the local AFN station, they were playing a frenetic rock song, 'The Twist', the singer was a new name to me, Chubby Checker. I wondered about the title of the song. It seemed very appropriate for Vietnam, the twist, that described everything here.

I had never heard Helene swear, so I was shocked when she spoke. "They are a bunch of total fucking lunatics," she said. "They have just recruited a large number of soldiers for the Viet Cong."

I laughed. "Welcome to Realpolitik, my darling." Realpolitik was politics or diplomacy based primarily on power and on practical and material factors and considerations, rather than ideological notions or moralistic or ethical premises. The politics of brute force. As practised in Vietnam, North and South.

"They're going to lose, aren't they, Jurgen?"

"You mean Diem, and his American allies?"

"Yes, they're playing right into the hands of the communists, isn't that blindingly obvious."

"Yes," I replied. "Just as the French did before them, just as successive Vietnamese governments have done. I fear that within a few years the communists will be in power."

"So why are we here, Jurgen?" Why are we helping them?"

"Because it's our home, Helene. It's where we've chosen to make our lives, build our business and a home for our child."

She was silent for a full hour as we droned on over the endless Vietnamese jungle.

"Have we made a mistake, should we go elsewhere?" she said

suddenly. I jerked in surprise and the aircraft leapt a couple of hundred feet higher.

"Possibly," I said after a moment. "But we are committed at the moment, once the baby is born and we have fulfilled our contracts with the U.S. military, we could consider moving somewhere else. The world needs aircraft to transport goods, we could consider setting up in a different country, we'll speak to Paul if you wish."

She nodded. "Yes, I think that would be a good idea, after the baby is born. Then we'll have a better idea of how things stand."

We landed back at Tan Son Nhat without incident, our intention was to go straight home to the bungalow we had rented while our own home was being repaired, but there was a surprise waiting for me. I taxied over to the hangar where there was a Willys jeep parked outside. Paul and Ritter came out, grim faced. I dropped down the ladder, helped Helene down and waited for them to speak.

"There's someone in the office to speak to you, Jurgen. Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Goldberg."

"What does he want?"

They both shrugged. "He refused to speak to us," Ritter said. "Said he wanted to talk to you and no one else."

It was nothing good, that was certain. If Goldberg would only talk to me that meant a secret mission of some kind and that could only lead to trouble. Well, I'd been in trouble before and had so far managed to get out of it. I went into the office, Helene came after me with Ritter and Paul. Goldberg was sat on our old couch, he immediately stood up and came to shake hands.

"Hoffman, good to see you again."

"Colonel, you too," I replied.

"How are things in Hue?" he asked.

"The usual, Colonel, a total fuck up. Did you expect anything else?"

He shook his head tiredly. "No, I guess not. I'm sorry about that problem you had with Miles, it could have been real bad."

I raised my eyebrows. "Bad, Colonel? As I recall it cost the lives of a Special Forces captain, two sergeants and countless other lives including many Vietnamese civilians and our own engineer. That was 'real bad' enough for us."

He looked suitably abashed. "Yeah, sorry about that, it wasn't one of

our finest moments. Now look, I want to talk to you in confidence," he looked significantly at Helene, Paul and Ritter.

I smiled at him. "You are talking to me in confidence, Colonel. These people are totally trustworthy, proved time and again. As I recall, it is your own people who you have problems with. As a matter of interest, you're sitting two feet from where one of them killed Johann, if you look hard the bloodstain is still visible."

I felt Helene flinch, but I felt I had to make a point. Goldberg relaxed and smiled.

"Ok, I'm not getting very far am I? Maybe I'd better come right out with it. I need your aircraft, Jurgen."

"So what's the problem, you want a standard charter of one of our C-47s, just put in the paperwork and we'll deal with it?"

I was being deliberately naive and we all knew it. A senior officer coming out here personally and waiting for me to return was no standard charter.

"I want both of your C-47s to ferry troops and equipment to Da Nang, can you handle it?"

I looked at Paul and Ritter. This proposal stank worse than a manure heap. "You know we can handle it, Colonel. What's the catch?"

He thought for a moment. "Well, there are one or two aspects of the operation that I can't discuss with you, but essentially it's a straightforward ferry job, out and back. Take the men up there, refuel and wait for forty-eight hours and bring them back."

"Can I discuss it for a moment with my people, two aircraft is a major charter for us?"

He nodded, and I indicated to Helene and the others that we needed to speak privately outside the hangar. We went into the late afternoon sunshine and I asked them what they thought.

"They want us to go to the North," Paul said immediately.

Ritter nodded. "My thoughts too, Jurgen. They could use any number of their own aircraft for a simple ferry job to Da Nang."

Helene had paled. "Oh God no, not again. Not the North."

I spread my arms. "That's almost certainly what they want, so let's proceed on that assumption. What do we do?"

"Say no, of course," my wife said. "You mustn't do it."

I smiled at her. "It's not that easy, my love. We have certain

obligations to the U.S. military and we can't refuse them out of hand. Let's face it, we knew this was coming."

I could see a tear forming in her eye. I felt angry that the Colonel had come to put this one on us so abruptly, but I guess he had his orders.

"We'll have to do it," Paul said. "We owe them a lot, but let's just make sure they pay heavily for the privilege."

Ritter nodded. "I'm up for it, you'll need me for a two aircraft job. We'll need a second co-pilot too."

"I'll do it," Helene said. I stared at her. "You cannot be serious, you're five months pregnant."

"If you're going, Jurgen, I go too. I'm not sitting at home waiting to hear you've been killed. If it happens, I want to be with you."

"You're not cleared for twin engine aircraft," I said lamely. Her license was single engine only. But it was a stupid argument and she just laughed.

"You cannot be serious? What are they going to do, arrest me for not having the correct paperwork?"

We argued back and forth for almost half an hour. In the end we compromised, she would come with us to Da Nang but not cross the DMZ, and to get that agreement I had to repeatedly remind her of our unborn child. We went back into the office.

"You've got your aircraft, Colonel, provided you agree to our terms. What is the destination?"

"That's excellent, Hoffman. I told you, Da Nang."

I heard a laugh from Ritter von Schacht. "We are not children, Colonel," he said, "you have more than enough aircraft of your own to take your men to Da Nang. Tell us, exactly where is the destination?"

Goldberg sighed. "Ok, you're right. Initial destination is Da Nang, but yes, we want you to take our group over the DMZ and return for the pick up approximately forty-eight hours later. It's a straightforward in and out, you've done it before."

"So have you, Colonel, as I recall it was anything but straightforward last time."

He winced. "Yeah, point taken, but this time it's much simpler."

"When do you want to depart?" Paul asked him.

"Tonight."

The four of us stared at him as if he was crazy.

"You can't mean that, Colonel," I said to him, "that's ridiculous and you

know it."

He nodded. "I do, you're quite right. We had a contract sorted with another airline, Air America, but this morning there was something of a disagreement on policy between their managers and MACV and they've pulled out."

"Why didn't the CIA want to fly this one?"

"CIA?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

None of us replied, we just waited for him. Air America's slogan was 'Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Professionally'. This was not an exaggeration, as Air America aircraft, including De Havilland Canada DHC-4 Caribous and Fairchild C-123 Providers, flew many types of cargo to countries such as the Republic of Vietnam, the Kingdom of Laos, and Cambodia. It operated from bases in those countries and also from bases in Thailand and as far afield as Taiwan and Japan. It also on occasion flew top-secret missions into Burma and the People's Republic of China. The airline was directly owned and operated by the CIA, through a maze of front companies and they provided direct and indirect support to CIA operations.

Goldberg shrugged. "Yeah, you're right. Politics, I guess. There's been a falling out between CIA and MACV, each has their own view on how the war in South Vietnam should be run. Meanwhile, people like us have to keep the real war going."

"Ok, it's nothing new. Here are our terms. Triple the normal fee and the military fully insures our aircraft against loss or damage."

"Triple?" He was shocked. "That sounds a bit steep."

"I'm willing to bet it's a lot cheaper than Air America," I replied, but I was holding my breath. A triple fee would make a big difference to us.

He relented, he was obviously desperate and under orders to get results. "Yep, ok, we can do that. How do you want payment?"

"Half the fee up front in cash, and a certified cheque for the value of each of the aircraft. If everything goes well we tear up the cheques. Other than that, we'll ignore the paperwork. The balance to be paid when we return."

"Yeah, we can't put anything on paper. Very well, I'll be back here in four hours, we fly to Da Nang, take on some extra supplies and refuel and then push on across the DMZ tomorrow evening."

"We'll be ready, Colonel. Don't forget the money."

He smiled as he walked away.

"Paul, would you and Ritter get both aircraft refuelled and pre-flighted. I'll take Helene home for a quick nap, a shower and change of clothes, it's been a long flight in from Hue and we've got another long one ahead of us."

"We'll be ready," Ritter said. His eyes were shining, obviously he enjoyed the chance of seeing some action. I hoped to God he would be disappointed and it would be a milk run. We went to our bungalow and slept for a couple of hours, then showered and ate a hasty meal. Helene was unusually quiet.

"I don't know," she said when I asked her what the problem was. "I'm just sick and tired of all this nonsense, that business in Hue upset me, it was so stupid and unnecessary. Now this, it's like little boys constantly playing Cowboys and Indians. When will it ever end so that people can live a normal life, people like us? I want out, Jurgen, as soon as possible."

I agreed that when we got back we'd start looking into getting out of Vietnam. Shortly afterwards we were back at the hangar, Paul and Ritter were just finishing their pre-flight checks when two military transport vehicles arrived and disgorged our passengers, thirty tough looking soldiers, they carried no unit insignia but were almost certainly Special Forces. There were several wooden crates containing their equipment and these were quickly loaded. Thirty minutes later we were in the air, Helene flew with me and Paul and Ritter flew the other aircraft. Von Schacht was in the left hand seat, a gracious nod from Paul to the old Luftwaffe pilot's undoubted superior skill.

We droned on through the night towards Da Nang. I went aft to check the passengers twice but they were very uncommunicative, Helene and I were just the taxi drivers. That would do for me, I was quite happy to earn my pay by avoiding any contact with either them or the enemy, I was getting too old for that, it was best left to the youngsters. Da Nang airfield had lit up the runway and we were able to land without difficulty. We were directed to a far corner of the field where the soldiers hurriedly disembarked and were collected by two lorries. Shortly after the dawn arrived and we were left to our own devices throughout the day. We chatted, caught up on sleep, ate the sandwiches that Helene had provided and checked the aircraft twice over. During the day a fuel bowser came and we refilled the tanks until they were right to the top. I saw Helene to the officers' quarters at the airfield where they had allowed her the use of a room, and then returned to the aircraft as darkness fell. The lorries re-appeared with an additional four men, they were

all wearing army camouflage but they were no soldiers, their slumped civilian bearing gave them away. Colonel Goldberg joined me in the right hand seat to help navigate to the landing field. I called over Paul and Ritter and as they crowded into the cockpit we went over his maps.

"This is our destination, Vinh. Specifically a level field on the outside of the town, we'll be far enough away to get in without the locals noticing we've arrived. We've got some people of our own who'll be putting out markers for the landing, so it shouldn't be any problem getting the aircraft in. Only room for one at a time, though. Can you handle that?"

"I suggest the second aircraft leaves slightly later, Colonel. I don't think we want it circling over Vinh while the first aircraft unloads."

"Oh, right, yeah, I never thought of that. Ok, we'll do it your way."

We smiled at each other, it was pretty basic not to have an unarmed defenceless aircraft circling over enemy territory for any period of time.

"Who are the civilians, Colonel?"

"We haven't got any civilians."

He saw our sceptical look. "Yeah, ok, you're right. They're intelligence guys, translators and code breakers. The mission is quite straightforward, we got wind of a cache of enemy documents related to the insurgency, local leaders, intelligence people in the South, they're at an address in Vinh. We're going in to check out the documents and take photos of anything interesting, then leave them apparently undisturbed. It could be quite an intelligence coup, especially if they don't know we've seen them."

I didn't say anything, it sounded ridiculous. But if that was what they wanted to pay us for, so be it. At least there was a good chance of avoiding enemy contact. It was time for departure, the troops were already aboard. I went into the cockpit with Goldberg, we were the leading aircraft and we started up, got clearance and took off. Navigation was something of a challenge, we were looking for a small field in a darkened area west of Vinh but I managed to take bearings from the stars to assist my compass heading and within three hours we started to descend. There were lights below marking out the landing strip, arranged in an arrow to mark the wind direction. As I came in to land, Goldberg snapped out an order for the men to be ready and the cabin echoed to the sound of weapons being cocked.

He needn't have worried, I brought the C-47 to a halt and the soldiers leapt out, weapons raised, but there were only friendly voices raised in greeting. Immediately I took off again to clear the field for the second C-47

and as I gained height I saw it reflected in the moonlight as it approached the field for a landing. I flew back to Da Nang and when I landed Helene was there to greet me. Shortly after Paul and Ritter landed and the first part of our mission was over. We went into the military bar and bought drinks and then sat in silence. It was an odd feeling that for once the Special Forces were in enemy territory and we were safe at Da Nang, almost a feeling of guilt, as if we should have been with them. We felt powerless, unable to influence events as we had so often in the past. All we could do was wait. Eventually we gave up and went to bed, avoiding each other's eyes. The following day we spent servicing the aircraft to be ready at any moment, but the call didn't come. Neither did it the next day and by the following night we were beginning to get worried, they were very overdue. We waited half the night and still the radio was silent, the following morning we sat around waiting again. Then an army communications sergeant came over to us from the tower. They were in trouble.

"Message from Colonel Goldberg, Mr Hoffman. They've stirred up a hornet's nest over there, they want you ready to go in as soon as they can clear a safe landing strip."

He gave us the full text of the message. They'd been jumped by a large force of North Vietnamese regulars and had been forced to make a fighting retreat to the outskirts of Vinh. MACV were liaising with the United States Navy and the Air Force to arrange for an air strike on the enemy, as soon as they were due to go in they wanted us airborne.

"We'll be ready, you can acknowledge, let us know as soon as we can take off."

"Yes, Sir." He went back to the tower and we sat on edge, waiting for the word to go. An hour and a half later, we were told to take off immediately and pick them up from a point five miles due south of Vinh. We climbed aboard our aircraft and minutes later I was flying north. I was wondering about navigation if things got difficult when Helene appeared in the cockpit. I nearly leapt out of my skin.

"What the hell are you doing, you're supposed to be waiting at Da Nang?" I shouted at her.

"You needed a co-pilot, Jurgen, you've got me so shut up and let's get on with it," she said matter of factly as she sat down in the right hand seat. She'd timed it beautifully, it was too late for me to head back to Da Nang and remove her from the aircraft. I swallowed the angry retort I was about to

make and did as she said, I shut up.

After two hours we had crossed the DMZ and were well on our way to the pickup point outside Vinh. I saw movement out of my starboard window and glimpsed two squadrons of Douglas A-4 Skyhawks, heading for Vinh. They were travelling at high speed, inside of a minute they had disappeared from view.

"They obviously mean business, sending that many aircraft over," I said to Helene. She just pulled a face. I kept scanning the sky, then saw even more aircraft, a squadron of Grumman A-6 Intruders, ground attack bombers, they were new in Vietnam and carried a very heavy bomb load. I assumed they'd been launched from an aircraft carrier offshore, but it was too far away to see their markings. I looked again, a further squadron of aircraft were flying escort above the A6 intruders. One dipped down and came to check us out, they were F-100 Super Sabre fighter bombers.

"I think they've sent every fighter aircraft in Vietnam to join us," Helene said drily.

I nodded, I was staggered at the awesome display of airpower, there must have been at least sixty aircraft in the air, maybe more. As we approached the vicinity of Vinh, we saw the results of their intervention. Half a dozen A4 Skyhawks were circling around a point several miles south of the town, occasionally one or two would swoop down and blaze away at a ground target. The wing leader came onto our frequency.

"Civilian C-47s this is blue wing leader flying escort patrol over your party, acknowledge you have the LZ in sight."

I peered down and could see a large group of men in a defensive position either side of a sports field, it was Goldberg's party without doubt. They were besieged by a number of North Vietnamese regulars who were themselves pinned down by the relentless firepower of the Skyhawks.

"Civilian C-47s, acknowledged," I replied.

"Very good C-47s, let us make one more pass and then you can go in for the pick up."

"Acknowledged."

All six Skyhawks banked hard and swooped down on the North Vietnamese. The air came alive with rockets and cannon fire, the twenty millimetre cannon shells hammering the enemy ground troops to shreds. One by one they delivered their deadly ordnance and swept back up into the sky. I throttled down, dropped flaps and went straight in for a landing, Ritter

followed suit and landed exactly parallel to me, showing off his superb flying skill as usual. As I taxied over to the men, Helene ran back to open the door, then they were pouring into the aircraft. Inside of a minute, Goldberg came into the cockpit and started when he saw Helene.

"I didn't expect to see you aboard, Ma'am," he said. "Jurgen, we're all aboard, you can take off right away?"

I didn't need any further encouragement, I opened the throttles wide and got us into the air. Ritter was right behind us and I felt comfortable to see several Skyhawks fall in around us as escort. Back in the cabin there was uproar, somehow they'd manage to locate some booze and were celebrating. Goldberg came into the cockpit. "Hoffman, I don't suppose you take a drink when you're driving?" He grinned.

I shook my head. "No, thank you, Colonel. What are you celebrating, it sounds like a party back there?"

"Jesus Christ, man, we got out, we really hit those commies hard. Did you see those fighter bombers go in?"

"I saw them, yes. I assume your mission was a success, Colonel?"

"Hell no," he laughed, "it was a total mess up from start to finish. But we got out with only a couple of minor casualties and the air force gave them a damn good pasting. Christ, it's something to celebrate," he laughed again and went back into the cabin.

We flew on in silence for almost an hour, then Helene spoke to me. "What are you thinking?"

"I was wondering whether it would be worth us considering buying a Douglas DC-4, it's a much bigger aircraft, four engines and over eighty seats."

She stared at me. "You cannot be serious? These people are lunatics. Those soldiers back there are celebrating a failed mission and the total devastation of a North Vietnamese town. Crazy."

I laughed at that. "Did you not realise that before, Helene? Of course they're all crazy, war itself is lunacy. But it's the way things are, I can't change it or them."

"They'll never win a war if they fight it like this, you know. The people on the ground must hate them," she snapped back.

I shrugged. "I expect they do hate them. But it's not my problem, I'm not dropping the bombs."

"So that's all it is to you, Jurgen, just a way of making money?"

“That’s all this business has ever been, Helene, a business like any other. When I fought here in the Legion I fought hard and honourably. Now I run my business just as honourably. What would you have me do, retire and become a missionary?”

She laughed then. “No, perhaps not. I can’t see you preaching the word of God.”

“Good. And what about the baby, won’t you want him to have a decent home, nice clothes, a good education? Maybe the Sorbonne? We could get an apartment for when we visit.”

She laughed. “You’re so sure it’s going to be a boy?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, I don’t know, I’ll be happy either way.”

“That’s ok then. Paris, the Sorbonne, yes, that would be wonderful. But I don’t know, it’s a terrible way to earn a living.”

“So is being a soldier, at least this pays better. It’s our business, Helene, it’s what we do.”

She went quiet for a while as we droned on. Just before we came into land at Da Nang, she suddenly turned to me. “If we were to stay here for a while longer, Jurgen, what does a Douglas DC-4 cost these days? I hate it all, but we do have to think about the future of our child.”

I grinned. “A lot of money, my darling, but at this rate we’ll be able to afford it. Providing the war goes on for a few years.”

I smiled, French women were both beautiful and very practical and my brave, lovely wife possessed both of these qualities in full. How could any man be as lucky as me, to have a wife like her? We were both survivors, both battered by the forces of war and both able to keep looking forward.

“Oh, the war will go on for some time,” she said. “But you know that sooner or later we’ll have to leave South Vietnam?”

“You mean when the communists take over.”

She nodded. “Exactly.”

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*Once upon a time our traditional goal in war and can anyone doubt that we are at war? - was victory. Once upon a time we were proud of our strength, our military power. Now we seem ashamed of it. Once upon a time the rest of the world looked to us for leadership. Now they look to us for a quick handout and a fence-straddling international posture.*

*Barry M. Goldwater*

General Harkins looked out of his office window. Jurgen Hoffman and his pretty wife Helene were walking out of the building having just signed a new one year contract with the U.S. military. Jurgen was carrying their new baby, a girl named Celine, apparently after Helene's grandmother. They were a happy, prosperous looking couple, he reflected, more prosperous now that they had the new contract to make payment on a Douglas DC-4. He looked around as an aide, a major, walked into his office and saluted.

"Sir, the news has come through, Diem is dead, the information minister Tran Tu Oai has declared it was a suicide."

"And?" Harkins pressed him.

"It was General Duong Van Minh, Sir. Together with the Army Chief of Staff, Tran Van Don. Just as we expected."

Harkins nodded. That would leave the way clear for someone who would be more acceptable to the Buddhist majority.

His thoughts turned to the other problem, the New York Times correspondent David Halberstam. Four months ago they were having a Fourth of July celebration at the American embassy when David Halberstam became so angry that he refused to shake hands with Harkins. When the host called for a toast to the General, Halberstam shouted 'Paul D. Harkins should be court martialled and shot!' It was all bullshit, of course, but that kind of bullshit tended to stick.

It was lucky that he had the ear of President John F Kennedy, at least Kennedy would be there for the long haul, he wasn't likely to go the way of Diem in this fly-blown country, assassinated by his own people.

Even the Times correspondent, Lee Griggs had the impertinence to compose a sarcastic rhyme about him.

*'We are winning, this I know, General Harkins tells me so.*
*In the mountains, things are rough,*
*In the Delta, mighty tough,*
*But the V.C. will soon go, General Harkins tells me so.'*

These damn traitors ought to be shot, he thought to himself. Thank God for the United States.

The End

# DEVIL'S GUARD COUNTERATTACK

By Eric Meyer

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# FOREWORD

The Tet offensive came as a massive shock to the Americans at the end of January 1968. The Vietnam War was at its height and General William Westmoreland's plan to engage the enemy in an attritional battle at Khe Sanh had only just begun. The government and military line for the media and public was unequivocal, the war is being won, the communists are weakened and almost ready to lay down their arms. When they broke the traditional New Year's truce during the Tet holiday, the shock to the South Vietnamese and more importantly the American government and public was shattering. Their confident understanding that the troop losses were worthwhile, that the end was in sight, were wrecked. It seemed to them that they had been misled.

Despite the fact that the Americans and ARVN inflicted massive damage on the communist ability to fight, the damage to the image of the war in the public perception was beyond repair.

For several weeks the major towns and cities of South Vietnam became battlegrounds and Khe Sanh itself saw a battle for survival that lasted for many months and inflicted countless casualties on all sides. Even when the siege of Khe Sanh was lifted and the communists defeated, the base was abandoned shortly afterwards, awarding the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army a propaganda victory.

The role of mercenaries in the war and during Tet is well documented, as is the role of civilian aircraft flying up and down the country on a range of mysterious errands. Equally well documented was the Phoenix Program, the American policy of using Special Forces and civilian mercenaries, both Vietnamese and foreign to assassinate communist leaders both military and political.

Amidst the turmoil and hell of this critical period there were many accounts of actions behind enemy lines. This is one such account.

For obvious reasons, some of the details in this story cannot be individually verified, but in general most of the events took place and are true. For the rest of the story, I earnestly hope the reader will forgive the interpretation that I had to make to weave the mass of data into a coherent story.

Eric Meyer

# INTRODUCTION

At a time when Jurgen Hoffman has settled into his new life with his beautiful French wife Helene, running a growing but small airline in South Vietnam, the communist Tet offensive takes away everything he has been working for. His airline is wrecked, the aircraft and hangar destroyed in a Viet Cong mortar attack. His wife, a doctor, is kidnapped. All he has left are his comrades from the old days, veterans of the Waffen –SS legions that were feared across Europe. Experienced in fighting the communist guerillas from their service in the French Foreign Legion, the brutal fighting skills are the only resource they have left with which to restore their families and fortunes. Valued by the American military as experts in guiding armed incursions into the Viet Cong jungle strongholds, this is the story of their efforts as they work with the Americans to blunt the impact of the Tet offensive.

# CHAPTER 1

*'We are at war with the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars, and it has been said if we lose that war, and in so doing lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening.'*

*Ronald Reagan 1964*

I surveyed the wreckage of my whole life, everything I had worked for, fought for, shed blood for. The hangar was partially destroyed, outside three aircraft lay drunkenly at odd angles on the concrete. Two Douglas DC-4s, the big, profit making aircraft that promised to be the basis of a flourishing and successful airline. As well as the Douglas C-47, the reliable old friend that had been the early mainstay of the launch of our new airline. All smashed,

destroyed in a series of mortar strikes that had devastated Tan Son Nhat, the huge military and civil airfield outside of Saigon. A salvo of shells had struck the heart of our operation, scoring hits on the aircraft and the hangar, we had counted more than thirty shells in all during the initial attack. Mortar attacks were nothing new to us and we had a sandbagged trench prepared thirty yards from the hangar where we were able to shelter during the raid. With total shock we had watched the attack, seeing all we had worked for destroyed in a matter of a few minutes.

"At least we didn't suffer any casualties," Paul said to me.

Paul Schuster, my companion and partner for the last twenty-odd years. Left homeless and rootless after the Second World War, both of us found that former Waffen-SS officers had little to offer the new Europe. We had joined the French Foreign Legion and fought our way through Indochina. After Dien Bien Phu, the disastrous French defeat, we had built a new life for ourselves with a small airline operating out of Tan Son Nhat. Years of work and sacrifice destroyed in minutes by yet another communist attack, just when it seemed that we were getting ahead. I looked at Ritter, another veteran of World War Two, he couldn't return my gaze. A brilliant pilot, the aircraft were his life and his loves, now it was effectively over. Emile de Grasse, our chief engineer and his assistant Joe Ryder looked on stonily, like Ritter the aircraft were their life.

"I should go out to Cholon, Jurgen, to check on Helene and Sophie," Lan said.

I looked around at her. Nguyen Vo Lan was our office manager, a twenty-eight year old Vietnamese, competent and efficient, she was the backbone of our operation. I wondered why she was so keen to go to Cholon, the mainly Chinese area of Saigon in which my wife Helene and I lived with our daughter in a rented bungalow. My thoughts were interrupted by an explosion as another mortar shell hit the main runway two hundred yards away from us. We ducked down while debris showered around us.

There was a brief pause and everything seemed to have gone quiet. I looked over the parapet of our trench only to duck down again as a machine gun started chattering. Then there were a series of screams and shouts, Paul and I had heard them before, the VC were attacking. The distinctive sharp sound of M16 bursts added to the din as the U.S. and ARVN forces fired back, then we heard the pneumatic drill sound as someone got a .50 calibre machine gun into action. All we could do was wait until it was over, after all,

it wasn't our battle. I crouched down and looked back at Lan, I kicked myself for not thinking of my wife and daughter before now. Thank God she cared for their welfare.

"You're right, it would be good to have someone go check on them. But Lan, we don't know how far this attack has spread, the VC may have got as far as Cholon."

"In which case you'd want me to check, Jurgen."

I smiled. "Yes, Lan, thanks. What about Nhu, would it be best if you got her out of here?"

Nhu was our pretty, tiny young Vietnamese office assistant, she helped Lan with the day to day business of typing and filing.

"Yes, I'll take Nhu with me if you wish. We'd better get going, Jurgen, I can find a way through the city that keeps us clear of the fighting."

I put my hand on her arm. "No, wait until this attack is over, I don't want you exposed to the crossfire, Lan."

She frowned, but nodded and went over to talk to Nhu. The sound of the gunfire intensified. Paul Schuster looked grim, he would certainly be thinking along the same lines as me. These terrorists had destroyed our business, our future, how tempting it would be to take one of the assault rifles and start seeking revenge. When the attack started we had all grabbed for our rifles, for when the VC attacked there was no rule of law in South Vietnam, it was every man for himself. We still used old but reliable M2 carbines, the compact, fully automatic rifle that dated back more than twenty years to the last days of the Second World War. But it wasn't our battle.

We waited out the battle, hearing the screams and shouts of both attackers and defenders. Screams of hate, of fear, of pain and panic. At last the firing started to die down and I guessed that the airfield defenders were getting the best of it. To my knowledge there were at least four battalions of troops based in and around Tan Son Nhat, at least three thousand men. More than enough to deter a Viet Cong guerrilla raid. I looked out of the trench again and saw the terrible sight of our aircraft ablaze, total wrecks. The wind changed suddenly and the smoke cleared from the furthest DC-4, to my horror I saw several black clad figures emerge through the smoke, retreating from the fighting and heading straight towards us.

"Paul, Ritter, the rest of you, we've got enemy coming in."

They could see the direction in which I was looking. I heard the rattle of the bolts as each of them charged their weapons. Emile, our chief engineer

had a Browning pump action shotgun, I guessed his poor eyesight made it a more suitable weapon, provided of course that he got near enough to the enemy to use it. His assistant Joe had an M2 like us, we had shown him how to use it on the nearby marine range, although he had never yet used it to fire a shot in anger. I guessed that was about to change.

I looked carefully over the top again, they were nearly on us, maybe fifty yards away. There were ten of them, running hard to escape the U.S. and ARVN defenders that were hunting them down as they ran directly for us.

"When I give the word, we pop up and hit them with everything we've got," I told them. "They're spread out in a line, so we each need to take the ones immediately in front of each of us. Stand by."

They looked grim, this shouldn't be happening, but at least it was an opportunity to take some revenge. I looked at them all one by one, checking they were ready, a habit of a lifetime.

"Joe, now would be a good time to take off the safety," I said quietly.

He looked startled, flushed red and bent to unsafe his weapon.

"Let's hit them," I said loudly.

We stood up to see the VC almost on us. Paul fired first, short, measured bursts. The M2 only held thirty rounds and like a light machine gun was most effective in quick, well-aimed bursts.

The leader was less than ten yards away, Paul's shots took him in the body and threw him to the ground. He fired again and the next man went down, I opened fire and took the VCs off to the right of the line, one man went down, then two more. Ritter was firing too, long bursts, he was no infantryman, a former Luftwaffe fighter pilot he presumably thought more in terms of bringing down an American B-17 bomber with long raking bursts of cannon fire.

Nonetheless, a VC went down to his shots. Joe fired several shots but none seemed to have any effect, his boss Emile let fly with the shotgun and another VC went down just before the trench. Paul and I shifted aim and three more went down, the last man made a determined effort to reach us, bleeding from wounds to his hip and stomach. Almost in slow motion, we saw him take out a grenade and pull out the pin. Ritter was reloading, Paul and I were out of ammunition, Joe just stood frozen with fear as the Viet came nearer, swinging his arm to lob the grenade into our trench. As his arm reached the top of its arc, there were two shattering booms from Emile's shotgun and the VC was flung back, crumpling to the ground.

“Grenade, everybody down!” I shouted. We all ducked, except for Joe and I pulled his legs from under him so that he collapsed to the floor of the trench just as the grenade exploded with a huge ‘whoomph,” a pressure wave hit us, the roar nearly burst our eardrums and the shockwave threw us to the back of the trench.

A shower of earth and grass came down over our heads, and then everything went silent. Warily, I stood up, Paul and Ritter joined me. A platoon of American infantry was heading towards us looking warily at the carnage. They poked the VC bodies to make sure they were all dead and then came over to our trench.

“You guys ok?” their lieutenant asked.

I recognised him, he had arrived in country only two weeks ago, Joe Wright, a would-be lawyer who planned on having the army pay for his education, provided he survived Vietnam, of course.

“Hi, Joe, we’re fine, no problems here.”

His eyes went wide as he looked from us to the bodies and back to us.

“Jesus, you got them all. That was some shooting.”

I nodded. “It’s not the first time we’ve had to deal with these gentlemen, I doubt it’ll be the last.”

“Yeah, ok,” he said hesitantly. “Well, I guess the Captain will be pleased you got these bastards. I’ve got to check around the perimeter, maybe we’ll meet up later for a beer,” he looked at me expectantly.

“I doubt it, Joe, we’ve got a hell of a mess to sort out. I think it’ll be a long time before any of us relax with a beer.”

He surveyed the wreckage of our dreams. “Right, I see what you mean. I’m real sorry, Jurgen, good luck with it. I’ll detail some of the men to remove the bodies as soon as the all clear sounds.”

I smiled and looked around at my people as he strode off with his men following.

“We ought to get going, Jurgen, Nhu and I, we must check in on Helene and Sophie.”

My God, I’d forgotten about them again in the heat of the action. Lan had a strange expression on her face, her pupils were dilated, she was licking her lips, more like a warrior queen than an office manager. Women were strange, I reflected, some were terrified of battle, some hated it and others seemed to find an almost orgasmic delight in its bloody glory.

“Are you sure you’ll be ok, Lan? There’s bound to be more fighting

around the city."

"Of course we will, Jurgen."

"I'm truly grateful, Lan, just be careful. Can you contact me when you know the score, if the phones are working by then?"

"Of course, if they're still out of action I'll try and get a message to you through MACV."

The U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, MACV, had their headquarters across the other side of the airfield from our hangar, or what was left of our hangar. Under their guidance, Tan Son Nhat had become one of the busiest airports in the world, with a constant mix of military and civilian flights taking off and landing at all hours of day and night. I wondered how they would react to this attack on their most sensitive area at a time when their commander, General William Westmoreland, had informed the world's press that the U.S. was winning the war. So far we had enjoyed good relations with MACV and I had no doubt they would agree to pass on any message during the current emergency.

"Very well, do you want to take a weapon?"

She grinned. "And be shot as a Viet Cong spy, you mean?"

Of course she was right, a Vietnamese civilian, a woman, carrying a weapon would automatically be assumed to be a guerrilla, with probably fatal consequences. Only civilians of white European appearance carried weapons in Vietnam.

"You're right. Good luck, then. Give my love to Helene and Sophie, tell them I'll be with them soon."

The women walked across the airfield, for once it was devoid of the usual chaos of aircraft taking off and landing, all flight operations had been suspended after the first mortar shells hit. At least they looked innocent, two young women in long, ethnic dresses, walking hand in hand. We walked over to the hangar and started to look around inside to see what could be retrieved from the collapsed building. That was when the second wave of attacks hit Tan son Nhat. Our first warning was when the rattle of machine gun fire echoed across the airfield. We rushed outside in time to see a saloon car, it looked like an old French Citroen, ram the main gatehouse of the airfield. There was a huge explosion and the gatehouse disappeared, destroyed by the bomb that had been hidden inside the car. I wondered if the driver had managed to get out before his bomb exploded. The communists could be fanatical, it was quite possibly a suicide attack. Then waves of black clad

Viet Cong guerrillas stormed through the open gateway, firing on the run. A squad of ARVN ran out to meet them and were cut down almost instantly, totally overwhelmed by the enemy. I heard a whistling sound and we all ducked as a mortar shell landed out on the apron where many American and South Vietnamese aircraft, both fighters and transports, were parked. An F-4 Phantom fighter bomber was hit and exploded as more mortar shells landed around the parked aircraft. Dozens of American and ARVN troops ran out to meet the invaders and a huge firefight developed again, I devoutly hoped that Lan and Nhu had got clear.

A Willys jeep came hurtling towards us, a colonel of the military police jumped out with his aide, a captain.

"Mr Hoffman, I'm Colonel Rathbone, how many of your men here are pilots, we need you to help out?"

"Three of us, Colonel, how can we assist?"

"Our pilots are off base, some of them anyway, we want you to get these aircraft in the air, now! Come quickly, Mr Hoffman, otherwise there won't be any aircraft to get off."

"Colonel, what's happening, have the North Vietnamese invaded?"

I said it with half a smile, but his look was serious. "It may be, it just may be. They're everywhere, all over Saigon, even in the embassy."

Helene, my wife, with our daughter. My God, I'd no idea it was this bad. Would Lan and Nhu even get through?

"Colonel, I need to get to Cholon, my wife is..."

"The base is closed, Mr Hoffman, all of Saigon is under military command, maybe the whole of South Vietnam. No one leaves the base and everyone inside is under the direct orders of the military. You either fly out or end up in one of my cells, Sir, which is it?"

I looked at his determined expression, there was no room for manoeuvre. His hand was on his holstered pistol and his driver had an M-16 held ready for use, though not yet pointed at us. The message was clear, we were in the middle of a military base, their military base and we had better play along.

"Which aircraft, Colonel?"

The atmosphere relaxed. "Are you three cleared for C-130s?"

It was a four-motor cargo aircraft, radically different to our DC-4s but still, it had four engines and wings. I nodded. "That's not a problem."

"Very well, climb aboard my jeep, the driver'll take you across to the

ramp, the ground crews are checking them out now."

"Where are we headed?" Paul asked him.

The Colonel pointed his finger straight up. "There. When you're airborne you'll get instructions from the tower."

We crammed into the jeep and the driver, a corporal, shot over the bumpy grass, across the tarmac and to the ramp where dozens of aircraft were frantically being prepared for flight. As we clambered out of the vehicle two F-4 Phantoms shot into the air and a Lockheed C-141 Starlifter taxied past to begin its lumbering take-off run. Powered by four jet engines, or more correctly turbofans, the Starlifter was the intended replacement for the C-130, bigger and faster. As we watched, the four giant engines screamed as the pilot increased power to maximum and then it climbed sedately into the air. In front of us were several C-130s, a harassed air force officer directed us towards three of them. Each had two MPs stood at the foot of the boarding ladder and an NCO waiting at the top. The officer shouted at the MPs and we were each allowed to board one of the aircraft. As I went up the stairs, the MPs turned and followed me up. We all ducked as another salvo of mortar shells hit the far side of the ramp, thankfully there was no evidence of any aircraft being hit.

"Sir, if you wouldn't mind, we'd like to get airborne."

I smiled at the non-com in the aircraft doorway.

"Jurgen Hoffman, pleased to meet you, Sergeant, believe me, I want to get off the ground as quickly as possible."

As I walked into the cabin the MPs followed. I looked at them, surprised that they had come aboard. The sergeant noticed my expression.

"General's orders, Sir. Every aircraft being flown by a civilian has to have the MPs on board.

I shrugged. "Whatever, but cut out the Sir, it's Jurgen."

He put out his hand. "Vince Robertson, Master Sergeant, I'm the ground engineer in charge of this aircraft."

I shook his hand and nodded at the MPs. "Gentlemen, if you'd care to strap in I'll get us in the air."

They stared straight back at me, ignoring me. One of them had a hooked nose, the classic Semitic feature, obviously a Jew. The German name would be like red rag to a bull to him, I'd encountered it countless times since 1945.

"As you wish. Sergeant, close the door and we'll get airborne."

The Master Sergeant closed and secured the door while I made my way

into the cockpit. As I was familiarising myself with the controls he came and sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"We'll cut the checks short, just get the engines cranked up, Vince. If we do the full pre-flight we'll still be sitting here when a mortar shell lands in this spot."

"I hear you," he replied, reaching forward to press the engine start buttons. One by one the engines fluttered into life. As soon as all four were running, I radioed the tower.

"Just to let you know, Sir, the cabin pressurisation on this bird is not working at present. I was looking at it when the shit hit the fan."

I nodded and clicked on the radio. "This is air force C-130 on emergency take off, am I cleared to taxi?"

There was a delay of less than two seconds. "Air force C-130, you're cleared for immediate taxi and take off, wind South Easterly fifteen knots, you're second in line, watch for another C-130 emergency take off in front of you. Call us when you're at cruising altitude."

"Acknowledged."

I nodded at Vince, he released the brakes and we started to roll forwards. Ahead of us a C-130 was already turning onto the runway, Ritter von Schacht, of course, ever the fighter pilot, he had to show off his superior flying skills. He roared along the runway and took off half way along. I turned onto the main runway, Vince pushed all four throttles forward to maximum and we picked up speed. A mortar shell hit nearby, Ritter's aircraft had alerted the enemy and now they were making us a target. We bumped and lurched as we hit some of the debris from the mortar strikes, Vince called off the speed and within seconds we had rotated off the tarmac and were climbing steeply.

I levelled out at five thousand feet, Ritter's aircraft was ahead of me and I was relieved to see Paul slightly behind and to port. At almost a mile in the sky, the chaos in Saigon was clearer and it was much, much worse than anyone had so far anticipated. The whole city had patches of smoke drifting across from lots of fires, many buildings and vehicles were ablaze and occasional explosions, jets of flame and smoke leaping into the air made it clear that the battle was still very much in progress. For this was a battle, there was no longer any doubt of that. We were used to varying degrees of guerrilla assault, but now it looked as if the communists were mounting a major effort to take Saigon. It was astonishing and certainly very daring. I

couldn't help but wonder what was behind their thinking. American and ARVN troop levels in Saigon were enormous and the resources they could call upon vast, more than enough to defeat any attack from the communists, whether Viet Cong or PAVN, the North Vietnamese Army. Then my heart sank as I recognised the area of Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon, where Helene and I had our home with our daughter Sophie. It looked as if the worst of the action was taking place around Cholon and it took all of my resolution not to turn the aircraft around and head back to Tan Son Nhat. Just then the tower came on the radio.

"C-130-6452, vector North-east and set course for Da Nang, copy."

They were sending us hundreds of miles from Saigon, but in the middle of a battle there was no room to argue.

"Tan Son Nhat tower, this is C-130-6452, set course for Da Nang, copy."

I heard Ritter's and Paul's aircraft called in succession, all routed to Da Nang.

"Vince, are you cleared to fly the C-130?"

The Master Sergeant shook his head. "Only for taxiing on the ground, Sir, I mean Jurgen."

"Very well. I want to check everything out in the cabin, make sure that everything is secure. We took off in something of a hurry, best not to chance anything breaking loose."

"I copy that, Sir," he replied.

"It's Jurgen, Vince, not Sir."

"Jurgen, right."

"I'll set the autopilot, just keep an eye on everything and give me a shout if any problem crops up."

I leaned forward and made sure that the autopilot was set for the correct course, altitude and speed and unstrapped. Then I walked through to the cabin. The two MPs were sat in the jump seats behind the bulkhead, the older one gave me a hard stare as I walked past. "Aren't you supposed to be flying the plane?" he snapped at me.

"Autopilot, Sergeant, Vince will call out if anything needs my attention." I smiled reassuringly.

"What the hell are you doing back here, you're checking on us aren't you?" he continued angrily.

I explained about making sure that everything was secure because of the

hurried takeoff.

"There's no need for that, we can take care of it."

"Thank you, but as pilot in command I have the responsibility to check it out myself."

He looked away as I walked on down the cabin making the checks, all the way to the back of the aircraft. When I turned to go back to the cockpit he was behind me.

"Can I help you, Sergeant?"

His face was furious, he'd worked himself into a rage.

"Mister, I swore I'd never share space with a Nazi. If you weren't flying this aircraft I'd like to break every bone in your body."

"Well that's a pity for you, I am flying the aircraft and I'm not a Nazi."

"Word is you were an SS officer during the war."

"Yes, that's true. A fighting soldier, Sergeant, but not a Nazi." I couldn't resist adding, "And neither was I a policeman, I was a front line soldier."

The insult rocked him, if we weren't in the air I swear he would have attacked me. Instead, he nodded and gave me a cold smile.

"This isn't over, Hoffman. I'll be looking for you so you'd better watch your back."

"I assume this is because of what the Germans did to the Jews, yes? You are Jewish?"

"Oh yes, I'm a Jew, my friend. Your people murdered my family, my father, mother, uncles, sister, everyone. My aunt managed to get me out before we were taken by your Gestapo thugs, but the rest of my family were slaughtered."

"I'm sorry for your family, Sergeant, but I repeat I am not and never was a Nazi and I did not murder any Jews, least of all your family."

"I couldn't give a flying fuck what you did in the war, Hoffman. You were a Nazi then and you're a Nazi now. I'd be happy to see you all rounded up and executed."

I smiled coldly. "You mean a final solution, something like that?"

"Yeah, I..." he stopped as he realised what he'd said. "Fuck you and all of your kind, just stay out of my way, Hoffman."

He stalked away and I finished my check of the cabin. I was unconcerned, he wasn't the first Jew to blame me for Hitler's Final Solution, and no doubt wouldn't be the last. Besides, I sympathised with him, I knew

I'd feel the same way. But I had an aircraft to fly, so I started back towards the cockpit. That was when we were hit, several rounds came straight through the cabin from underneath and exited through the cabin roof. Simultaneously the aircraft lurched heavily to starboard. I knew what had happened, we'd heard reports of the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese masters bringing anti-aircraft artillery south. ZPU-4s had been spotted on several occasions, a towed, quadruple-barrelled anti-aircraft gun based on the Soviet KPV 14.5 mm machine gun. At twenty thousand feet we were still within range of the weapon. As soon as the first rounds hit the cabin the Master Sergeant had instinctively pulled up on the stick to gain height, disconnecting the autopilot and losing control of the aircraft. I had seconds to get back to the cockpit before we went into a fatal spin. The nose had gone up, I had to claw my way back to get to the controls, a hard, uphill struggle. The two MPs were clinging to the cargo netting, their faces white and terrified. I ignored them, neither was apparently hit and I pulled myself up to the cockpit door, in seconds the nose would tip us over into the spin. I finally got into the cockpit and pulled myself into my seat, Vince Robertson looked as white as the two MPs.

"Thank Christ, Jurgen, I thought you'd been hit."

"Not this time." I strapped myself in, took hold of the column and put my feet on the rudder pedals. Then I pulled on my oxygen mask, the air was very thin at this altitude without cabin pressurisation. "Ok, Vince, I'll take it from here."

As I spoke, the nose started to tip over, the starboard wing went down and we were about to go out of control. I stamped on the rudder to push us to port and banked us over, the aircraft corrected and I throttled up to full, putting us back into the climb. Another burst hit the cabin and the whole aircraft shook, but we were flying away and climbing now, nearly out of trouble.

"Vince, would you check the cabin, see if there is any damage. You'd better take a portable oxygen mask with you and make sure the MPs have their own masks on."

"You got it, Jurgen." He got up and walked back down the aircraft, holding on as he went, we were climbing and the fuselage was at a steep angle. I took her all the way up to thirty thousand feet, our maximum altitude and no more anti aircraft fire came our way, we had cleared the height at which the ZPU-4s could target us. The Sergeant came back into the cockpit.

“Apart from the holes in the fuselage we’re all clear, nobody’s hurt.”

“Thanks, Vince. We’ll stay at this height all the way, we’ve no way of knowing how many of those anti-aircraft guns they’ve got on the ground, better safe than sorry.”

He nodded and we flew on towards Da Nang. While things were quiet, I took the opportunity to let Vince take the controls and manoeuvre the aircraft.

“You never know when you might find yourself alone on the flight deck during an emergency, do you?”

He smiled and concentrated on piloting the large aircraft. The Lockheed C-130 was a four-engine turboprop powered aeroplane, not the simplest to learn to fly, but when you knew how she did fly beautifully. I left him to it and studied some of the operations manuals for the aircraft. About fifty miles out from Da Nang the MPs came into the cockpit, looked around and went out. God only knew what they wanted, maybe they thought I had Vo Nguyen Giap stashed in the navigator’s seat. But we followed the navigational beacon all the way until we were in range and I called the tower.

“Roger, 6452, we have you on radar. There’s another C-130 ten miles ahead of you, just follow him straight in.”

I acknowledged. It was Ritter, of course, keeping up the lead. We followed the beacon all the way and got final clearance to land, as we were descending I saw two things. Firstly, Ritter was taxiing to the apron, secondly, there were a series of firefights going on just outside the base. We landed without drawing any of the enemy fire and I taxied to the ramp and parked the aircraft close to Ritter’s. Vince shut down the engines and I filled in the log, and then went to leave the plane. The MP corporal gave me a nod and shook my hand.

“Thanks for getting us here safely, Sir. Name’s Joe Reilly.”

“You’re welcome, Joe.”

I looked at the Jewish Sergeant, but his face was cold. I turned away and went down the ladder and walked across to where Ritter was chatting with a member of the USAF ground crew.

“Any problems, Jurgen?”

“A few bullet holes, nothing that can’t be fixed.”

He looked concerned and glanced at the aircraft, there were a dozen or more holes visible from where we stood. He grinned. “They’ll be cross you didn’t get her here in one piece, you know.”

I was about to reply when there was a whistling sound, one we knew all too well.

"Mortar," I shouted, "take cover!"

We lay pressed to the concrete of the ramp as the shell exploded in the grass at the side of the runway. They were aiming to prevent aircraft landing and when I looked up my stomach felt sick, Paul's C-130 was on final approach. My gaze shifted back to the runway to check it and I saw movement. I kept a folding telescope in my pocket, now I extended it and scanned the side of the runway. Midway between the barbed wire and the tarmac a heavily camouflaged man was standing up, then he became clearer, a rocket launcher was held in this hand. Next to him knelt another man, also camouflaged, clutching a spare rocket. It was difficult to make out exactly what weapon they carried because of the camouflage, but their intention was obvious, to destroy the C-130 as it landed, probably when it had slowed to taxi to the ramp. I sprinted to my C-130, ignoring the shouted questions from the MPs. Up the ladder and into the cockpit, I grabbed the microphone and called Paul on the guard frequency.

"Paul Schuster, C-130 about to land at Da Nang, abort the landing, I say again, abort!"

After a second's delay Schuster's voice came on the radio, calm and unflappable as ever. As he spoke, his aircraft's nose went up, the engine noise changed to a roar and he shot up into the sky.

"Copy that, what's the problem, Jurgen?"

"Some kind of missile team waiting for you, my friend. Can you circle until we've dealt with them?"

Another hesitation, then, "That's a negative, my friend. We got hit by anti-aircraft fire, one of the MPs is bleeding badly, if he doesn't get medical attention fast he won't last. I'll go around once, if you can't deal with him by then I'll have to chance it or the soldier dies, he lost a lot of blood."

"We'll do our best, Paul," I said heavily.

As I turned to rush out of the cockpit, the two MPs were standing in the doorway.

"What's up, Hoffman?" Cohen asked suspiciously.

I elbowed him aside and ran for the ladder and vaulted down to the ground. They ran behind me as I explained. "If we don't get this VC, the aircraft will be destroyed when it lands."

There was a Willys jeep parked nearby and I headed for it, calling for

Ritter.

"Hoffman, it's not our problem, we should call the MACV HQ or the tower and get them to deal with it."

I answered him on the run and explained about the wounded MP. "Paul's going to land regardless, Sergeant. Don't you think that MACV has its hands full with the action going on around here, they won't respond quickly enough?"

We reached the jeep and I climbed into the driver's seat, Ritter sat beside me. We both had sidearms, it would have to be enough. But the M16s of the MPs would be better.

"Are you guys coming or waiting here?" I shouted at them. I said it with a biting edge of contempt, maybe mixed with a good helping of arrogance that we Germans are supposedly famous for. It was enough. They climbed into the back of the vehicle and I shot across the airfield straight towards the VC missile team.

They were obviously concentrating on watching for the aircraft that was now making its second approach. We got within about a hundred and fifty yards of them before I saw a face distinctly turn towards us. I kept the pedal pressed to the floor, the second VC dropped his spare rocket and picked up an assault rifle, an AK47.

"For God's sake shoot the bastards," I shouted at the MPs in the back.

I veered over to the left to give them a clear shot from the side of the jeep. They opened up and their rifles spat bullets towards the missile team, the slower, lower pitched burst from the AK47 whistled over our heads. He was firing from the ground, the MPs were trying to sight from a bucking, rocking jeep.

"Keep firing, I'm going straight for them."

I swung the wheel over again and drove at them, trying to ignore the bullets that whistled around us. The MPs kept up a valiant rate of fire which must have spoiled the enemy's aim, I saw Ritter draw his automatic, stand up gripping the windshield and start shooting. Above us, Paul was on final approach again, in seconds he would be on the tarmac. A burst of AK47 rounds whistled just over our heads, we could see both of them clearly now. The missileer seemed to waver between firing his missile at our jeep and sighting on the C-130 whose wheels were just feet above the runway. The rifleman stopped firing and snapped another clip into his gun then brought it up to fire. It must have been just as he was about to pull the trigger, we were

no more than twenty yards away when our bullets hit him, spinning him around and to the ground. The man with the missile had swung back to the aircraft, now he changed his mind again and swung back to us. Too late, repeated short bursts from the M16s and single shots from Ritter's automatic stitched across him and he fell, then his missile ignited. We would never know why, had he fired at that instant, had one of our rounds stuck the explosive warhead, but there was a dramatic explosion that struck our jeep with a powerful, hot blast. The steering wheel bucked and then the whole vehicle tipped completely over, throwing us out onto the ground. Thankfully no one was trapped underneath.

As I shook my head to clear it, the explosion still ringing in my ears, I saw Paul's aircraft slowing down after touchdown. Thank God. I looked around, Ritter was getting up, the survivor of countless emergency touchdowns and real crashes, he just shook himself and got to his feet. Both MPs were struggling to their feet too.

"Anyone hurt?" I asked. They all shook their heads.

"A close one, Jurgen," Ritter smiled.

I nodded. A jeep and a lorry were headed for us, laden with troops to investigate. The jeep screeched to a halt and the officer leapt out of the passenger seat.

"What the hell's going on here?" he snarled.

"I believe it's called war, Captain," I replied.

He started barking orders to his sergeant to secure the area, then walked over to check the remains of the VCs, not that there was much left to inspect.

"Are there any more in the immediate area?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not that I'm aware of, I think it was just those two that infiltrated."

"Right. A good job, well done, you nuked the fuckers."

"I think it's called an own goal, Captain, their rocket exploded."

He looked mystified, obviously European football jargon had not reached him.

"I'm going to check on the aircraft that just landed," I continued. "If you don't mind, they've got at least one casualty and it's a friend of mine flying it. I'll be in MACV if you want a fuller report."

"Yeah, I guess that would be fine. Talk to you later."

We drove back to the ramp and up to Paul's aircraft. He had already called the tower and an ambulance was at the rear, the ramp was lowering

ready to take off the casualty. As the ramp touched the ground the medics ran on board and emerged in minutes with a wounded man on a gurney. Paul followed them and nodded to me and Ritter.

"A bit of excitement on this flight, Jurgen. Ritter, any problems?"

"No, I got through without our Viet friends punching holes in my fuselage. Any really serious damage to your aircraft, Paul?"

"No, just ventilation holes and a large bloodstain. He took a bullet through the leg, it exited the other side so there is no lead left inside him but it severed an artery. The other MP put a tourniquet on him to stop the blood loss, if he gets some blood quickly I hope he'll recover."

"That's good. I suggest we report to MACV and tell them that their aircraft are largely intact, then I want to see about getting back to Saigon, I must check on Helene and Sophie."

We walked across the flightline and into the HQ building. The MPs on the door had seen us coming from the aircraft and allowed us in. I spoke to one of the MPs behind the desk.

"Corporal, is there a telephone here I can use, if the lines are working I need to check on my family in Saigon?"

"For sure, I'll get an outside line connected to the telephone over there, station two."

I thanked him and went over to a line of telephones. It took a few minutes but eventually the phone in our bungalow was picked up, I heard the familiar voice of Lan, our office manager.

"Jurgen, it's good to hear from you."

"You too, Lan. How are Helene and Sophie?

There was a hesitation, the line crackled, I heard the word Viet Cong.

"What, what was that?"

"Sophie is ok, Jurgen, she's here now."

"Helene, where is she, is she wounded?"

"She was taken, Jurgen, kidnapped. She was tending a Viet Cong officer, he was wounded during the fighting. They pulled out and took her with them to look after him. I'm sorry."

"I'll get back to Saigon as soon as I can, Lan, take care of Sophie."

"Of course. Where are you, Jurgen?"

She didn't know, I remembered it had all happened so quickly. "Da Nang."

I heard her catch her breath. "But isn't the insurgency there as well, I

thought they were attacking everywhere."

I wondered where she'd heard that. "There are problems here, but it's not too bad. I'll be back as quickly as I can. Goodbye, Lan."

I hung up the phone. Ritter and Paul had caught the gist of the conversation.

"Any ideas on how we get back?" Paul asked.

"Any way we can, if all aircraft are grounded we'll need to hire a car."

Just then there was a flurry of activity and a booming voice rang out.

"What the hell's going on here, who are these people in my headquarters?"

A red-faced Brigadier-General was staring at us, hands on hips, surrounded by his staff. His name tab said Wilkes. A captain ran across to him. "These are the pilots that ferried the C-130s out of Tan Son Nhat, Sir, General Westmoreland's orders."

His eyes narrowed, he thought for a few moments. "Yeah, ok then, out of the frying pan into the fire. We might need those birds moved again so keep yourselves available to move on a moment's notice. Captain Vincent, make sure they get a hot meal and get someone out to refuel those C-130s."

"General," I interrupted, "I have to get back to Saigon, my wife and child are in trouble. If necessary we'll hire a car unless you have transport heading that way."

His gaze was cold. "Didn't you hear me? I'm sorry about your family, Mister, but I need you all here."

I went to argue, but he overrode me. "That's final! Captain, make sure they're confined to base and guarded. You're under military orders for the duration of the emergency, all of you. That's all."

He stalked off with his entourage fluttering after him like the train of an enormous cloak. Ritter and Paul looked at me with worried expressions. We were trapped, locked into a military base on a war footing, hundreds of miles from Saigon and my wife was missing, kidnapped by the Viet Cong.

"Jurgen, we'll sort this out," Ritter said. "Let's keep cool and keep our eyes open for a chance to leave. We'll get back to your family as soon as humanly possible."

I looked out of the window. On the flightline were dozens of aircraft, two F4s were taxiing, others were being serviced, refuelled and re-armed, a couple of Galaxies, half a dozen C-130s were parked. Tucked away in a corner was a pair of Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs. They may as well have been

locked in a vault, we had no chance of using one to return to Saigon. We were virtual prisoners of the U.S. military.

* * *

*‘Vietnam presumably taught us that the United States could not serve as the world's policeman; it should also have taught us the dangers of trying to be the world's midwife to democracy when the birth is scheduled to take place under conditions of guerrilla war’.*

*Henry Kissinger*

Chung Van Minh, District Commissar, Da Nang, glanced up at the Captain, Phan Tan Dung. They were in the command bunker which lay approximately two thousand yards from the MACV headquarters building and fifty feet below ground. Originally dug during the French occupation of Vietnam, the bunker had been substantially extended to include an infirmary, a machine shop and various administrative offices, including this one. Effectively, Minh was in command, he was the direct link between the Supreme Soviet of the Viet Cong which was then subordinate to Hanoi, nominally under the command of Nguyen Vo Giap since the failing health of their leader Ho Chi Minh.

“The attack is going well, Dung?” he asked icily.

He knew that it was not, their early attacks had in fact failed badly, possibly due to an intelligence failure following the capture days before the offensive was launched of one of their senior officers. But he wasn’t looking for excuses, according to Comrade Giap, this offensive would see an uprising that would sweep the Saigon regime from power and send their American lackeys into the sea. And of course, the commanders that were at the forefront of the offensive would see themselves receive their just rewards for their successes, and Minh intended that he would be one of them.

“There have been problems, Commissar,” Dung stammered.

In truth, there had been more than problems. The ARVN forces and their American allies had literally been waiting for them and they had fallen into an ambush that had caused the loss of more than a third of Dung’s force. More than three hundred of his men were killed and wounded in the initial assaults, the rest had fallen back to wait for new orders.

“I am not interested in your problems, Captain Dung. Have you

finalised plans for the assault on the airbase?"

Dung gulped. Both men knew that the moment they attacked the Americans would unleash their fearsome airpower, using the aircraft stationed at the base as well as reinforcements that they could call in from aircraft carriers stationed offshore.

"Commissar, the base is huge and so many of my men have been killed and wounded already. Could you not send for reinforcements?"

Minh considered for a few moments. He knew that the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies, the PAVN, the People's Army, were overstretched. Would they be likely to send reinforcements? Probably not, especially since so many of their troops were positioned around the American forward base at Khe Sanh. No, there would be no reinforcements, Dung would have to succeed no matter how many of his half-trained useless troops he lost. He could lose them all if it put Minh where he was going. Which was to the top. The very top, and this offensive would put him there if Dung played his part.

"Hanoi would be disappointed if they thought that their faith in you was in error, Comrade Dung."

He was careful to use the term 'comrade' to appeal to his party loyalty. That's what was needed now, party fanaticism triumphing over military caution.

"Of course, Commissar," Dung said eagerly. But he was no fool, what choice did he have, he understood what was being demanded of him and was enough of a realist to agree to anything, his troops would just have to manage. Even as he spoke he was working out how far away he could stay from the main action and yet save face.

"You will continue the mortar bombardment through the night, Comrade Dung. The more aircraft you can damage, the less there will be to launch attacks against your men when they attack at first light, yes?"

"Very well, Commissar."

"I won't keep you from your preparations, Captain, you must have much to do."

"Yes, Sir."

The Captain stopped himself from saluting the Commissar and left the underground room. Minh looked back at the pile of paperwork on his desk and continued working through it. He caught sight of a map and looked at it for the thousandth time. Saigon, yes, there was a prize worth fighting for.

Governor of Saigon, not too ambitious to alarm the leaders in Hanoi, yet a seat of wealth and power to the man who was awarded that illustrious post. What was needed was for that fool Dung to achieve some worthwhile victories over the next few days. Perhaps some of the men needed some encouragement. He remembered a lesson he had learned in school about the Roman legions that had conquered Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. He wrote a careful order on a new sheet of paper, signed it and called for a messenger. The man rushed in and bowed.

"Take this to Captain Dung, he is to acknowledge receipt. Hurry!"

"Yes, Commissar."

The man took the note and rushed away. Minh wondered at Dung's reaction to the order, any units failing to take their objective tomorrow would be forced to undergo decimation, the process whereby every tenth man was executed, the victims to be chosen by their comrades. That should put some spirit into their attacks, he smiled inwardly. He bent back to his papers and began checking the equipment manifests returned by some of his outlying units. There was no time to rest during a war.

# CHAPTER 2

*'Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America--not on the battlefields of Vietnam.'*

*Marshall McLuhan*

We spent the next twenty-four hours trapped in Da Nang. I was distraught about Helene and Sophie, at one point Ritter and Paul physically restrained me from stealing a car and driving back all the way to Saigon. They pointed out, rightly, that I wouldn't be any help to anyone from inside a military stockade. Ritter wanted to visit China Beach, he'd never seen it despite his long service in Vietnam and we got permission from MACV to go there with an escort of MPs, including my Jewish tormentor Master Sergeant Aaron Cohen. For a couple of hours we were able to forget the war, at least in part, and we stripped off and swum in the sea while our guards watched us

carefully. Perhaps they thought we were about to escape by swimming away, I wasn't sure. When we were a hundred yards offshore we heard the sound of rifle fire and shots hit the water twenty or thirty yards away. We whirled around to see where it was coming from, but there was no attack. The MPs had decided to get in some target practice on a large baulk of timber that was drifting nearby. A couple of shots missed badly and came near but we ignored them, it was a stupid macho game, no doubt instigated by Cohen. When we got back to shore he was smirking and I said nothing about his silly little game. I'd like to have told him he would have made the ideal enemy soldier, childish, immature and unstable, an easy target for a trained foe, but I let it be.

We got back to the airfield with the familiar roar of aircraft taking off and landing, the long flightlines of USAF fighters, the bulky shapes of cargo aircraft hastily being loaded and unloaded, the whole place was in chaos. ARVN soldiers and American marines patrolled constantly on foot and in jeeps and armoured personnel carriers. Huey troop carrying helicopters constantly took off and headed for the nearby hills, there were also half a dozen of the new Cobra attack helicopters mounting operations. It was an impressive display of military might and gave us the impression that any increase in Viet Cong activity would be quickly suppressed.

But the communists were not about to give up. Sporadic mortar fire peppered the airbase throughout the rest of the day causing small numbers of casualties in both people and equipment. Several aircraft lay at drunken angles pushed to the edges of the tarmac to keep the runway clear. The tarmac itself was patched where shells had struck, making it unsafe for flight operations until the combat engineers hurried out to repair it. Strike operations were conducted by F4 Phantoms of the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing constantly hunting out, and harassing the enemy wherever they could be found. Which was not very often. The three of us, with long and bitter experience of Viet Minh and Viet Cong tactics, knew they were probably hiding in tunnels which they had started to dig during the French war in Indochina. It was a difficult tactic to counter, they would suddenly pop up and shoot, then disappear like ghosts. Yet their tactics in Saigon had been different, I recalled, they had conducted a series of frontal attacks, they'd also attacked here. Would they chance it again, against a heavily fortified and well equipped airbase now fully alerted? I doubted it, but in view of the way things were in Saigon, I hoped the military were allowing for the possibility.

We were made welcome in the officers' mess and drank soft drinks and chatted through the evening, alcohol was not permitted due to the risk of a VC attack, we could be required to make an emergency take-off, but everything was quiet. We bunked down in a spare room with some mattresses they brought in and put on the floor. I slept badly, worrying about my family in Saigon. Would Helene be alive? Of course she would, trained doctors were in short supply in the ranks of the Viet Cong and she would be valued and well guarded. Probably! But would they ever let her go? They'd have to, I'd decided that I would make them let her go, whatever it took. Then in the early dawn the enemy brought the war to a new crescendo with an all out frontal attack.

Like many large scale attacks it all happened all at once, the sound of explosions, the crackle of small arms fire, lights suddenly blazing bright, sirens sounding, voices shouting. We were scrambling to get dressed when the door was flung open and a wild-eyed private stood there.

"You're to take cover in the bunker and stand by to take off on the General's order."

"Thank you, Private," I replied. He rushed away and I turned to my companions.

"It looks like the communists are interrupting our breakfast, my friends."

They both laughed. "Not for the first time," Paul said.

"What wouldn't I give for the chance to fly off one of those F4s?" Ritter said. "Do you think they may be short of fighter pilots?"

Paul and I laughed. There weren't many certainties in this world, but one was that no way would our friend ever be allowed near one of their advanced supersonic fighter aircraft. We finished dressing and went out to find what was required of us. General Wilkes was snapping out orders and men were running to and fro. The flightline was a hive of activity as fighter aircraft spooled up and roared off the runway. Captain Vincent spotted us and came over to speak.

"When the flightline is clear we want you to get those C-130s off the ground, would you stand by to move quickly?"

"We're ready, Captain," Ritter said, "Just give the word."

"Good. The ground crews are out pre-flighting them right now, they're putting on fuel too."

"You mean they weren't refuelled yesterday when we came in?" he

asked the officer incredulously.

"Er, no, they weren't, it was overlooked."

None of us said a word, but he could see in our faces how unimpressed we were with such a singular example of military sloppiness. We left the building and ran across to the ramp where the C-130s were being prepared. The runway was alive with activity, dozens of aircraft queued to take off. Around the perimeter a number of attacks were in progress, the inevitable mortar shells landed around us, rifle and machine gun fire spat across the airfield and the clatter of helicopter rotors added to the din. Eight Hueys took off, laden with troops, two more Hueys were equipped as gunships and they flew on the flanks of the formation. Almost at once enemy machine gun fire reached up to hit them, one of the Hueys shook as it was hit and it started to go down, trailing smoke. It landed hard, but the troops managed to scramble out largely unscathed. One of the gunships banked away to find the machine gun and seconds later we heard the sound of their minigun sending its enormous quantity of bullets down onto the enemy position. The machine gun stopped abruptly and the gunship rejoined the formation.

Four two and a half ton trucks roared through the gates, the famous 'deuce and a half' that had transported troops to and from the battlefield for many years in the service of the U.S. military. They were filled with troops of the First Marine Division that had hurried to shore to reinforce the base defences. Incredibly, after their long guerrilla campaign it seemed that the Viet Cong were mounting an all out attack. Giap, the North Vietnamese commander, was reported as being opposed to meeting the forces of the well-equipped ARVN with their formidable allies, the Americans of MACV. It now seemed he had had a change of heart, what we were all seeing was a major assault, not just a local action as had been initially supposed in Saigon. General Westmoreland's entire strategy had been based around bringing the enemy into set-piece battles, I wondered would he be pleased with the result now that it has actually happened.

While we sheltered in a slit trench covered with sandbags and a corrugated iron roof we watched the battle rage around us. We saw our first NVA troops when the regulars of the North Vietnamese Army launched a direct attack on the marine helicopter pad nearby and the whole area exploded in sheets of fire. The marines headed to reinforce the helipad defenders and the firefight spread. Nearer to where we sheltered, a furious action started when a force of more NVA regulars stormed the wire and

broke through onto the base. The casualties they took were enormous. The last time I had seen that kind of callous disregard for the lives of troops was on the Eastern Front. I wondered if these troops had a similar incentive to fight, the commissars waiting behind the lines to shoot them if they faltered or refused to press the attack.

They were being slaughtered by the massed machine gun fire of M60s, truck mounted Quad-50 M2 .50 cal. machine guns, hundreds of M16s being fired on full automatic by the U.S. and ARVN defenders, a few with grenade launchers for when the enemy came near enough and soon an infantry team opened up with their mortars, increasing the devastation.

The communist attacks eventually began to peter out, they must have suffered fifty percent casualties in their first wave of attacks if not more. The infantry and marines moved to secure the base and apart from the endless activity on the flightline, everything went quiet. We climbed out of the trench and walked over to inspect the C-130s we had ferried to Da Nang, I suppose we felt we had a certain interest in their welfare after going to so much trouble to get them here.

"I wonder if they'll want us to fly them back," Paul said.

He spoke for all of us, if the military decided that they were more at risk in Da Nang than at Tan Son Nhat, maybe they would ask us to return them. On the other hand, of course, they could ask us to fly them somewhere else that they deemed safe. Wherever that may be, it seemed that the whole of South Vietnam was a battlefield. All I needed was to get back to Saigon, to my daughter Sophie and to start the hunt for Helene. We walked back to the headquarters building which was seething with activity, soldiers running to and fro, radios crackling, telephones ringing and over it all, the bellow of orders being given from the senior officers. We found Captain Vincent and I asked him about getting back to Saigon. He looked harried, pale and shaken by the sudden onslaught.

He shook his head. "I'm not certain the General will agree to letting you go, gentlemen. Pilots are an even more precious commodity right now, especially if we need to evacuate the aircraft in a hurry, but I'll do what I can."

He went away and we found a coffee machine and helped ourselves.

"What are you planning to do?" Ritter asked me.

I knew exactly what he meant. We had all been through endless battles during the Eastern Front in Russia, the Indochina war and now Vietnam. One

way or the other I would get back to Saigon, with or without the General's permission, and we all knew it.

"I'll give them until midday, after that, all bets are off and I'm getting out of here and back to Saigon. If necessary I'll get hold of a car."

They both nodded. 'If necessary' covered a multitude of options, including theft and worse.

"Enough of the 'I' Jurgen, we're all in this together. If one goes, we all go," Paul said.

"For sure," Ritter said vehemently. "We're like the Three Musketeers," he grinned. "All for one and one for all."

I thanked them. They were good comrades to have with you in a fix, veterans of countless actions against the communists on countless battlefields. Just then there was a spurt of activity and General Wilkes stormed into the office, complete with helmet, M16 and an anxious entourage similarly attired for war.

"Captain Vincent has informed me of your request to get back to Saigon. I've received orders to hold the C-130s here, we stand and fight at Da Nang, no more aircraft to be shuttled around the country so your services are no longer needed. I have a Lockheed C-141 Starlifter leaving this afternoon to make the trip back to Saigon with our casualties, you're welcome to have a seat."

My spirits lifted, at last the search for Helene could begin. "Thank you, General, that's much appreciated."

He nodded. "No problem, thanks for the help and I wish you luck with locating your wife. I gather she was kidnapped by the VC?"

"She's a doctor, she was tending a wounded Viet Cong officer in Cholon and they took her with them when they evacuated the area."

One of the aides, a Vietnamese ARVN liaison officer looked up sharply. "Excuse me, Sir, but if that is the case I would suggest that you consider looking in area of Cu Chi, that's where the VC often send their wounded, especially VIPs."

"Why Cu Chi?" I asked him sharply. "What's so special about that place?"

He shrugged. "ARVN intelligence reports suggest that increasing numbers of communists are infiltrating that area, many are hidden in tunnels although we have not had much luck in finding them. It's rumoured that they have an entire headquarters there with an underground hospital, I don't know.

It's just that we've had a lot of pointers towards Cu Chi, so I'd keep it in mind."

"Tunnels? You think they have some kind of underground complex in the area?"

"We're not sure, but probably, yes. It's only thirty miles from Saigon and we've had countless brushes with the VC, they always seem to disappear in that general area, no matter how thoroughly we search we can't locate their bases."

It wasn't news to me about the tunnels at Cu Chi. During the French occupation of Vietnam there were a great number of anecdotes and rumours about that area. Several missions had been mounted to seek out the VC in their underground lairs with no result. The U.S. military had conducted the Iron Triangle operation with a similar lack of success. I was slightly dubious about the ARVN officer's report about an extensive and well equipped complex there, but I thanked him and made a mental note to follow it up when we got back.

We managed to grab a lunch in the base PX, and then went out to board the Starlifter. There was a queue formed at the rear of the aircraft ready to climb the ramp into the huge cabin. Loading was similar to the C-130 but of course the aircraft was much larger and powered by four jet engines. It was much faster too, with a top speed in excess of five hundred and fifty miles an hour which would make short work of the trip to Saigon. The stretcher bearers went first, carrying their gurneys of wounded to be placed on the floor near the cockpit. We joined a throng of soldiers who boarded next, some walking wounded, their bandages and sticks evidence of the brief action at Da Nang. Last to load, rather ominously, were a dozen black, rubberised bags, all zipped closed. Body bags. We kept a little distance from them, as if to be near the dead would be a bad omen. The ramp closed with a whine of hydraulics and the engines started to spool up. We strapped in, each of us took one of the line of seats along each side of the fuselage as the aircraft began to taxi out to the runway. This being a military flight, there was of course no flight attendant to give us a safety talk and demonstration, there was just a scream of jet engines and the Lockheed surged along the runway and took to the air.

We droned on through the afternoon, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Mine were straightforward, first and foremost I had to locate Helene and re-unite her with Sophie. Then of course there was the other

problem, we were broke, the business had died when the Viet Cong shells struck. As if reading my thoughts, Paul spoke suddenly.

"We've got a lot to do when we get back. They hit us pretty hard."

Ritter laughed. "Hard, are you serious? They wiped us out, completely, totally, we're ruined. Everything destroyed, aircraft destroyed, hangar bombed to rubble, we've got nothing left."

"I think the Cessna was relatively undamaged," I said quietly. They both looked at me, astonished. Then all three of us burst out laughing, one four seat light aircraft, that was all that was left of our once thriving airline.

"We need to start again," Paul said quietly. "I'm not going to let it all go down the drain after so many years. We need to raise money and buy more aircraft, just one to begin with. Maybe we could do some temporary work flying for another airline."

The thought struck us all at once. Air America. They were recruiting and with our combat record we should be picked up straight away.

Air America was an American passenger and cargo airline established in 1950 and covertly owned and operated by the Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities Division. It supplied and supported United States covert operations in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. The airline flew civilians, diplomats, spies, refugees, commandos, sabotage teams, doctors, war casualties, drug enforcement officers, drugs, and even visiting VIPs all over Southeast Asia. Its cargoes on occasion, part of the CIA's support operations, involved logistical support for local tribes fighting the North Vietnamese forces. Forced draft urbanisation policies, such as the widespread application of Agent Orange to Vietnamese farmland created a disruption in local food production, so thousands of tons of food had to be flown in, including live chickens, pigs, and cattle. On top of the food drops, known as rice drops, came the logistical demands for the war itself, and Air America pilots flew thousands of flights transporting and air-dropping ammunition and weapons to friendly forces. Reportedly they were always on the lookout for pilots, especially those with combat experience and not inclined to ask too many questions or be overly enthusiastic about correct paperwork.

I was about to say that it would be impossible for me to commit to working full time for another airline until Helene was located, but then Paul pointed out that the reverse was true.

"Think about it, as an out of work civilian you'll find it next to impossible to get information to help find her. As a contractor for the CIA's

own airline, we'll be well placed to ask questions. It's always better working from the inside, my friend. As an outsider, you're nobody."

I thought about it, but I was already convinced. Making contacts inside the CIA could be the best, even the only hope of locating my wife. Once we had found her, I had no doubts about getting her back. We'd been on that kind of mission before and none of us had any qualms about doing it again. The trick was discovering where she was being held.

"You're right, it could be our way in."

I left Paul and Ritter talking enthusiastically about flying the multitude of different aircraft that Air America operated, many from Tan Son Nhat itself. Amongst them was the C-47, the Dakota which we used to operate, as well as our destroyed four engine Douglas CD-4s and the DC-6s which we were all cleared to fly. But it looked like being a long, slow hunt to locate her. I could only pray for better news when we reached Saigon.

During the journey the medics tended the wounded, working hard and rushing to administer pain-killing injections when one of them started groaning with the agony of their injuries. Sadly, what the Starlifter offered in terms of capacity and speed it definitely lacked in comfort, like most military transports it was Spartan in the extreme. One man literally screamed in agony, he was bleeding badly from wounds in his body, legs and arms, probably from a mortar shell. Around him the floor was literally awash with his blood which they seemed powerless to stop and eventually his screams stopped altogether. The medics quietly carried him to the back of the aircraft where he joined the rest of his fallen comrades, destined for a bitter return to the U.S.A and a family grief stricken and destroyed by the loss of their loved one. The cabin was silent, apart from the roar of the engines. All talking had stopped as everyone was left with their private thoughts. There but for the grace of God go I, or something like that. It had been the pure luck of the draw, a soldier in the wrong place at the wrong time, when a mortar shell struck at random. There was little conversation for the rest of the journey.

MP Sergeant Cohen was sitting further along in the cabin, on the opposite side from us. From time to time he shot me venomous glances, he'd obviously decided to take out the whole of his hate and resentment for the Nazis murder of the Jews on me. On a man who had no part in the affair. I still couldn't blame him, but he was becoming something of an irritant. Soon, we landed in Tan Son Nhat. The devastation was shocking, buildings wrecked, broken aircraft scattered around the field and smoke still billowing

up into the sky. It was a nightmare landscape. At one end of the airfield was our base of operations, the hangar was almost totally destroyed and our two DC-4s smashed beyond any hope of repair. We disembarked and began the long walk over to inspect the damage. Emile de Grasse and Joe Ryder had been working on one of the DC-4's, a hopeless attempt to salvage some of the parts for possible future use, I imagined. They came to meet us, clearly relieved that we had returned in one piece. Emile came and shook our hands.

"Hey, it's good to see you guys again, Joe and I were inspecting the wreckage, it's not good."

We walked towards the broken hangar. I laughed at Emile's choice of words.

"Not good is one way to put it, Emile. How about total and utter disaster, I think that sums it up a little better?"

He looked thoughtful. "Well, maybe, maybe not, we're not sure yet, me and Joe."

"What do you mean, not sure?"

"Look, guys, we've spent the time while you were away making a thorough inspection of the two DC-4s. We've gone through them completely, every component, every piece of metal and every spare part that survived in the hangar stores."

"So what are you saying, we can sell all of the spare parts and recoup some of our money?" Paul asked him curiously.

"No, I'm saying that we think we can scrape up enough parts to rebuild one of the DC-4s, to get it flying again."

"Emile, Joe, you guys are geniuses. What can we do to help?"

"Nothing. Just stay out of the way, we'll need a lot of time and maybe a few prayers, certainly a month."

Ritter and Paul were clapping them on the back. "Good work, we'll give you all the time you need. Look, I have to get out to Cholon and look in on Sophie and find out the details of what happened to Helene."

Paul nodded. "You get moving, Ritter and I are going over to the Air America building to see about some temporary work."

"Air America?" Emile looked up sharply. "You're planning on working for the CIA?"

"Just to get some cash in while we rebuild, Emile, this is strictly temporary."

He shrugged. "Just be careful, I've heard people say that they're even

worse than the Viet Cong."

We left them to get on with rebuilding the DC-4, it seemed an impossible task but Emile was one of the best in the business, if he said it could be done, it was probably true. I left Ritter and Paul and drove our old Land Cruiser into Cholon, thankfully the vehicle was untouched during the attacks. Wreckage lay strewn everywhere and it was quite obvious that the whole city had been a battleground. The battle still raged in Cholon.

I had to persuade an ARVN checkpoint to let me through, the whole area was still being fought over. Rifles cracked overhead, mortar shells dropped spasmodically and American tanks were moving around the outskirts.

"You shouldn't go in there," the ARVN captain said to me severely. Fortunately, I had met him a couple of times in the past and he knew I had legitimate business in Saigon. "The VC are still holding out in parts of Cholon, we're not exactly sure of their strength but they're coming out and hitting us where we least expect it."

"My family home is there, my daughter is in danger."

"Yes, I understand. I'll detail a couple of men to go with you and check out the route. Good luck, Jurgen."

I thanked him and two ARVN troopers climbed into the back of my car. I drove on, managing to avoid any brushes with the enemy and reached my bungalow. While the two men took up position outside I went towards the building. Nguyen Vo Lan opened the front door, her eyes widening in surprise. "Jurgen, I didn't expect you back. I'm so sorry about Helene."

"Thanks, Lan, bring me up to date on everything. Where's Sophie?"

"She's playing in the nursery."

"Is Nhu with her?"

She shook her head. "I sent Nhu into town to get supplies, she's due back shortly."

I walked through and found Sophie, she leapt into my arms and I hugged her tightly. Thank God that she at least was safe.

"When is Mama coming back, Jurgen?"

I laughed. I insisted she called me Jurgen, in spite of Helene's disapproval. Maybe it made me feel younger, but it was sure good hearing it from her today.

"Soon, my darling, soon. You carry on playing, I have to talk to Lan."

I left her and went into the lounge. My office manager looked different,

instead of her more formal outfit, the Vietnamese silk Ao-Dai dress, she was wearing black trousers, a black silk blouse and a red bandanna in her hair.

"You'd better be careful with what you wear at the moment, Lan, you look almost like a VC terrorist, although a lot prettier. Now tell me about Helene."

She was taken aback at first about my comments on her clothes, but she soon ignored it.

"On that first day, there was a great deal of fighting close by. Helene and Sophie were here with Nhu, I went out to find out what was happening and to look for someone in authority to tell us if we needed to evacuate. When I got back, the VC were here. They held us at gunpoint while Helene was forced to fix up a wounded VC officer. He seemed very high ranking, someone of importance. When they left, they insisted that Helene went with them to look after him. I tried to protest but they threatened to shoot me."

She was almost weeping with fear and misery. I gave her a few moments to recover and pressed her further.

"Did they say where they were taking her, any indication, or for how long they would have her?"

"Nothing, I'm so sorry."

We heard a vehicle pulling up outside, I assumed it would be the ARVN captain checking with the soldiers who were mounting guard.

"I need to get you out of Cholon, Lan. You can't stay here, not with a battle still raging. I'll find somewhere in the city, a hotel would be fine for a few days until I can rent somewhere that is safer."

She looked wary. "Look, I know there has been fighting here, but the city is not safe either, especially for a child as young as Sophie. I'd sooner stay here with her until it's all over."

I wondered what she knew that I didn't, there was certainly fighting in the city but not as persistent as here. I was about to insist they move when there was a loud banging on the door. Lan went to open it and was almost physically hurled back into the room by a squad of American MPs, four in all, followed by an MP Lieutenant. One of the MPs was Cohen, the Jew who had made himself so obnoxious on the journey to Da Nang.

"Jurgen Hoffman?" the officer asked. I nodded. "Yes, that's me."

"Mr Hoffman, I'm Lieutenant Withers. Under the military powers that are in force during the emergency I have orders to search this house, kindly stand aside while my men look around."

“I’ll go and play with Sophie,” Lan said.

I nodded. “Search the house, what the hell for?”

“We had a report that a Viet Cong unit was sheltering here, we need to check it out.”

I smiled coldly. “Lieutenant, while I was ferrying one of your military aircraft to Da Nang, a VC unit did occupy the house while one of their officers was wounded. They kidnapped my wife, who is a doctor, when they left. She is still missing, yet you come here now to search? Shouldn’t you be out looking for her?”

“Sorry, Sir, those are my orders. Men, make a start.”

Cohen led them off to ransack my home, smiling broadly at the misery that he was able to bring upon me and my home.

“I need to get my daughter first, she’s in the nursery.”

“Yeah, ok, bring her in here while my men are looking.”

I fetched Lan and Sophie and they sat and waited while we heard the soldiers doing their best to trash my home, Cohen’s orders, no doubt, but there was nothing I could do about it. Withers looked slightly startled at Lan’s rather militaristic way of dressing, I wished she’d worn something a little more feminine and less likely to make her look like a Viet Cong, but it was too late to worry about that. We heard a distinctive shout from upstairs and then the soldiers came stamping back down into the lounge, Cohen was triumphantly holding up a handful of leaflets. He handed one to the officer and gave one to me with a laugh.

“So that’s what you get up to in your spare time, eh, Hoffman?”

It was a cheaply copied single sheet of paper with a message in French and English, exhorting the population to rise up and hit back against their capitalist slave owners. The Republic of South Vietnam and their American allies, of course.

“This yours, Hoffman?” Withers asked coldly.

I laughed. “Do you not listen? I explained that a VC unit took over this house and kidnapped my wife, obviously they left those leaflets while they were here. My God, you’re wasting time, I need to find my wife.”

“We found them hidden, Lieutenant, didn’t look like they were left by accident, they were in a cupboard underneath a loose floorboard,” Cohen said.

He was almost gleeful, I wondered if he’d planted the leaflets himself. Probably not, the VC had been here, that was obviously where they had come

from.

“Look, the VC were here, that’s been made perfectly clear, if they left leaflets in the house that has nothing to do with me.”

I was getting exasperated with their plodding approach. What the hell were they doing, there was a war going on several hundred yards away and they were messing around with a few damned leaflets, undoubtedly left by the retreating VC. I had raised my voice to shout at them when the lieutenant stopped me dead.

“Mr Hoffman, I want you to come back with me for questioning, I feel that something is going on here and we need to get some answers. Sergeant, take him out.”

Cohen came forward grinning with one of his MPs, they took one arm each and dragged me towards the door.

“Lan, I’ll sort this out, look after Sophie for me,” I shouted desperately.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be safe,” she called back.

They dragged me into the jeep. “Not so nice being on the receiving end, is it?” Cohen smiled.

I ignored him, he was only trying to bait me. We drove to MACV headquarters and I was put in a cell. I had lost my airline, my wife, my home and my freedom all in a matter of days. I could honestly say it was the absolute low point of my life.

* * *

*‘It doesn't require any particular bravery to stand on the floor of the Senate and urge our boys in Vietnam to fight harder, and if this war mushrooms into a major conflict and a hundred thousand young Americans are killed, it won't be U. S. Senators who die. It will be American soldiers who are too young to qualify for the senate.’*

*George McGovern*

It was damp and stinking in the tunnel, but this room was brightly lit. In the background, the muted sound of a generator could be heard, powering the lighting and other systems that were part of the underground infrastructure. Surprisingly for such a rudimentary and claustrophobic setting, the room’s

occupants were seated in chairs, battered old leather armchairs but still more comfortable than the hard chairs or bare earth that were in use by the other tunnel dwellers. An older man walked quietly into the room with a tray of tea. He set it carefully on the table and was about to serve the four men when one of them, Cu Chi Local Commander Nguyen Cong Trong, nodded to him to leave. He bowed and hurried away, they were alone. Ba spoke first, Major Ho Van Ba, Hanoi, PAVN liaison officer and personal representative of Commander of the People's Army of Vietnam, Vo Nguyen Giap.

"Comrades, the Commander is not happy, not happy at all."

His gaze swept around the room and settled on Dung Vo Phuc, Viet Cong commander for the Saigon district. Phuc stared back at him, he wasn't about to be flayed by a lackey from Hanoi, regardless of his status. A veteran of the French war and countless guerrilla actions against the ARVN and U.S. military, he had done everything possible to make a success of the offensive.

"If Comrade Giap is unhappy, Major Ba, perhaps he should look to the failure of the people to rise up against the capitalists, isn't that what they predicted would happen? My men have played their part, and many have sacrificed their lives. Where is the people's revolution that Hanoi assured us would occur?"

They sat their frozen with shock, Vo Nguyen Giap was widely regarded as the military genius behind the communist successes in Vietnam. He had few critics, few that lived.

"Do you wish me to inform the General that his plan was at fault, Comrade Phuc?"

Phuc looked down at the table. He was a brave man, but not a suicidal one. "No, no, I did not mean that," he added hastily. "But we all need to look into the failure of the people to rise up as was predicted. I'm sure there were many reasons, perhaps we were betrayed."

They all nodded, satisfied. Betrayal, a possible traitor in their midst, was always a face saving way to explain away military and political stupidity.

"Perhaps you are right," Ba said smoothly.

Nguyen Cong Trong, as the local commander at Cu Chi, carried a heavy responsibility if this line of thought was to go much further. "I will investigate immediately, Comrades," he said hastily, if a little louder than was necessary. The others noted his nervousness. "Be assured that if there is any traitor in Cu Chi, which I doubt, they will be found and executed immediately."

“Commissar, do you have anything to add?” Ba asked the fourth man there. Trinh Tan Binh, Viet Cong commissar, who was personally charged with ensuring the revolutionary enthusiasm of the guerrillas, and of course the civilians who so far had failed to rally to the red flag, stared back at him. Everyone present knew that in fact the whole plan was ill thought out, the idea that the civil population would take up the armed struggle on behalf of the government of the North, whose culture and customs they actively disliked, was absurd. But it would take a brave and foolhardy man to say it out loud.

“The fight goes on, Comrade Ba, as you know. Even as we speak, our fighters continue to take the war to the enemy wherever they can be found in and around Saigon and in the countryside. We are still hopeful of victory.”

It was a good answer, they were all old hands here, too experienced in political infighting to blurt out answers that were indiscreet or directly critical of Hanoi.

“And what of Son? Why was he allowed to take part in the offensive, the General was quite clear, he was here to observe and learn, nothing more. And yet you let him take part in the assault?”

Phuc drew breath. “I was aware of Comrade Giap’s orders, Major. As was Captain Nguyen Tang Son. Believe me, he took it entirely upon himself to lead an assault team into Cholon, it was just ill-luck that he was wounded. But he is an adult, the son of one of our most illustrious leaders. We can only order him so far.”

Ba looked at all three of them in turn. The fools, Giap’s son, his illegitimate son at least, he should have been cocooned against any kind of direct enemy contact.

“And what if he had been captured, what kind of a propaganda triumph would that have been for the enemy?”

“But he wasn’t captured,” Phuc continued. “Despite his recklessness and disobeying orders, we took care of him and brought him back here. It was only bad luck that caused his injury, this is, after all, a war zone down here.”

Ba noted the ‘down here’ reference, as if the North wasn’t bleeding itself dry of soldiers and resources to support the insurrection, as if it was the South that was making all of the sacrifices.

“And where is the Captain now?”

“In the infirmary, it’s about five hundred metres away along the East

main communication tunnel, he is being looked after by the French doctor who patched him up when he was wounded. She obviously knew what she was doing so we brought her back with us, in view of the importance of Captain Son."

Well at least they got that right, Ba thought.

"The General is aware of the French doctor that is treating his son. She is to be looked after, is that clear? Well looked after! Comrade Giap is taking a personal interest in this matter."

They were suddenly interested. Who was this woman, why the personal interest of the Commander of the People's Army of Vietnam?

"You will provide him with regular reports of his son's welfare as well as that of the woman, is that clear?"

They all nodded enthusiastically. Trong couldn't help himself, who was this woman who was a prisoner in his tunnel system? What was the knowledge worth? He opened his mouth to ask Major Ba, but the officer held up his hand to stop him.

"Don't ask, it is a matter of state security. I advise you not to be curious in this matter, just make sure she is looked after. And that she doesn't escape, of course."

The meeting broke up with the three leaders desperately curious about the French doctor in their midst.

"Comrade Phuc, I take it you are joining your men for the next assault, is that correct?"

The VC leader nodded. "Certainly, I shall travel back to Saigon as soon as night falls."

"Very well, I wish you luck on your next attack, Comrade Giap will be awaiting news of your breakthrough."

"Thank you, Major," Phuc replied. He could do with a victory to present to Hanoi, but in the meantime, he would put in place some enquiries about the doctor. It could be useful insurance if he failed to satisfy their Northern masters.

# CHAPTER 3

*'I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies*

*in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.'*

*Martin Luther King*

I hardly slept that night, I knew that there was little I could do to counter the ponderous bureaucracy of the military. In the morning they brought me lukewarm coffee and a stale sandwich for breakfast. Two soldiers came to the door of my cell, one of them cold and hard-faced, no doubt Cohen had spread the word that I was a Viet Cong sympathiser. The other was one I'd drank with on the odd occasion, Corporal Lec Wiecknicz, a Polish American and formidable chess player that I had shared a few games with. And lost.

"Jurgen, how's it going?" he asked.

"It's been better," I smiled wryly.

"I'll bring my chessboard in later if you fancy a game."

"That's ok, Lec, I'm aiming to be out of here before much longer."

"Good luck then, maybe we can get together another time."

"It's a date."

The other soldier, a private, just grunted, confused that the so called 'traitor' was apparently a friendly. They both left and I was alone once more, with nothing to do but wait. It wasn't a long wait, the communists decided to liven up the morning with a renewed mortar barrage.

There was the familiar whistling sound, I threw myself to the floor just in time as the shell exploded next door to the guardroom where I was imprisoned. The whole building shook and there was a tremendous crash as part of the structure gave way. A machine gun started to chatter, then another. Voices were shouting, bellowing orders, cries of alarm and hurt and the distinctive sound of aircraft engines being hastily started up drowned out much of the noise of the conflict. More mortar shells struck the airfield, then the wind changed and I heard the familiar sound of communist battle cries, they were attacking again. There were continued bursts of AK-47 fire, the lighter, faster sound of Colt M16s giving reply. Grenade launchers added to the din, punctuated by the explosions of the mortars that kept up an incessant fire. The Americans would have gunships and fighters in the air by now, but using them in the cramped vicinity of the airfield would prove next to impossible. But even without the gunships the Viet Cong were outgunned

and outnumbered as well as in possession of inferior military technology. The end was pre-ordained, yet still they pressed on with their attack. Another mortar shell struck the guardhouse bringing down chunks of concrete on my head and all I could do was shelter in the lee of the wall, away from the worst risk of stray bullets and shell splinters. Then almost as soon as it had started the battle ended. The whole airfield was quiet, no aircraft took off or landed, no shots were fired, nothing exploded. Except for the General.

"What the hell is going on here, Lieutenant? Who authorised this man to be put in here?"

"Er, I did, kind of, Sir. My sergeant found enemy propaganda leaflets in his house."

General Westmoreland, MACV commander in Vietnam and overlord of the American military effort in South East Asia, looked through the bars at me.

"Is this true, Mr Hoffman?"

I nodded. "General, it's true alright, but it's not that simple."

I explained about the Viet Cong occupation of my house and the kidnap of my wife. He nodded and turned back to the hapless MP Lieutenant.

"So you thought by arresting the husband it would do your job for you and bring back this kidnapped French doctor, is that right, Lieutenant Withers?"

Westmoreland peered closely at the officer's nametag, as if to imprint the name on his memory forever.

"Er, no General, not exactly. The VC leaflets in the house..."

"The house that the VC had occupied, correct? So if they take over this guardhouse and leave some of their stuff behind when we kick their butts out, you should be arrested as a traitor, is that it?"

"No, General." The hapless MP Officer froze, lost for any further reply. It was obvious what had happened, Cohen had persuaded him that I was a Nazi traitor working for the communists to cause me problems. I wondered what would happen to him when Withers realised how he had been used.

"Release him, Lieutenant Withers," Westmoreland said, very quietly.

The MP rushed to find keys and opened my cell door allowing me to walk out. I thanked Westmoreland. He brushed it aside. "Hoffman, come with me."

I followed him, astonished that he was taking an interest in my case. Was it about Helene, I wondered? Then I remembered that he was senior

military, the most senior. We reached his office and he sat behind his desk. I waited for the axe to fall, to find out what he wanted.

"Hoffman, this insurgency is a lot worse than we realised, it looks as if the communists are going for broke, we've got our work cut out to stop them."

I went to answer, but he held up his hand. "No, it's not that bad, we will stop them, but casualties are getting worse, the war of attrition that we have been fighting here is unpopular back home, if the casualty rate gets any higher public support for the war will plummet."

"Why are you telling me this, General?" I asked him.

"You know about Cedar Falls, last year?"

That stopped me for a moment, I now knew where he was heading with this. I remembered the massive operation to strike a decisive blow against the Viet Cong. Operation Cedar Falls was mainly conducted by U.S. forces. The aim was to eradicate the so-called Iron Triangle, the area located in close proximity to Saigon, which intelligence had reported had become a major stronghold of the communists.

Operation Cedar Falls was reportedly the largest American ground operation of the Vietnam War. Two Army divisions, one infantry and one paratrooper brigade, as well as an armoured cavalry regiment participated in the operation. Altogether, Operation Cedar Falls involved thirty thousand U.S. and South Vietnamese troops. The Viet Cong, unfortunately, chose to evade this massive military force by either fleeing across the border to Cambodia or hiding in a complex system of underground tunnels. Nevertheless, the U.S. military uncovered and destroyed some of the tunnel complexes as well as some stockpiles of Viet Cong supplies. In the course of the operation, so-called tunnel rats were introduced for the first time to infiltrate Viet Cong tunnel systems. I shivered to think of the fight in that claustrophobic environment.

I had overflown the area several times and seen the devastation. In an attempt to permanently destroy the Iron Triangle as a Viet Cong stronghold, Operation Cedar Falls also entailed the complete deportation of the region's civilian population to so-called New Life Villages, the destruction of their homes and the defoliation of whole areas of the countryside.

From the air, much of it now looked like the surface of some alien planet, like the blurry black and white pictures of the First World War battlefields. The B-52s had done their work well, dropping vast bomb loads

on the wild jungles to turn them into a pitted wasteland of craters and stunted vegetation. I also remembered the operation sixteen years ago when as a senior sergeant in the French Foreign Legion I had gone into the area with a small team of volunteers to rescue a wealthy French civilian, a banker, who had been captured by the Viet Minh during a fact finding tour of the area. What the Viets didn't know at the time was that the banker was in fact a senior planner for the General Directorate for External Security, the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, or DGSE. He was a spy, in Indochina to upgrade the French military and intelligence effort. If the Viets found out the truth, it would have meant an overwhelming intelligence disaster for the French. In the event, they met their disaster at Dien Bien Phu, but at the time devastating defeat in Northern Indochina was long in the future. I had led that operation into the area known nowadays as the Iron Triangle. I shuddered as I thought of that desperate bloody battle that ended up in a primitive tunnel system, crawling along narrow passages that could cave in at any time. Waiting every second for a hand or foot to touch a sharpened, poisoned stick. For an enemy knife or spear to strike from an unseen position. By a miracle we had found the DGSE man still alive, his true identity kept a secret. We fought a running battle to extricate him that ended with the deaths of half of my men. The air force flew round the clock ground missions, bombing and shooting everything that moved until eventually a battalion of paratroopers dropped in and covered our return to Saigon. It had been a close run thing, and that in a country that was supposedly pacified and friendly to France, for the main trouble spots were then in the North, closer to the Chinese border.

It had been a lesson to me and one I always thought the French High Command should have learned, that they had severely underestimated the communist strength and determination. I wondered if the Americans would fare any better.

"Of course I know about Cedar Falls, General. We could hear the B-52 bombing raids from here in Tan Son Nhat."

"You were there, not so long ago."

I had always assumed that the mission was kept a secret. "That's confidential, General."

He shook his head. "Not any more, it isn't. We've been pressing the DGSE for a release of their confidential files, they finally came through. When we searched for operations and personnel that concerned the Triangle, your name came up."

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I’m still bound by the confidentiality agreement I signed when I discharged from the Legion.”

“I respect that, Mr Hoffman. I’m not asking you to reveal any details of French operations.”

“So what do you want, General?”

“I want Dung Vo Phuc, the VC commander. These attacks around Saigon have hurt us badly, morale has been shaken and civilian confidence has plummeted. I want the head of the guy that is behind these current attacks.”

“I believe that would be Vo Nguyen Giap, General.”

He smiled. “Yeah, he’d do nicely, but short of invading North Vietnam it isn’t going to happen. Phuc is the Saigon Area Commander, he’s reportedly hiding out in the Cu Chi area at the moment. I want someone who knows the area and has experience of fighting in and around those tunnels to guide my people in, we’ll do the rest.”

“And when you find him?”

Westmoreland looked at me. It struck me that there were no aides in his office. Astonishingly the MACV supreme commander was talking to me alone. Clearly he didn’t want any record, any witnesses to this conversation.

“He’ll have to take his chances, he’s a criminal insurgent. If possible he’ll be brought here to stand trial.”

Obviously, it was a search and kill mission. That was nothing new in Vietnam, both sides increasingly used assassination as a tool.

“And what exactly do you want from me?”

“Just to guide my party in.”

In some respects, the mission could dovetail with my intention to look for my wife around the Cu Chi area, following the ARVN officer’s tip. The problem of course was that a quiet inquiry to find a kidnapped civilian would be blown apart by leading a party of Special Forces in to assassinate the local warlord. I explained this to Westmoreland. He nodded and pressed a button on his desktop.

“Send in Captain Edwards.”

An officer came into the room, I’d spoken to Edwards on occasion, he smiled a tight hello.

“Captain, would you ask members of Team Zebra to come in here?”

“Yes, Sir.” He left the office and we sat waiting. After a few minutes, the door opened again and a group of soldiers trooped in. They saluted the

General and one of them turned to greet me, it was Abe Woltz, the Special Forces sergeant who had been on a mission that I had led into North Vietnam.

"Jurgen, great to see you again."

We shook hands, he looked good, fit and confident. But was in civilian clothes.

"You've left the army?"

"Sure have, I'm a civilian now."

"Company job, eh, Abe?"

He shrugged. "Something like that."

Then I recognised Aaron Goldberg, the Special Forces colonel who had gone into North Vietnam on an undercover mission. The mission went badly wrong and I had flown an aircraft in to get him out, an operation that grew into a messy and costly engagement. He came over and shook hands. "Hoffman, good to see you."

"Colonel, you're looking well."

"Gentlemen, if I could have your attention," Westmoreland called out. "Mr Hoffman, these people will be going on this mission, as well as some others that you may have met before. I wanted to reassure you that the men chosen would be the best."

"I don't doubt you, Sir, but as I said, my feeling is that the mission could muddy the waters and even get Helene killed. I'll be going in alone."

"In that case, I don't need to keep you any longer. Thank you for listening to me."

I left the office, surprised that he'd given up so easily. Then I walked over to what was left of our hangar. As I skirted the airfield, I could see the destruction wreaked by the communist assaults. Teams were out clearing the wreckage and the flightline was alive with air force personnel checking, arming and refuelling the aircraft. Fighters and helicopters flew off constantly, obviously the priority was to search and destroy the insurgents before they struck again.

In the distance, I could see a flock of helicopters circling the outlying suburbs of Saigon, hunting for targets. One of them suddenly swooped down and I shuddered as the gunners started to fire, sweeping the ground below with a storm of bullets. They were over Cholon, Sophie was there with Lan and Nhu. My first mission had to be to get her out. When I reached the hangar, Emile and Joe were busy grinding away at a huge piece of wing. They waved a greeting and carried on, Ritter and Paul were inside, they had

cleared a space to use as a temporary office, the desk was supported on a pile of old flight manuals where the blast had ripped off the legs.

Ritter jumped up and slapped me on the back, “Hey, nice to see they let you out, they must be short of space over in the MACV cells.”

Paul waited quietly, he knew there would be more to it than a simple release, there always was, it was the way of the military. They always wanted their pound of flesh.

“I’ll tell you about it later, I need to take the Land Cruiser into Cholon to bring Sophie out, Lan and Nhu as well.”

“Sure, I’ll come with you, Jurgen.”

“I’ll come too, you might need some support,” Ritter called out.

“What about Air America, I thought you were going over there to find work, what was the deal?”

“It was no deal, they wanted us to sign long term exclusive contracts so we told them to go to hell. We’d sooner starve with our own airline than commit ourselves to them for the next three years.”

“But we haven’t got an airline, we don’t own any aircraft.”

“We’ve got one,” Ritter said. I laughed, the Cessna 172. Some airline.

“Besides, Emile and Joe are repairing the DC-4, who knows, they may come up with another miracle.”

I smiled. “We’re not in Lourdes, Ritter. This is Vietnam, miracles don’t happen. Only nightmares.”

He ignored me and gathered weapons out of the cupboard, an M2 automatic carbine and three Colt automatic pistols in holsters. We strapped them on, Ritter hefted the M2 with some spare magazines and we went outside and climbed into the Land Cruiser. We drove out of the airfield and started on the road to Saigon, everywhere there was activity, mainly military but large numbers of bewildered Vietnamese flocking around, almost certainly bombed out of their homes and looking for a safe haven. But where was safe?

In Vietnam during Tet it was supposedly a time of peace, a time for families to gather together to celebrate. Instead, they were living in a state of terror from the communist offensive and of course the inevitable American and ARVN response. I turned off onto the road to Cholon and immediately got stopped by a roadblock. An ARVN captain came out to speak to us.

“The road is closed until further notice, Cholon is under attack and until we can clear it, no-one is allowed in.”

I explained that my young daughter was in there, but he shook his head. “I am sorry, but my orders are clear, no one goes in, I am authorised to shoot anyone who tries to go past this checkpoint.”

We argued back and forth for five minutes, but he wouldn’t budge an inch, he had orders and wouldn’t vary them for any reason. I felt like running the roadblock and calling his bluff, but if they opened fire on us it wouldn’t do anyone any good. Paul added weight to that argument.

“We’ll have to turn around, Jurgen, we’ve been looking around and they’ve got an M60 set up across the road inside that old building, I think they’ll use it if you give them half a chance.”

I turned the vehicle around and headed back to Tan Son Nhat.

“What next?” Ritter asked. I suspected he was all for going back in with all guns blazing, the archetypal fighter pilot, but in the middle of a huge military action where the troops were obviously very trigger happy, it would have been a fatal move.

“Back to the hangar, I’ll try and contact Lan by telephone and find out her situation, maybe she get them out of there.”

We returned to the hangar, but when I tried to call the number it was unobtainable. I got the operator and she informed me that all lines to Cholon were down again. We sat around for an hour, talking about the almost insurmountable problem.  Besides, there was little to do at the airfield until Emile and Joe had finished rebuilding the DC-4. Suddenly, I had the answer.

“If I can’t get Sophie out of Cholon, I’m going looking for Helene. I’m going to Cu Chi, where that ARVN officer said that she was probably being held  If she’s there, I’ll find her.”

Ritter was ablaze with enthusiasm. “When do we leave?”

“I’m leaving right now, my friend. There’s nothing left for me to do here, so it’s time to go somewhere where I can be useful.”

Cu Chi was about thirty miles away, we could be there in an hour. I had no idea where to start when reached the area but at least I could make some enquiries, traditionally the local headman would be a good place to start. I wasn’t blind to the difficulties, I wasn’t expecting him to sell out the Viet Cong, indeed, he was probably Viet Cong himself. But if I could open some sort of communication with him, it may lead to information about Helene. Maybe we could trade.

“I’m coming with you,” Ritter said firmly. “It’s dangerous country in the Triangle, you’ll need me to watch your back.”

“I’m in,” Paul added. “Let’s do it, we can at least see how the land lies and be back here by tonight.”

“It’s appreciated, my friends, thank you. Let’s go.”

We loaded up the Land Cruiser with supplies, food, water, fuel and most importantly, weapons. We took an M2 and a Colt automatic each, with plenty of spare ammunition. Ritter rummaged in a box and came up with half a dozen grenades, Russian military pattern. He saw me looking at them.

“Liberated from the VC, my friend. Their owner had no further use for them.”

We drove out of Tan Son Nhat and headed west towards Cu Chi. Within a mile we ran into yet another checkpoint, this time it was manned by U.S. troops.

“Sorry, Sir,” a pimply looking corporal said to me through the open driver’s window. “Orders from General Westmoreland himself, no one is allowed along this road during the emergency, you’ll have to turn around.”

“Corporal, this is ridiculous, I have to get to Cu Chi, now let me pass.”

A lieutenant came across and joined us. “Sir, let me make this clear. The communists are using this as a major supply artery for their attacks on Saigon. Our gunships are patrolling and shooting everything that moves, so there’s no question of anyone being allowed to go up that road.”

A helicopter gunship was a convincing argument. I nodded, “Understood, Lieutenant.”

I turned the Toyota around and headed back to Tan Son Nhat. Our freedom of action was gone, the two places I needed to reach for my family, Cholon and Cu Chi were both out of bounds. I parked at the side of the hangar and Paul and I sat in the sun while Ritter went inside and found a long lost bottle of Jack Daniels. He passed it around while we swapped ideas about getting to Cu Chi. Then I told them about Westmoreland and his assassination squad.

“It could help,” Paul said thoughtfully. “If they took out the main man it would certainly discourage the others, it would be a major blow to them.”

“Paul, for God’s sake, when has targeting the enemy generals ever achieved anything?”

“What about Yamamoto?” Ritter asked.

Operation Vengeance was carried out to kill Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on April 18th 1943, during the Solomon Islands campaign in the Pacific Theatre of World War II. Yamamoto, Commander of the Combined

Fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy, was killed on Bougainville Island when his transport bomber aircraft was shot down by U.S. Army fighter aircraft, operating from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. The mission of the U.S. aircraft was specifically to kill Yamamoto and was based on United States Navy intelligence on Yamamoto's travel plans in the Solomon Islands area. The death of Yamamoto reportedly damaged the morale of Japanese naval personnel and was described by Samuel Eliot Morison as being considered the equivalent of a major defeat in battle.

"So you think that killing Phuc would achieve the same thing, crush their morale, and give the Americans and ARVN a boost? He's not exactly Yamamoto, is he, no Giap?"

"Jurgen, it may help and at worst it certainly couldn't do any harm. If that's the price for getting the American military on our side to locate Helene, it could be worthwhile. It's a win-win."

"Not for the ones that get killed in the attempt," I said wryly.

"Nor for Phuc," Ritter added.

Maybe it was the stress, but Paul, who never, ever made a joke about anything, said, "Fuck Phuc."

We were both taken aback for a moment, maybe it was the whiskey. Then we all burst out laughing, soon we were literally rolling around the grass, saying 'Fuck Phuc.' That's where we were when Captain Edwards, Westmoreland's aide, arrived in a jeep. He looked on astonished. "It's a private joke, Captain," I explained.

"Right. I came from the General, he wants to know if you have had a change of heart."

They knew of course that the roadblocks would drive me right into their waiting arms.

"Tell the General he's won, I'll do it."

"All three of us, Jurgen, if you're going hunting for Helene we're with you," Paul said.

Ritter nodded. "That's right, you go nowhere without us."

"There you go, Captain, you've got no less than three veterans of the Indochina war to guide your team in."

"Er, I think the General just wants you, Sir."

"And I don't want any part of it, but we all have to make compromises, don't we?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I'll tell the General."

He climbed back into the jeep and drove off.

We got a message during the afternoon that we were to present ourselves at a building near to MACV at 0800 hours the following morning, when we would be briefed. The soldier drove away and that was when the rockets hit. Multiple strikes smashed into the airfield and hit some of the buildings near the control tower. Two aircraft were hit and the whole place erupted into chaos as alarms sounded and troops, who thought the worst was over, grabbed weapons and helmets and dashed out to deal with the attack. The VC had a heavy machine gun set up outside the perimeter wire and bullets slashed across the runway, causing personnel to run and duck for cover. There was little we could do, we sheltered in the trench with Emile and Joe to wait it out, praying that this time they would avoid hitting our area. They were making good progress on rebuilding the one DC-4, but any further devastation would finish us for good. They did avoid us, although the headquarters area and the terminal were suffering badly. Then their infantry attacked, another of the mass, frontal attacks that they had begun to employ during the Tet series of offensives. There must have been two hundred of them pouring across the airfield about half a mile from us. Once again the ARVN and U.S. infantry and marines poured out to meet them, some running to take up defensive positions between the advancing enemy and the precious aircraft that once again were scrambling to take off.

This time the communists were completely out of luck. There was a flight of troop carrying Hueys inbound, protected by two of the new Cobra gunships. The Hueys banked away to find a safe landing area and the gunships began to seek out their targets. All that was left for the troops on the ground was to stand and watch as the Cobras went to work.

The miniguns were 7.62 mm, multi-barrel heavy machine guns with a high rate of fire, around four thousand rounds per minute using Gatling-style rotating barrels with an external power source. In effect they were a modern development of the nineteenth century Gatling gun that had proved to be so devastating, but these were not hand cranked. Fed by massively long belts of ammunition, they could keep up their deadly rate of fire until the ammunition ran out. While the helicopters hovered, they poured fire on the Viet Cong below. Some guerillas tried to fire back, but the Cobras stayed high and difficult to hit whilst the miniguns devastated the enemy below. It lasted less than three minutes, by which time the entire attacking force had been wiped out. All that was left was for the defenders to check the corpses to see if any

had survived the literal storm of bullets. I doubted there would be many alive to tell the tale. Paul and I went over to the MACV compound to see if any of the people we knew had been hit. We were directed to the infirmary, where Captain Edwards was being heavily bandaged, he'd suffered when a rocket hit a wall behind which he was sheltering, bringing down the brickwork on top of him.

"That's bad luck, Captain," I said. "Next time, try to find a stronger wall."

He was at least able to grin. "I hear you, Hoffman."

I was about to reply when there was a shouted, 'Tenshun', and Westmoreland himself came in to look in on the casualties. He saw me and Paul.

"You guys, are you busy?"

We shook our heads. He led us to a quiet corner. "Good, listen. The mission is on hold for a few days. In the meantime I need you to fly an aircraft out to Khe Sanh for me, they've been hit pretty hard up there and we're still short on pilots. You up to it?"

He obviously considered he had me bought, body and soul. "Yes, General," I replied. Paul nodded.

"Good. Don't get hurt before that other thing, but we need you on this one for now. Major," he said to an anxious officer trailing him, "take these guys out to the flightline and get them checked out on that waiting Provider."

So we were press ganged back into service with the U.S. military. As we walked after the Major, I tried to recall what I knew about that particular aircraft, I had certainly never flown one.

The first prototype 123 made its flight on October 14th 1949, powered by two 2,200 horsepower piston engines. The aircraft was reported to be very manoeuvrable at low speeds, which made the powered version an excellent tactical transport. It featured high-mounted wings and tail surfaces on a pod-type fuselage which made for easy rear-end, unobstructed on and off loading. Because of its powerful engines, it showed superior ability to operate in short field landings and take offs. It could carry sixty-one fully equipped troops for assault or evacuate fifty patients on litters plus six attendants. The full-section rear ramp door made this an ideal aircraft for support of airborne operations from the 1950s into the current Vietnam theatre of operations. The C-123s were often used as transports for paratroopers. In Vietnam it had become an all purpose tactical aircraft often working with Special Forces. The C-123

was the primary aircraft used in the spraying of the jungle with a defoliating agent to clear vegetation to help stop enemy troop movements. Some had two small jet engines added to their outer wings to give them improved takeoff performance from short runways. In 1966, some models, including this aircraft, were fitted with auxiliary powerplants in a pylon-mounted 2,850 lbs. thrust GE J-85 turbojet outboard of each engine. These were for emergency use. Some were converted to become the C-123K which had underwing auxiliary jets, a few others the C-123H equipped with wing tip jets.

Khe Sanh was in trouble, deep trouble. Like Dien Bien Phu before, the communists had brought heavy weapons to bear on the all important supply airfield. Under attack since before the Tet offensive had started, Khe Sanh relied upon the airfield for its vital supplies lifeline. Cut off from that lifeline, Khe Sanh would fall. The only way to keep it alive was by sending in constant supply aircraft and the C123 Provider was proving to be the most suitable. The runway at Khe Sanh was pitted with holes from mortar shells that had smashed its surface during the attacks. In addition, the enemy gunners, North Vietnamese regulars, had dug in anti aircraft machine guns to pepper the outgoing cargo aircraft whenever they could. Hence the C123s, that could use their auxiliary rockets to get off the runway in an incredibly short distance, avoiding the enemy ground fire.

The Major led us out to where the aircraft was parked. Two ground crew were working at the fuselage, riveting over a hole that appeared to have been created during the recent attack. I saw the blood spattered around it and on the concrete. The Major saw my look.

“Yeah, the pilot and co-pilot were checking around the aircraft when the rocket hit, blasted a hole in the side but no other damage.”

“What about the aircrew?”

He shook his head. Poor devils, I thought, psyched up and prepared for the gauntlet of Khe Sanh and mown down before they even got off the ground. Then a civilian came out of the doorway, followed by two soldiers. Abe Woltz and two men I recognised behind him, Joe Russo and Jack Bond, both Special Forces Master Sergeants. Paul and I had shared a mission with these three men five years before, they were tough and efficient, men to rely on in a jam.

“You’re flying with us to Khe Sanh?” I asked them, surprised.

“Yeah, we’re waiting for the go on the next mission, so the General suggested we ride shotgun with you on this one,” Bond laughed.

They hadn't really changed five years after the mission that took us in and out of North Vietnam. Maybe one or two more lines on their faces, perhaps the eyes a little more distant as they looked back on a procession of battles and the bloody casualties that always resulted.

"That's good news, get on board, we're going straight out."

The Chief Engineer, the master sergeant responsible for the aircraft on the ground, came across for a word.

"You ever take off in one of these babies, Sir?"

I shook my head. "I gather I need to ignite the rocket assist, if you would show me."

"I sure will. Soon as you get the wheels rolling, hit the button and you'll be up to take off speed before you can spit. There are spare rocket packs in the aircraft, so if you want to use them when you leave here it won't be a problem, maybe a bit of practice wouldn't be a bad thing."

"I'll do that, thanks, Chief. Anything else I need to know?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, just full throttle and hit the tit when your wheels get rolling and hang onto your hat. She flies like a bird, you won't have any problems."

I nodded and we shook hands. Then I climbed aboard. Paul was already in the right hand seat and had contacted the tower.

"We're clear to taxi out to holding position," he said to me.

I acknowledged and strapped in. "Fair enough, let's get the engines started and get moving."

With a shudder and a fluttering roar, both engines started, one after the other. We taxied out to the holding point and watched while a flight of Phantoms took off, headed for a rendezvous with the enemy. I heard the tower give us clearance to roll, Paul throttled up, let off the brakes and we turned onto the main runway. Then he pushed the throttles all the way forward and I hit the auxiliary ignition button. There was a roar, a massive ear-shattering roar, I felt as if I had been punched in the back as the aircraft quickly gathered speed. The acceleration was insane, we both had to hold the column firmly and steer carefully to keep the nose straight ahead. Within seconds we had reached take off speed, I pulled back on the column and the C123 jumped into the air. The rockets pushed us upwards at a steep angle, when they finally cut out we were already a long way off the ground, well out of effective range of enemy machine gun fire. We were on the way to Khe Sanh.

* * *

*We should declare war on North Vietnam. We could pave the whole country and put parking strips on it, and still be home by Christmas.*
*Ronald Reagan*

LBJ wasn't happy, in fact he was extremely unhappy. Dick Helms, Director of Central Intelligence, avoided his gaze. With a huge budget and assets spread over the whole of South Vietnam, his agency had totally failed to anticipate the Tet offensives. Sure, they were backtracking now, dragging out every old memo that warned off 'possible enemy attacks' to try and justify their position, to say that they had given warning, but it was too little too late. Ordinarily, Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defence would have borne much of the blame, but he was on his way out, resigned to take up a new and respectable position as President of the World Bank. And the fourth man, Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, 'Reluctant Rusk' as some people called him, had long opposed the course of the war. Before Johnson, President Kennedy was often so irritated by Rusk's reticence in advisory sessions, he claimed the State Department was "like a bowl of jelly" and that it "never comes up with any new ideas". No, when the shit hit the fan, it was Helms who would feel the heat. He didn't have long to wait.

"Dick, what the fuck is going on, why didn't you warn us?" the President asked with an irritated tone.

Helms knew it was coming and had thought out the response. The blunt Texan President was not known for enjoying long, waffling replies.

"We didn't see it coming, Mr President. There were signs, of course, but nothing to suggest the sheer scale or indeed the timing of this, until it was too late."

LBJ shook his head. "I don't know what the hell we're paying you guys for, Richard. All those billions of dollars, what have they bought us? Not intelligence, that's for sure."

Helms could feel the other two men quietly smiling at him. The bastards. "We're doing a lot of good things over there, Mr President, this is just one failure that..."

"Jesus H Christ, Richard, you call this 'just one failure'? It's a fucking unparalleled disaster is what it is."

The Director felt bound to leap to his agency's defence. "It's certainly not that, Mr President, the communists are getting their asses kicked, that's for certain."

"And what about Hue, what about Khe Sanh?" Johnson pounded him.

On January 31st 1968 the ARVN, the South Vietnamese Army and U.S. Army forces were completely unprepared when the communists failed to observe the promised Tet Truce. Instead, they launched a division-sized force of North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong (VC) soldiers on a coordinated attack on the city of Hue. It was a massive, main force assault on the city that threatened to overwhelm the defenders. After several days of hard and bitter fighting, much of it house to house, there was still no end in sight. Khe Sanh had already been under attack since earlier in the month and public opinion was turning strongly against the war in the face of the tenacious attacks. Especially since they had been told by their government and the military that the Viet Cong were a spent force, about to give up.

Dean Rusk leaned forward to intervene. "If I may, Mr President, should we not now be talking to the other side, trying to get a resolution to this whole conflict?"

"You mean surrender, Mr Secretary?"

"No, of course not, that's not what I mean," Rusk replied to the President's acid retort.

"It's just that we don't seem to be any nearer the military and political objectives we set out to achieve when we went into Vietnam. Isn't it time to get out before any more of our boys get killed?"

Johnson and Helms both sighed with exasperation.

"That's another way of saying surrender, Dean," Johnson said. "Forget it, use some backbone, man. We did not kick Hitler's and Tojo's collective asses by giving up the second that things got a bit hard. We're in this for the long haul, not to run like whipped dogs the minute things get a bit hot. Enough of that, I want to hear some ideas, how do we get ourselves out of this, how can we turn things around?"

Helms pretended to think for a few moments. There was nothing politicians loved as much as intelligence gossip. "Well, Sir, in the short term we've got a plan to hit the leadership hard in the Saigon area. You know about the Phoenix Program?"

The Phoenix Program was a counterinsurgency program designed, coordinated, and executed by the CIA, Special Forces, and the Republic of

Vietnam's security apparatus during the Vietnam War. The Program was designed to identify and "neutralize", via infiltration, capture, terrorism, or assassination, the civilian infrastructure supporting the Viet Cong insurgency. The program was in operation had begun the previous year in 1967.

They all nodded. “That’s old news, Richard. What have you got for us now?”

“Dung Vo Phuc, Sir. He’s the VC commander for the whole of the Saigon region, equivalent rank would be about Brigadier level. He’s the driving force behind their operation in both Saigon and in large parts of the Mekong Delta. We’re hatching a plan to take him out, we estimate it will hit the VC hard, real hard.”

The President smiled. “Good, I hope you get him. When does this take place?”

“We’ve still got some gaps in our intelligence to firm up on, we’re hoping within five days.”

“Can’t you make it any quicker?”

“I’ll do my best, Mr President.”

“Keep me informed, Richard. Now, what are we going to do about Westmoreland? I don’t like the way the American people has been led down the garden path by these Generals. Who do they blame when it all goes wrong, me, of course? I want you to start thinking about a replacement.”

“Are you sure that changing horses midstream is a good idea,” Rusk asked him.

Johnson grimaced.

“What I am sure, Dean, is that this is a time for strong decision making, not waffling around the edges. I want some names, some suggestions, is that clear?” They all nodded.

“Right, that’s it then. I’m going to take the dogs for a walk around the Rose Garden.”

# CHAPTER 4

*‘'The thing that was so ironical was that all through our training we were taught that the Cong wears black pyjamas and a panama hat and that's your enemy. Well, bugger me, we landed on the HMAS Sydney a couple of*

*miles off Vung Tau and we went in by American landing barge with weapons, ammunition, the whole thing, and every mother's son standing there was dressed in black pyjamas and a panama hat, selling Coca-Cola and pineapples.'*

*Barry Kelly, 1966, Australian*

We flew on northwards throughout the day towards the fort named Khe Sanh, positioned near to both the DMZ and the Ho Chi Minh trail. It's function was to disrupt and intercept the enemy supply lines, as well as wave a flag to the enemy, come here and be annihilated by our superior firepower, part of Westmoreland's strategy to tempt the Viet Cong out into the open. The trouble was they had accepted his invitation and threatened to overwhelm the base, its very existence was under threat. On the 20th January a lieutenant of the 14th Anti-Aircraft Company, 325th Division PAVN, defected at Khe Sanh and laid out the plans for an entire series of North Vietnamese attacks.

The main base itself, and Hill 861, would be simultaneously attacked that same evening. Hill 861 was attacked by approximately three hundred North Vietnamese troops. The marines, however, were prepared. The North Vietnamese infantry, though bracketed by artillery fire, still managed to penetrate the perimeter of the defences and was only driven back after severe close-quarters combat. The main base was then subjected to an intense mortar and rocket barrage. Hundreds of mortar rounds and 122mm rockets slammed into it, levelling most of the above ground structures. One of the first enemy shells set off an explosion in the main ammunition dump. Many of the artillery and mortar rounds stored in the dump were thrown into the air detonating on impact within the base. Soon after another shell hit a cache of CS tear gas, which saturated the entire area.

Hours after the bombardment ceased, the base was still in danger. Then a fire ignited a large quantity of C-4 and other explosives, rocking the base with another series of detonations. Thankfully, the communist forces did not use the opportunity to launch a ground attack, but the camp had been under attack ever since. When they were not attacking, the North Vietnamese lobbed shell after shell into the camp using long range artillery that was itself outside the range of the American guns.

Our flight was uneventful but the landing was anything but. As Khe Sanh appeared in the distance we could see the puffs of smoke from the

artillery duel. I took her in on a steep glide path to keep well away from communist anti aircraft fire and banged the Provider down on the runway. I kept the engines running, as soon as we stopped the ground crews started to unload the crates from the cabin. Simultaneously, medics and helpers rushed out onto the runway carrying gurneys with the wounded. There was a rather grimmer cargo to take aboard too, a truck came out and transferred eleven body bags onto the aircraft, everyone ignored them and pretended they weren't there. We were all in a hurry, every second spent on the ground was a greater risk of being hit by enemy artillery. Shells were still landing around us, it was only a matter of time before they corrected their aim and started dropping them directly on us. One shell landed particularly near so that earth, foliage and small pebbles pattered against the fuselage. I wanted to tell them to hurry, but they were all aware of the need for urgency, nothing could be done to speed it up any further. Finally we were loaded, the door banged shut and we started to roll. A soldier ran in front of the aircraft, waving us to a stop, Paul jumped up to walk back to open the door and see what he wanted. He came back two minutes later.

"We're to hold here for ten to fifteen minutes, there's a bombing raid due in. B-52s."

He sat down and we waited, we didn't see the aircraft, just contrails high in the sky. There was a whistling sound as the bombs started to fall, then the explosions, they were shattering, waves of pressure sucking at the aircraft even though the targets were half a mile or more away. I even pitied any communists that were caught underneath that series of rolling explosions, it was vast, man-made death, a slaughterhouse delivered from the heavens. Wherever the bombs fell there was total devastation. We sat it out, not saying a word. The sheer power of the raid was overwhelming, awesome, a Gotterdammerung, a twilight of the Gods, as if Wagner's breathless opera was being re-enacted for real on a ghastly scale. Eventually it ended and soon and there was an abrupt silence, then the camp started to come back to life.

A soldier signalled that we could leave and Paul opened up the throttles. As soon as we were moving well, I hit the rocket assist button and we were punched forward, almost instantly up to take off speed and then we were airborne. Behind us an enemy shell hit the runway, as if to make a mockery of the terrible bombing that had been unleashed upon them. A series of flashes lit up the jungle beneath us as a communist machine gun sought us out, I flung the aircraft over in a steep bank to avoid the gunfire that brought

us close to stalling. We fought the aircraft, getting the best we could out of our struggle for height and speed, eventually we got her flying evenly and we were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm astonished that anyone was left alive to shoot at us," Paul said.

"There always is, my friend. Remember Berlin in 1944, totally destroyed? Yet it didn't stop Hitler's madness for a moment."

The flight back to Saigon was uneventful, night fell and we saw the lights of Saigon in the distance. From twenty miles out the skyline was lit with flashes as the battle continued.

They were taking a terrible beating from the massed firepower of the combined American and ARVN forces, but the communist forces had stirred something up that would change the course of the war, of that I was already certain. Abe Woltz came forward to look forward through the windscreen.

"Jesus, it's a mess," he said. "Seeing it at night makes it a lot more vivid, they're all over the place, the VCs."

"Let's hope that this mission of yours hurts them enough to make them want to stop," I replied.

"You don't think it will, do you?"

I shook my head. "That kind of thing never has and I suspect never will make any difference. Someone else will just step forward and take his place. Yamamoto's killing in1944, that didn't stop the Japanese, nothing did until you dropped two atomic bombs on them."

He was thoughtful. "You think that might work?"

I turned abruptly to look at him. "For God's sake, Abe, that's not funny."

"Right.  Just a joke."

I recalled the rumour that John Foster Dulles was supposed to have mentioned the possibility of lending atomic bombs to the French for use at Dien Bien Phu.  Hardly a joke.  Abe was silent then, just watching the violence of the approaching Saigon skyline. We contacted Tan Son Nhat tower, who cleared us in to land straight away, some of our casualties were in desperate need of emergency hospital care and couldn't wait their turn whilst squadrons of fighters took off and landed. I put her down as gently as possible and taxied up to the cluster of buildings next to the terminal, military ambulances and personnel were already waiting for us to unload the wounded. Finally, I shut down the engines and Paul and I left the aircraft in the hands of the ground crew and walked over to the hangar.

Emile, Ritter and Joe were sat quietly drinking and enjoying a game of cards inside. We joined them and poured ourselves whiskey, feeling our taut nerves relax as the rich, fiery liquid exploded in our bellies.

"As bad as that, was it?" Emile said, looking up.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

He smiled. "You're both as white as sheets, you've got that stretched look, like when we used to come in from a bad mission."

"Yes, I see what you mean. It was bad, Khe Sanh is under continuous attack, it's like Dien Bien Phu."

"Do you think they'll let it fall?"

I shook my head. "They can't, Emile. The political shock would be immense, Dien Bien Phu signalled the end for us and the fall of Khe Sanh would make the same statement to the Americans."

"So what are we up to next?" Ritter asked. "When are we heading into the Triangle?"

I gave him a sharp look. I trusted Emile and Joe completely, but it was supposed to be a secret. He laughed at my expression.

"Jurgen, even the guy that comes around to empty the garbage told me to be careful when we head into the Triangle, it's not a secret, my friend, believe me."

Security in Vietnam had always been unbelievably bad, but I was shocked. So many lives depended on us getting in and out before the enemy even knew we were there, now they might be waiting for us. Helene was now at more of a risk, as were the members of the team going in to seek out Phuc. There was nothing we could do about it now, though.

"We'll need some kind of a decoy," Paul said abruptly. "Something to point the enemy in the wrong direction, if we go straight in they'll eat us up for breakfast."

"Have you got any ideas?" I asked him.

He nodded. "One or two, we'll discuss them in the morning."

He meant quietly, of course, well away from our tipsy ground crew.

"Fair enough. I'm going to bed down in the storeroom, I've got some blankets there. Where are you guys sleeping?" I asked Emile and Joe.

They smiled. "In the DC-4, where else? We wake up and put out our hands for the toolbox, it's a convenient arrangement."

"Until a mortar shell drops on your heads," Paul said drily.

They both shrugged. "Lighting doesn't strike twice in the same place,"

Joe said.

"So they say," Paul smiled. "When the Viets start shooting lightning you may have a point, but it's shells they're firing at us, in case you hadn't noticed."

Joe looked vaguely uncomfortable, but he drained his glass at poured another. "In that case, I don't want to waste any of this if we're going to be killed during the night."

I helped myself to another drink and went to bed down for the night. I hadn't been sleeping well, my nights were punctuated by flashes of the past few days. Once again it was a long, cold night with only my nightmares for company. Every time I came fully awake I heard the sound of gunfire, the occasional louder report of a mortar or grenade. I imagined each one was being fired at the Cholon district. Sophie, my precious daughter, how could I do something about her? Was there any way I could get her to safety? I'd have to press the military harder to get them to let me through, I fell asleep with that resolution in my mind. In the morning I dressed and joined Paul and Ritter to go over to MACV. Major Willis was just exiting the building, when he saw us he came over.

"I was about to come and find you, we've had some developments. According to one of our informants, a Mr Le Van Dao, we believe we can pinpoint the where our target will be in three days time. Have you met Mr Dao?"

I remembered him well, with his father he ran one of the biggest smuggling rackets in Vietnam. He was no friend of the Viet Cong, he knew that if they came to power they would shut him down in the blink of an eye. Dao had come with us on a previous mission many years before and had proved himself to be reliable.

"Yes, we know Dao, he's ok."

"Good. He's waiting inside for you."

Willis showed us into an office where Le Van Dao was waiting, we shook hands warmly. We'd helped him out of a difficult situation and he had returned the favour, which was the way it worked in Vietnam.

"What have you got for us, Dao?" I asked him.

"Jurgen, the man you seek, Phuc, is due to attend a strategy meeting with his senior officers, it's set for three days from now, in the Cu Chi area."

"Do you know the exact time and place?"

He nodded. "Of course, yes, I can supply all of that."

“And the price?”

“Ah,” he said delicately. “I am of course always delighted to assist the military and you and Paul I have always regarded as personal friends, we have been through much together, you and I.”

“Yes we have. What is the price, Dao?”

He smiled. “Westerners are always so direct, I always forget despite my American education. There is no price, of course, but I would ask a favour of you.”

“Dao, for God’s sake, what is the price?” Paul burst out with uncharacteristic frustration.

I could sympathise with him, Dao’s price was quite likely to get us shot at.

“I want you to pick up a consignment for me, it should have come overland but with all of this trouble lately,” he spread his hands. “It’s the Viet Cong, they’ve already murdered several of my couriers so I am very anxious that this one gets through. You still have your Cessna flying, I believe.”

“You’re very well informed, my friend,” I smiled at him.

“Information keeps me alive in this troubled country, Jurgen. For example, would you like to know the name of the Vietnamese boy who shared a bed with one of your Special Forces colonels last night?”

That would certainly be playing with fire, I reflected. There were times when it was best not to know and a homosexual or perhaps even paedophile senior officer of the Special Forces could make a very dangerous enemy indeed.

“No, I do not want to know, Dao, not ever. Where is the consignment to be collected from and where is it going to?”

“It is to be picked up from Memot and brought back here, to Saigon, discreetly of course.”

I was startled. “Memot is in Cambodia.”

“Yes, it is. Fortunately, aircraft do not recognise borders, do they?”

“But Cambodian fighter aircraft do, my friend.”

“In that case, it would be best to avoid them.”

He spread his hands, he’d laid it on the table. Of course we had to take it, I’d avoided Cambodian patrols in the past, it wasn’t too difficult, though potentially very dangerous.

“Have you any information about my wife, Helene? Do you know her whereabouts?”

“I am making enquiries, Jurgen. If I hear anything, I will of course let you know.”

I wondered did he know already and was saving that information for when he needed a big favour in return. Maybe, maybe not, but pressing him wouldn’t help, despite my desperation. Besides, we were going into the area to get Phuc and I hoped that we’d get some leads directly from him. He was the area commander for the Viet Cong, a European doctor tending to a high ranking officer would sure to be known to him. The trick would be asking him before the Special Forces started shooting at him.

“Ok, we’ll do it, when is the pick up?”

“Tonight, they’ll have it ready for you. Here are the coordinates for the landing field, they will expect you at about midnight, the field will be cleared and lit ready for you to land. It’s been used before so you won’t have any problems with your Cessna.” He handed me a piece of paper.

“Paul, are you ok with that?” I asked Schuster.

“Yes, of course, so we get the information when we arrive back with the parcel, is that right, Dao?”

“Naturally, I will have everything for you, coordinates, times, everything. I would give it to you now if I had it, but you know how it is.”

“Yes, of course.”

We left him and went over to the terminal to file a flight plan to leave that night. We did not, of course, mention that we’d be illegally flying into Cambodian airspace. Then we walked back to the hangar to start preparing the Cessna.

“But you can’t fly her out tonight,” Emile said emphatically, she’s not ready, not airworthy.”

“Jesus Christ, Emile, you told me she was undamaged. This is crazy, it could wreck everything.”

“She is undamaged, but look, she’s got a problem with both the magneto and the starter, we’re not sure yet how to fix it. We were going to deal with it but we’ve been working flat out on the DC-4 to get the airline running again. We thought that was more important.”

I calmed down. “You’re right, sorry, but we need to fly the Cessna tonight, it’s critical to us. When can you have it ready?”

He thought for a moment. “Well, if we start now, maybe by the end of tomorrow, Joe could go and source the parts we need in Saigon, yep, about five pm tomorrow.”

“How about five pm this afternoon, Emile? We have to have that aircraft or we’re sunk.”

“Why is it so important?”

“I can’t tell you, I’m sorry. But just believe me, it’s critical.”

He lost me in deep, technical jargon. I stopped him.

“Emile, just tell me, yes or no!”

“I can get you started, but if you stop the engine, or let it cut out, you may never get it going again.”

“Good man, we can keep it running, we’ll only be on the ground for a minute or two.”

He gave me a curious look. “So it’s that kind of a job, is it?”

“Yes, it is. We land at midnight, collect a parcel and straight out again.”

“Unless the Vietnamese authorities decide differently. Or the VC. I didn’t tell him that the Vietnamese authorities weren’t going to be the problem this time. Neither did I mention Cambodia.”

“We’ll be fine, just get her running for me, we’ll worry about the rest.”

He walked away, calling out for Joseph to give him a hand, then mumbling about stupid changes of plan, crazy to risk running on an engine that couldn’t be restarted. Paul smiled.

“Well, that went well.”

“Wonderful, he’ll be fine. Let’s go and get some food, we haven’t had breakfast yet.”

We rummaged in the cupboards in the wrecked hangar. Emile and Joe had rigged up a small camp cooker and we heated some stew over it and ate it with some slices of bread they’d left lying around from the night before. Or the night before that.

“I think we’d better wander over to the terminal for lunch, Paul said. “Any more food like that and we’ll die of malnutrition before we even get airborne tonight.”

There was a banging on the door and Major Willis stepped into the room. He looked around at the roof, sagging down at a crazy angle. I caught his eye.

“We’re expecting the builders in at any moment, Major.”

He smiled. “Did you get anything worthwhile out of Dao?”

I gave him the gist of our conversation. He looked worried. “So you’re flying into Cambodia tonight? In an aircraft with an engine that can’t be stopped once it’s started?”

“That’s about it, yes.”

“It’s crazy, if anything goes wrong the whole mission to the Triangle will be jeopardised. Maybe we could lend you one of our aircraft?”

Paul and I both laughed. “Sure,” he said, “and tell the whole of the Viet Cong that we’re running a mission on behalf of the U.S. military. And what if the Cambodians see us in a U.S. military aircraft, like one of your Cessna Bird Dogs? That would be a talking point in Washington.”

“I see what you mean. Ok, I’ll leave it to you guys, good luck.”

He left us then. We spent the morning checking and cleaning our weapons, we intended to take the two M2s and our personal Colt automatics each. Ritter wandered in and demanded to know why we weren’t taking him, but I told him it would be impossible in the light aircraft with a cargo as well.

“I could fly the aircraft, I’m better than any of you, you know that.”

“Ritter, the people we’re meeting know Paul and I quite well, by sight. If they see a stranger, it could cause problems. We want you to keep everything going here in readiness for the Cu Chi mission.”

I explained that the payment for this pickup was the info we needed to go and get Phuc. There’s one more factor, Ritter. If we hit any problems, I want you to go with them into Cu Chi. You must look out for Helene. Phuc is bound to know where she is, it’s important that no one shoots him before he tells us.”

He finally nodded. “Ok, I’ll do that, but make sure you’re back, you two. Without us, these Special Forces people are sure to make a mess of it.”

“I hope not, Ritter. For Helene’s sake.”

“I’ll keep an eye on them.”

By late afternoon, Emile and Joe were still sweating and fuming over the ignition circuits of the Cessna.

“We need a new starter, Jurgen, the magneto is shot too, you shouldn’t be taking her out like this.”

“Just get her running, Emile, we’ll worry about the rest. Paul, we’d better get the guns stowed.”

“I’m on it.”

He went and fetched the two M2s, he also had a wooden case full of ammunition clips. He climbed into the cabin and stowed everything safely.

“We’re ready to give it a try,” Emile said.

“Fair enough, we need to leave now so it’s now or never.”

He was still muttering, bewailing the fact that we shouldn’t be taking

such insane risks with his aircraft, but I ignored him. They hooked up an auxiliary power supply and Emile shouted at everyone to stand clear. Then he called for Joe to press the starter. Nothing happened.

"Try it again, Joe."

Nothing.

"I was afraid of this," he spluttered, "I'll have to spin her over by hand. Joe, ignition on, contact!" then he swung the propeller. Nothing.

"Again, Joe, contact." He swung again and the engine coughed, then died.

"Again, contact." He gave it a hard swing and the engine coughed, hesitated, coughed again, then it burst into life. There were a couple more coughs and splutters before it settled into a gentle idle.

"Well done, Emile, you too, Joe. Paul, let's get aboard. We need to get clearance and get moving."

I got in first and Paul followed. I put on my headset and called the tower.

"Cessna N54115, proceed to holding, we've got a squadron of Phantoms due in, you'll need to wait your turn."

Damn, we needed to go, and go now, but there was nothing for it but to wait. Five minutes later there was a roaring noise as eight USAF Phantom F4s hit the runway and screamed down to the end, then taxied around to the ramp, it was a beautiful display of precision landing skills. "Cessna N54115, you are cleared to take off, go straight out."

I opened the throttle and took off the brake, the Cessna taxied around to the runway. Then I opened her up and we accelerated along the tarmac and took off. We both kept looking around for enemy ground fire, a slow moving, low flying aircraft like this one would make an easy target, but we saw nothing and we climbed to five thousand feet, where we were relatively safe from small arms fire. We set course for the Cambodian border, our route took us over the Iron Triangle and I wondered if Helene was down there somewhere, and safe. But she had to be unharmed, otherwise everything would be for nothing. We didn't encounter any enemy ground fire and had a peaceful flight eastwards. Darkness fell and we were forced to navigate by dead reckoning, the old method using compass and instruments.

We crossed the border and worked out that we were nearing Memot, our destination. The lights of the town came into view and we veered south to look for our landing field. Sure enough, it came up on the port side, just

where it should have been. Paul had been navigating and it was quite a feat. He shrugged when I complimented him.

"Just lucky, I guess."

But we knew it wasn't luck, Paul Schuster was fastidious and careful in everything he did, there was little left to chance. He was an ice cool calculator, as well as almost totally fearless. A good man to have at your back, especially in this country. Or at least in Vietnam, we were now in Cambodia I had to remind myself. It would be well not to forget it. I throttled back, dropped flaps and prepared for landing, we dropped nearer to the field, then the wheels bumped and we were down.

"Remember we can't turn off the engine," I said to Paul. He nodded and climbed out of the aircraft. There was a small group of men waiting for us, Vietnamese and Cambodians. One older man walked forward. "You are from Le Van Dao?"

"Yes, we've come for the package."

He nodded and beckoned his men. Two came forward carefully carrying a heavy looking package. Paul helped them lift it up into the cabin and I dragged it in and pu it on  the back seat. Then he climbed aboard and I throttled up to take off again. I reached the end of the field, swung around and pushed the throttle all the way forward, the Cessna bumped along until we were almost at take off speed. I opened my mouth to make some throwaway comment to Paul when the searchlight came on from the helicopter that had come down on us, its engine noise concealed under the sound of our engine roaring at full speed for take-off. Simultaneously, a voice boomed out at us, they had a loudspeaker system fitted to the helicopter.

"This is the Royal Cambodian Police. You will not take off, cut your engine and wait for us to land. If you attempt to take off we will open fire."

"Not in a million years," I said as much to myself as to Paul.

I rotated the aircraft off the field and into the air, keeping the nose down. In front of us was a dark patch that I hoped was a wooded hillside. It offered our best hope of evading the police helicopter. Paul automatically reached forward and switched off all of the lights, cabin and exterior navigation lights. Even the panel light went out in our effort to avoid them.

A burst of gunfire flew past our nose, tracer punctuating the night with fiery bullets. The helicopter was almost overhead, we could hear it and then we saw it as it moved off to one side, presumably to give their door gunner a good shot. We were heading towards the dark patch but not quickly enough. I

kicked on the rudder, put down the nose and flew underneath the helicopter, it wouldn't make an escape, not yet, but it would stop them shooting at us, until they countered my tactic. We flew on for a few seconds, then the Cambodian pilot caught on and stopped the helicopter in mid air so that we surged forward ahead of it. Paul looked back through the window.

"He's turning to bring the gunner to bear."

"Right."

I pushed the stick further forward and dived for the dark shelter below. There was almost no moonlight, we were skimming the tops of trees that we could barely see, but at least it made us a hard target for the gunner. Then he saw us and another burst of fire probed out towards our Cessna. He almost missed us again, except for a single shot that smashed through the side window, went through the cabin and came out the other side. I jinked the aircraft around the sky, but we were very close to the trees, one touch would be the end. There was only one thing to do, Paul was already cranking the slide on the M2 to put a round into the breach.

"At least they made us a firing port," he said grimly.

Then he pulled the trigger and a shattering noise filled the cabin as he emptied a clip at the nearby helicopter. He must have hit them with some of his shots for the pilot veered away sharply into the night and we saw him retreating high into the sky, away from the annoying shots from Paul's carbine. But of course, they would be mounting an M60 machine gun, more than a match for our .30 calibre assault rifle. If they could see us.

"I'm really going to skim the trees, Paul, you'd better hold on."

"Right, I'll stop firing, they'd pinpoint our muzzle flashes."

I grunted an acknowledgement and strained to see what I could of the jungle canopy below. We hurtled along, every now and again the aircraft gave a tiny lurch as we touched a small branch, but luckily we didn't hit any that were large enough to bring us down. And the Cambodian police helicopter lost the scent. The search light probed the sky endlessly, looking for us, but unless they were extremely lucky, we'd made it. I was heading east, away from the obvious route west that they would expect us to take, back to Vietnam. We could make the turn anytime, the trick was to disappear first.

We travelled on for ten minutes, I estimated we'd gone about twenty five miles, before I found a series of valleys that ran to the west and I swung the aircraft around and followed the course of one of the valleys back towards

Vietnam. In the distance, we saw a the lights of a fighter patrolling the border, they'd obviously launched an interceptor of the Royal Cambodian Air Force to look for us and shoot us down, but hidden in the contours of the valley we were invisible to their radar. We crossed back over the border and started the long flight back to Saigon. Paul took over and I dozed in the pilot's seat. I felt beyond tired, the stress of the airline lossed and the kidnap weighed down on me, I felt stretched almost to breaking point. I grabbed sleep when and where I could get it, in my long experience of soldiering it was the only way. When you awoke, you just kept putting one boot in front of the other, you kept going either until the end, until you or your family were dead, beyond help.

We landed at Tan Son Nhat and I taxied around to our hangar. Dao was waiting there with a truck, he had half a dozen tough looking Vietnamese with him, all armed. I stopped the engine, I reckoned it deserved a chance to cool down. He came up to the cabin and looked at the broken window.

"Problems?"

I shook my head. "Just a slight accident, nothing serious."

"I see. Nothing to do with a Cambodian police helicopter getting shot up?"

"Were there any casualties?"

"One officer took a bullet through the leg, it wasn't critical."

"We wouldn't have been there, so I wouldn't know. We didn't have clearance to cross the border."

"Of course not. Did you get the goods?"

Paul climbed out of the aircraft and started to lift the package out. Dao beckoned his men forward and they ran to take hold of it and carry it away, two to carry it and four to cover them with their assault rifles.

"A valuable cargo, my friend."

He smiled. "Not really, just vegetables, my grandfather likes them to be fresh."

It was heroin, of course, I estimated that its street value must have been in the millions of dollars. It was just as well that the Cambodian Air Force hadn't scored a lucky hit. I felt a twinge of guilt, the drug trade was unpleasant and not something I would have got involved in through choice. But who was I to judge? Forty years ago in the U.S. it was alcohol that was the dangerous drug, banned by law. All it did was promote lawlessness and gangster violence, so it seemed was happening now with heroin. It was

addictive, sure, but so were cigarettes and some people said even chocolate. If they were that worried about it, maybe they should come out here and try to put a stop to the trade themselves.

Dao handed me an envelope. “It’s all there, Jurgen, as promised. I wish you luck, take out the bastard.”

“Because he’s bad for trade?”

“That’s right, he is indeed bad for trade. I wish you good night.”

He climbed into the passenger seat of their truck and the driver roared away. I stared down at the piece of paper in my hand. The name ‘Trang Bang’ was written there. There was an address and a date and time. Phuc, we had him. The date was the following evening, they’d put the meeting forward. We needed to get to MACV right away, it was time to prepare.

* * *

*‘Give me the money that has been spent in war and I will clothe every man, woman, and child in an attire of which kings and queens will be proud. I will build a schoolhouse in every valley over the whole earth. I will crown every hillside with a place of worship consecrated to peace.’*

*Charles Sumner*

It was dark, as it always was in the tunnels. The room seemed cramped, although the ceiling had been hollowed out and made higher to allow the wounded more ventilation, more airflow to help their wounds heal, it was still too low. The Vietnamese lay propped up in the bed, he was heavily bandaged and obviously still in a lot of pain. Phuc tried to hide his contempt and anger as he looked at him, Son had caused him so much trouble he wished that the wounds he’d suffered in Cholon were enough to have killed him. Of all the luck, to be tasked with such a crazy mission by no less than Vo Nguyen Giap, then to have his son here running around like an American cowboy with an AK47, leading his troops to glory. Except that there was no glory, most of his men were dead. Major Son was here and his father, Giap, was pressuring him constantly both for news of his recovery and for progress reports on the battle. As if they didn’t know already. The battle was lost, how many more of his men did Giap want to shed their blood for this insane assault. They were

outnumbered, outgunned and outmanoeuvred. Everyone knew it. He started, suddenly realising that Son was speaking to him.

"Excuse me, what was that?"

Son and Trong, the Viet Cong commander in the area of Cu Chi, were both looking at him curiously. He needed to be more careful.

"I said are your plans in place for the next assault, Comrade Phuc?"

"We are meeting tomorrow evening, Major Son. All of the area commanders will be present to coordinate a strategy for the grand assault on Saigon."

"Let's hope it will be more successful than the last one, Comrade."

Phuc seethed with anger. And how successful was your assault, he wanted to ask him. As I recall you lost most of your men and achieved nothing. Even now, it is only through the efforts of a European doctor that you were able to survive yourself. But of course, he said nothing, merely smiled.

"We will endeavour to achieve the goals set out by your father, Comrade Giap. And how are the other assaults he had planned progressing, Major?"

Son winced, the barb was not well hidden. Everyone knew that the Tet offensives were grinding to a halt, had ground to a halt. Except for Hue, where the fighting continued, although it was bitter and the Viet Cong and People's Army forces were being slaughtered. Here in Saigon the fighting went on, but again the enemy had regained the initiative and Phuc's forces were being pushed back and shot down like dogs. It was the same everywhere, even in Khe Sanh, which Comrade Giap has assured them would be the next Dien Bien Phu, was a graveyard for the brave men and women who constantly pressed forward on the attack.

"I'm sure that Comrade Giap will see us no less successful that the other forces under his control."

Trong was appalled. The anger between these two was thick and vicious. Sooner or later he would be called upon to take sides, who would he ally himself with? Giap of course was all powerful, but Hanoi was very distant. Phuc was a wily politician too, as well as a clever leader, he could just as easily arrange for a stray bullet to hit Trong during an attack. The best solution would be to mediate between these two men.

"Comrades, we are all grateful for the esteemed leadership from Hanoi and for the bravery and courage of Comrade Phuc. We need all of these

things to succeed. Perhaps the next battle will see the people rise up against their cruel masters, but if not we will try again, and keep trying until we succeed."

"Stirring words, Comrade Trong," Phuc said acidly. "So you will be leading the next assault, will you?"

Even Son had to smile as the Cu Chi commander flushed bright red with embarrassment.

"I will do whatever is necessary," he mumbled, "as I have always done."

"Gentlemen, it is time to change Major Son's dressings, I must ask you to leave us for a moment."

They looked up at the European doctor, the one kidnapped from Cholon to care for Son.

"We are not finished, you will have to wait, we do not take orders from you," Trong said, asserting his authority as area commander in Cu Chi.

"I said you need to leave," she snapped back at him. "If his dressings are not changed he may catch blood poisoning and die. It is not my order, it is nature that dictates the progress of infection. It's up to you, if you want him to die, ignore me."

The two men got up to leave. Son chuckled as they were left alone.

"You dealt with them well, Helene."

"Believe me, Major, it was only what was medically necessary. I care nothing for you or for Trong. You are my jailers, nothing more."

"But surely you see how necessary it is that we win our independence from the Americans?"

She sighed. "Major Son, I came to this country almost twenty years ago. During that time I have seen the vile things done by the communists, I have twice been kidnapped by them and once left severely wounded and fighting for my life. I told you, all I see are my jailers."

"Why is my father interested in your husband, Mr Hoffman?"

She looked at him sharply. "My husband? I have no idea, why should he be interested in him?"

Son shrugged, as much as he was able covered in the bandages. He winced.

"I don't know, but he has asked about him twice, and about you. It's almost as if there is some kind of a bond, perhaps from the past."

"I'll ask my husband when you release me, perhaps he will know."

Son ignored that. They were chronically short of doctors in the tunnels, he hadn't told her yet that there were no plans for her release.

Helene carried on with the dressings, hiding her concern. Almost sixteen years before Jurgen and his men had freed her from a Vietminh work camp, on their way to the north of the country on a mission to capture or assassinate Giap. It would be well that his son did not know of her husband's involvement.

# CHAPTER 5

*'Tell the Vietnamese they've got to draw in their horns or we're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age.'*

*Gen. Curtis LeMay, May 1964*

The following morning we were to meet with the team at ten o'clock to prepare for the insertion that evening. We went early to check on Captain Edwards who was in the base hospital. It was a habit from the old days, we always went to check on casualties from actions we had been involved in. He lay in bed, swathed in bandages, he did his best to smile when we arrived.

"Nice of you to call in, guys."

"How long are they keeping you here?" I asked him.

"Another three or four days, so they say, but I aim to try and get out by tomorrow. Is everything going ok, Major Willis taking care of you?"

"He's fine, yes. Everything's organised, well, we think so, we'll know more later. You know we can't discuss it," I said to him.

"Tenshun," a shout sounded from the entrance to the sick bay. A bustle of uniforms and General Westmoreland swept in with his entourage. He spotted us and came over, I was amused to see even Captain Edwards stiffen to attention in his bed.

"Hoffman, Schuster, von Schacht, how's it all going?"

"It's coming together, General, we're seeing the team at ten hundred hours," I replied.

He drew us away to a quiet corner. "I saw the information you brought back, that was good work. A pity it's such a rush job."

“That’s war, General,” Paul said with a smile.

“True. Listen, about your business. We need more capacity for our military cargoes up and down the country, some of our more specialised equipment and personnel could do with some civilian help.”

He meant black operations, deniability, secret incursions into enemy territory, of course. I wondered what the problem was with Air America. Maybe they were overstretched, but probably it was just the politics of the military versus the CIA. I knew they often fell out over the most minor differences of how to run the war.

“What do you mean, General?”

“Just that I’ve asked my engineers to schedule in some time to rebuild your hangar and I’m also prepared to get our people to underwrite the lease of a replacement DC-4.”

We looked at each other, Paul, Ritter and me. Perhaps miracles did happen after all, but then again, this was still Vietnam, there would be a heavy price to pay.

“What’s the quid pro quo, General?”

“Just the occasional contract for the military, things that we can’t sanction our own people to undertake. With no questions asked. Is it a deal?”

We all nodded emphatically. Running Special Forces and mercenaries into the North was dangerous. But which part of Vietnam wasn’t dangerous?

“Agreed, and thanks, General.”

He nodded and went on his rounds of the wounded. We left to find our way to MACV, a corporal showed us into a room at the side of the building. When we walked in, there were some familiar faces waiting for us. Abe Woltz, the sniper turned CIA man, Joe Russo and Jack Bond. Colonel Goldberg, the man we’d taken out of a North Vietnamese jail cell. There was also a man in the uniform of the Vietnamese Rangers who introduced himself as Major Ho Tan Diem.

“Gentlemen, come in and let’s get started,” Goldberg said. “Firstly, thanks to Hoffman and Schuster here, we have a time and place to hit Phuc, so that simplified things quite a bit. Due to the shorter time scale we’ll have to risk going in by helicopter, we’ve got two Hueys and a Cobra to escort us. It’ll be a rapid incursion, land, take out the target and get back out quickly.”

I noticed he’d forgotten the nicety of pretending that we would capture Phuc if possible. Paul and I exchanged smiles. He went on, showing us maps and charts of the landing area, pictures of Phuc to identify him and a

host of background intelligence. Then he looked at us, “Hoffman and Schuster are familiar with the ground, they’ll lead us in. Any questions, gentlemen?”

Paul, Ritter and I looked at each other. We had a hundred questions, but none that he could have answered. We also had our own agenda that we didn’t intend discussing with the Colonel.

“They’ll abandon the meeting when they hear the choppers arriving,” Paul said abruptly.

Goldberg looked at him, as if Schuster had just vomited over his immaculate uniform. “What do you mean?”

“Colonel, when they hear the helicopters land, they’re going to wonder what the hell we’re up to and a high level strategy meeting would be an obvious target. What we need is a diversion, a convincing reason for being in the area.”

The others nodded, it was obvious to anyone who had fought insurgents for any period of time. Goldberg flushed red, he should have thought of it.

“Good point, Mr Schuster. Any suggestions?”

We looked at his map. Approximately ten miles from Trang Bang there was a small village, Binh Ho, with a red star marked against it indicating it was a VC stronghold. I went up and pointed to it on the map.

“If we go in there on a search and destroy mission, it would be a legitimate excuse. Land the Hueys, clear the village and take off again. Except that we don’t leave, the helicopters take off and we march to Trang Bang. We’ve covered that ground on several occasions, we can guide your party there with a good chance of not being seen by the enemy.”

Goldberg considered for a moment. “So, you’re proposing that we destroy an entire village as cover for our mission, am I correct?”

“Essentially, yes. A Viet Cong village, of course. We would be denying it to the enemy, so it would achieve an additional objective.”

“There could be women and children in that village, Hoffman.”

I nodded. “There are also women and children in Hanoi, Colonel, but in this case I’m not proposing a B-52 raid, indiscriminate high level bombing. They would at least stand a fair chance.”

He was quiet as he thought about it. “Major Diem, your thoughts on this?”

The tough looking Vietnamese looked up. “Fine.”

Obviously a man of few words. Goldberg nodded and went on.

“Right, we’ll go with that. Search and destroy mission at Binh Ho, we disperse the occupants and when the choppers lift off, we stay behind. Anything else?”

I pictured the hell that lay behind his simple phrase ‘disperse the occupants.’ The reality was the three helicopters would swoop down on their village and disgorge a group of heavily armed men. In theory it should be possible to order the villagers out and destroy their huts, they called them hooches. The reality was that there would be arguments, tears and sooner or later someone would start shooting, then the bloodbath would start. Of course we would do everything possible not to shoot at non-combatants, but here in Vietnam the communists often employed women and young children as soldiers, knowing that we would be reluctant to shoot at them. They were also known to drive women and children in front of them when they attacked. I hoped we would be able to disperse them without too much bloodshed, but I doubted it.

Goldberg ended the meeting, we all had a good idea of what we were doing. At least, I hoped so. The Colonel came over to us.

“Is there anything you need, weapons, uniforms, anything like that?”

We all shook our heads. “Colonel, we’ve got our M2s, they’ve always worked for us,” Ritter said. “As for uniforms, why would we bother? Your men are not going to shoot us by mistake, we’ll be the only white faces for more than twenty miles.”

“I was thinking that it might help if you were captured by the Viet Cong, Mr von Schacht.”

Ritter laughed. “I don’t think so, if they want to shoot us they will. If they don’t, they won’t. But I’ve never been captured by the communists, Colonel, you’d know more about that.”

I winced, it was a hit below the belt. But there was a grain of truth, for all of their vaunted technological excellent and superiority, the Americans were not achieving much. The vast bombing raids with the B-52s, the attack bombers, the F-4s, their tanks, artillery, machine guns and a variety of exotic weaponry had still not turned the tide.

“As you wish,” Goldberg said stiffly as he turned away.

I turned to him. “Ritter, that was confrontational, why make an enemy of the Colonel?”

He shrugged. “Their stupidity almost got everyone killed before, as well as himself captured. Until Paul here pointed out the idiocy of going straight

into Cu Chi, he probably would have done the same thing again. Sorry, my friend, but I've got no confidence in the man. Thankfully the soldiers he commands are good, very good."

"Well, ok, but try and rein it in a bit, Ritter, we don't want open hostility to sour this mission."

"I will do, certainly. Sorry. Me and my stupid mouth, I suppose I should have kept quiet."

"Just be polite around Goldberg next time you see him, Ritter."

"Ich verstehe, Herr Sturmbannfuhrer," he said.

Then he stood back, clicked his heels and gave a slight bow in the typical Prussian fashion. We shook our heads in exasperation and walked out of MACV, grinning like lunatics.

During the afternoon we checked and rechecked out weapons. We took the M2s with plenty of spare clips, but we all knew if we got into a serious firefight we were going to be in too much trouble for even more spare ammunition to get us out of it.

There were rumoured to be eight or more battalions of Viet Cong hidden around the Iron Triangle and during operation Cedar Falls the previous year, three divisions of American and ARVN troops with heavy air and artillery support had failed to defeat them. Many had simply melted away into the distant hills and jungles, others had disappeared into the tunnel systems that existed in the area. When the troops pulled out they simple came back and carried on as before.

Whether we took ten spare clips or a thousand it wouldn't make any difference. Stealth would. I hoped that Colonel Goldberg realised that fact. We loaded and checked our automatics, strapped our fighting knives to our belts and we were ready. As the light was fading, a deuce and a half pulled up outside out hangar and we climbed aboard. The others were already there, Goldberg in the cab, Major Diem, Russo, Bond and Abe Woltz in the back. The Tan Son Nhat helicopter base had been destroyed during the initial attacks and we drove out to a remote field that they were using, closer to the main airfield.

There was no conversation, we each had our own thoughts to consider, the loved ones we were leaving behind, in my case, I hoped, the loved one I was going to find. We arrived at the helicopter pad, our three aircraft were waiting for us. Two of the familiar Hueys, troop carrying helicopters each with a door gunner either side, now sat waiting, chewing gum and watching

as we boarded.  A slight distance away the sleek shape of the Cobra gunship.

The Bell AH-1 was a two-bladed, single engine attack helicopter manufactured by Bell Helicopter. The armament projected ominously outboard of the fuselage, .308 inch multi-barrel miniguns and seven rockets mounted in the M158 launcher. They had proved themselves formidable in the ground attack role since they were introduced the previous year.  We split into two parties, Paul, Ritter, me and Major Diem in one chopper, the others in the lead craft. Almost immediately the engines started with a roar, the pilots engaged the clutches and the huge rotors started to spin. We left the ground in a creeping, forward ascending motion, we were on our way to Cu Chi. I tried to draw the Major out in conversation.

"Which branch of the Rangers are you in, Major?"

He didn't answer at first, I thought he was going to do the strong, silent Special Forces act on me. Then he looked at me.

"You know of the new American tunnel rat groups?"

"Yes, I've heard of them."

"I have been training the tunnel rats, Mr Hoffman."

"Please, it's Jurgen, and this is Paul and Ritter."

He inclined his head. "Very well. I understand you have all had experience in Viet Cong tunnels?"

I shook my head. "Just me and Paul. What made you become a tunnel rat?" He paused again, damn, he really was an inscrutable oriental. But then he spoke. "Before I joined the ARVN, I was Viet Cong. I helped plan and dig some of those tunnels."

Now it was our turn to be silent.

"What made you change sides?" Ritter said typically.

I expected him to give the familiar tale, family murdered by the communists, but he was different.

"I wanted to go to America," he said. "When all this is over, I want to open up a restaurant in New York, my family had a restaurant in Hanoi before the country was divided."

"Are they still there?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I guess so, but we didn't get on. I don't know, maybe they've gone to Paris, they often talked about it while the French were here."

From son of a Hanoi restaurateur, through the ARVN Special Forces and a tunnel rat, then to New York to open another restaurant, it was a weird story. So weird it had to be true.

“Excuse me, I need to speak to the pilot,” Diem said.

He went forward. “Jesus Christ,” Ritter said, “so what are we going to do, open a coffee shop in Berlin when this is all over?”

“It’s as good a plan as any,” I grinned, “but I think I’ll stay with an airline.”

“I’ll bet Pan Am is trembling at that prospect,” he laughed. “I wonder if they think they can keep up with the competition.”

“At least they own some aircraft,” Paul said quietly. We stopped talking, we had a long way to go before we could restore even what we had several days ago.

Major Diem came back into the cabin. “We’re five minutes out,” he shouted above the racket. We all nodded and set about last minute preparations. Each of us took out our automatics, cocked the slide to put a round ready to fire and put them back in their holsters. We cocked the M2s and checked that our equipment was all strapped securely to our webbing, then we waited. As the Hueys banked in for a landing in the centre of the village I saw the Cobra take up station above us, then turn to point the minigun in the nose back down at the village. There was a bump as we landed and we leapt out.

A Viet ran out shouting, clutching what looked like a machete. Goldberg hit him with a three shot burst from his M16, it wasn’t a time to ask questions first. This was the Iron Triangle. Women and children started screaming, then a small phalanx of black pyjama clad men came rushing towards us, they were carrying AK47s, no problem there with their identities. We jerked our weapons around to take them down but the Cobra gunner was alert, a hail of gunfire descended from above that cut them to shreds. There were about ten or twelve huts in the village and we started to check them, one by one. Ritter and I ran into one where the floor matting was up and a man was starting to descend into a tunnel. I cut him down with a shot from the M2, then Ritter ran up clutching a grenade. He pulled the pin and lobbed it into the tunnel entrance, the VC I had shot was inert, half in and half out of the tunnel and the explosion beneath him lifted his body up, then it fell back down into the darkness. Ritter tossed in another grenade to make sure, we ran back out to start on the next hooch. Paul was outside, covering us as we ran from hut to hut. It was the way we’d learned to do it during the French war and before that in Russia. One man to give covering fire, two to go in and destroy the occupants of the hut. The Viet Cong could not claim that they

were the first to invent the concept of a civilian guerrilla force, the Russians had shown themselves to be particularly deadly when dealing with invaders.

The brief skirmish was winding down, the others were dealing effectively with the villagers, Diem and Goldberg had rounded up a small group of civilians, all women and children. Diem shouted at them to leave the area at once as the village was about to be destroyed. They started to leave, wailing, weeping, beside themselves with grief. But the men we had killed were the enemy, they would have killed us, given the slightest chance. Russo and Bond started to set the charges, then we moved off to a small clearing about fifty yards away. Russo fired the explosives. The result was spectacular, a plume of smoke and sparks climbed into the sky, debris from the ruined huts rained around us and amidst it all, the Cobra opened up with the minigun, spraying the whole area with bullets to finish off anything that had survived the blast. We ducked into the jungle. So far, so good. We raced along for a couple of miles to clear the area of the village, then we stopped while Goldberg checked out position.

"We're about eight miles from Trang Bang and we've got two hours before that meeting assembles. Any suggestions, anyone?"

"We'd better move fast," Major Diem said. "Time is not always exact with these people and after our attack, they may alter their arrangements. They could run later, or even earlier, we don't know how they'll respond."

"Let's go, then," the Colonel said.

We picked up the pace, Goldberg led, with Diem behind him. Joe Russo took the rear, the rest of us followed in a tight group. It was a panting, sweating, breathless run and we were lucky that we didn't encounter any locals, or even worse, Viet Cong on the journey. But we arrived at Trang Bang without meeting anyone. The house where the meeting was to be held was a large old planter's bungalow on the outskirts, it was easy to find. It was also in darkness. Diem went forward to check it out, we were impressed by his field skills, he just slipped into the darkness and disappeared without a sound. We waited for what seemed like an hour but was probably no more than then minutes, then he returned, appearing in our midst as silently as he had left. Goldberg literally jumped. "Jesus Christ, Diem, don't do that, give us some warning, we could have shot you."

Diem ignored him. "They're not there. It's empty."

The Colonel reeled with disbelief. "Are you sure?"

Diem nodded. "I checked the whole house nothing."

He looked wildly around, as if hunting for a vision, some solution that would magically appear.

"That's it, then. It's a washout, we'll head back to Saigon."

I was astonished, he was giving up so easily. "Colonel, if I may, there are some people here in Trang Bang that may be able to help us."

He looked at me sceptically. "Like who?"

"The guy that gave us the information about the meeting, Le Van Ho, lives in the village. If he was able to find out the details of the meeting, he should be able to find out where they have moved it to."

"Unless it was all bullshit," he spat out.

"No, Colonel, it wasn't bullshit. If they said the meeting was taking place, then it would have been true. It's not their fault if the VCs change the arrangements afterwards."

He considered for a moment. "Where does this guy live, this Le Van Ho?"

"His house is the other side of town, if we skirt around we can reach it without being seen."

"Ok, let's try it then. You'd better lead the way. Men, keep alert, I don't like this situation, it could be a trap."

I pushed my way along a narrow path that went around the town, avoiding the areas where there were houses. After all this time in Vietnam, I was surprised at Goldberg. It if was a trap, they'd have staked out the house, we would have been pinned down by VC mortars and machine guns by now. After fifteen minutes we approached Le Van Ho's house. It was just outside of the town itself, clearly chosen for the remote situation that would facilitate the comings and goings of the old smuggler's couriers. We got near to the front door and I went forward to check through the shutters. Major Diem slipped around the back to do the same thing. He came back, "All clear." I turned to Goldberg. "It would be polite to knock I think."

"Yeah, go ahead, we'll cover you."

Half a dozen assault rifles swung up as I went and knocked on the door. Almost immediately, it was opened by a young boy.

"Hello, I have come to see Mr Ho."

He looked past me at the armed soldiers, then without blinking, went back inside and closed the door. Two minutes later the door opened again and he beckoned us in. We were shown into a spacious hallway, a young Vietnamese greeted us.

“I am Le Van Minh, you wish to see my grandfather?”

“I am Jurgen Hoffman, Minh, a friend and business associate of Le Van Dao.”

“Mr Dao is my uncle, Mr Hoffman. I will take you to see Mr Ho.”

Joe Russo and Jack Bond waited by the door, rifles ready. The rest of us followed him into a room and the most extraordinary scene we had set eyes on in a long time.

An old man, obviously Ho, was sat in a throne like upholstered armchair. He was smoking a pipe, the rank, sweet odour made it clear that it was opium, with his feet resting on a young girl, perhaps fourteen years old, who was crouched down to make a footstool. Minh saw our open mouthed expressions.

“My grandfather suffers from what is known as Forniphilia. It is a form of bondage and sexual objectification, in which the person's body becomes a chair, table, or other piece of furniture. Apart from his pipe, it is the only form of pleasure he can enjoy these days.”

Goldberg cleared his throat. “Ahem, yeah, right. Would you ask your grandfather for any information in his possession about the location of the VC meeting, the details he sent to us through Dao were incorrect.”

Minh spoke rapidly in some local dialect, and then turned to us. “My grandfather says that the information he gave was correct at the time, it is not his responsibility if they change the details at a later stage. But he does understand the problem, and the urgency. If you would take some tea, I will go to our contact and endeavour to find out more.”

“Thank you, Minh. That is very kind.”

He left and I explained it all to Goldberg and the others. I could see that he was frustrated. “Jesus, we sit drinking tea in the middle of the Iron Triangle as if we were on a pleasure cruise. Abe, can’t you get a message out to your people and find out more?”

Abe Woltz, late of Special Forces, now of the CIA, looked thoughtful.

“I sure could, Colonel, but is that a good idea? The VCs are pretty hot on radio intercepts, if we send a message they’ll almost certainly know we’re here. Besides, they didn’t know squat when we left, I doubt that anything has changed. I’m sorry, I wish I could help, but I’m only on an observation mission here, I don’t make the decisions.”

Paul interrupted. “Colonel, this is Vietnam, there are formalities to observe. These people are totally reliable, believe me, we are quite safe here.”

Goldberg grunted, some acerbic comment about tea. “Perhaps they have coffee too, Colonel,” Paul added with a straight face. I think he was serious, he wasn’t a joker, but I wasn’t sure.

“Yeah, ok men, stand down, we’ll just have to wait. Abe, would you let Bond and Russo know where we’re at.”

“Sure, Colonel.” He went out into the hallway and we made ourselves comfortable on the floor. Ho just sat there, serene and relaxed, smoking his pipe, his feet on the girl. She didn’t move, not a muscle. It was uncanny.

“Do you think she’s alive?” Ritter asked in a loud whisper.

I shrugged, “I imagine she’s ok, I don’t know.”

Then Ho spoke. “She is perfectly fine gentlemen. She is also well paid for the service she provides to me, it feeds her family and many of her relations. She is well looked after and honoured for what she does.”

He had spoken in an English accent that was almost perfect. He saw us looking.

“You wonder at my English? I studied at one of the English universities, the University of London. A hellish place, London, I couldn’t wait to get back here. Our girls are so beautiful.”

I guessed that back in London, the girl would be in school and doing a paper round, but I doubted it would keep a gaggle of relations in food.

“Vietnamese girls are indeed beautiful, Mr Ho,” I said politely.

“Only in the south, my friend. The northern women, they are so ugly. So are the men,” he chuckled. Then he went quiet, sucking on his pipe. The young boy who had answered the door brought a tray of tea and we helped ourselves, sipping quietly in the surreal atmosphere. Eventually, Minh returned. He bowed to his grandfather, then spoke to us.

“The meeting was moved into the tunnel system, apparently the Viet Cong were concerned that your bombers might strike the area.”

“Can you show us where this tunnel is?” Goldberg said eagerly.

“Of course, but there is a further problem, the meeting was also postponed until tomorrow evening.”

“Jesus Christ, it can’t get any worse,” he muttered.

“You are welcome to stay in my home,” Ho said clearly.

Goldberg looked up. “Until tomorrow night?”

“Of course, you will be perfectly safe here. Tomorrow evening, Minh will guide you to the tunnel system.”

I felt a nasty tremor in my guts when he talked of the tunnels. I knew we

would have to go down there sooner or later, to find Helene. But although some were fairly roomy and brightly lit, most were a subterranean hell of satanic whispers beckoning you on to your doom. Ambushes, poisons stakes, traps, roof falls, even primitive crossbows that were set to fire at an unwary invader, they were a claustrophobic hell. But a hell we had to face. Tomorrow.

Minh found us a room to sleep in, a large, almost barnlike room on the upper floor. We approached it through a concealed entrance behind a bookcase, then up a narrow flight of stairs. There were plenty of sleeping mats lying around, I suspected it was not new to the purpose of sheltering fugitives. We settled down to get some sleep, Goldberg established a routine of sentries, I offered to take the first watch, Paul agreed to accompany me. Soon, the group fell into a troubled sleep.

"Do you really trust them?" Paul asked.

I nodded. "They've been feeding the military information for years, they're one of the most valuable assets in this area. Before Cedar Falls last year, they gave plenty of intel to the army. The commanders failed to act on a lot of that info, they didn't trust them completely and the operation was largely a failure. As you know, the VCs pulled back outside the Triangle and just came back afterwards. Ho's people told them exactly what was happening but they didn't believe it. Yes, I trust them, they're ok."

"I remember when we were in Russia," Paul said reflectively. "We holed up in a village, not much bigger than this one. The people said they hated the communists, they'd suffered pretty badly under Stalin. Said they couldn't wait for us Germans to kick him out of the Kremlin. It was early evening, a party of our people sat drinking beer in the village hall, the locals said it was a celebration of their new found freedom. Two hours later, a dozen men were dying, laying in their own vomit, they'd been poisoned."

I tried to picture the horror of that hall, men terrified, plastered with their own guts spewing out all over them.

"What happened then?"

"A Gestapo unit happened to turn up at about the same time and saw what was going on. They were attached to a company of Partisanjaeger, guerrilla hunters. They ordered us out of the village and threw a cordon around it, then torched it with all of the inhabitants inside, men, women and children. They said it was to teach them a lesson. I guess it did that."

"They won't poison us here."

“No, I’ve no doubt you’re right. But I’ll eat my own rations and drink from my water bottle.”

I nodded. “Probably wise.”

Soon after we were relieved and we managed to get some sleep. We awoke late morning. Throughout the day we stayed inside the house, checking and rechecking our weapons and equipment. At nightfall, Minh came to us. “It is time to leave.”

We shrugged into our packs, picked up our assault rifles and filed out into the darkness. Minh led us quietly along a path deep into the jungle. Finally he stopped.

“The entrance is there.” He handed Goldberg a small map. “The part of the tunnel system where they are to meet is marked on this chart, you should not have any problems, but be careful, there are sleeping quarters for the Viet Cong along the route. You may need to silence them.”

We looked around, there was nothing. “There,” he pointed again.

Then we saw a small bush that looked slightly out of place. It didn’t seem to fit with the surrounding foliage. I walked up and tugged at it, the whole bush and the ground it was planted in came away, a dark hole beckoned downward. We had arrived at the VC tunnel system.

“Woltz, set up a guard position here, make sure you’re well concealed. We’re going in. Major Diem, would you take the point, this is more your territory than mine. Hoffman, would you follow, your experience will be useful. I’ll go next, then Schuster and von Schacht. Any questions?”

There were none. Woltz sat down and started to assemble the folding stock rifle he carried in his pack. Diem dropped down into the hole and I followed him, it led into a low tunnel that was just a crawl space. Then the roof got higher and we were able to stand. Goldberg came up behind me, then Ritter and Paul brought up the rear. We assembled in a group in the darkened cavern while Goldberg checked the chart with a small torch, he looked at his watch.

“Ok, we’ve got an hour and a half, it should be enough time but we don’t know what we’ll meet on the way, let’s move out.”

* * *

*‘What a cruel thing is war:  to separate and destroy families and*

*friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbours, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world.'*

*Robert E. Lee, letter to his wife, 1864*

PRESIDENTIAL PALACE, SAIGON.

"How c**o**uld you let these terrorists get so near to my palace?" Thieu screamed.

"My palace, no less. Fired on by these rebels, how did they get so close to Saigon? And what of the other outrages these people are committing, Hue, our sacred capital, it is unbelievable. What are you doing about it? General Vien, I demand an answer to the cowardly failures of the army."

Vien refused to be cowed by the antics of this clown. He had a long and distinguished career in the military that began at the French-run Cap Saint Jacques Military School, graduating with a commission in the Vietnamese National Army as a Second Lieutenant. He rose quickly through the ranks, becoming a battalion commander in 1953 and then all the way up to his present job as commander of the military apparatus of the Republic, including a spell as a paratrooper. He was no coward.

"The attack was totally unexpected, Mr President, as you know. We were all surprised, even the Americans with their much vaunted intelligence assets."

He looked significantly at da Silva, the CIA station chief Saigon. The spy refused to be handed the baton of blame.

"Sir, we've sent warning after warning that something big was being planned, you can't blame us for any failure to act upon those warnings."

Westmoreland watched them scurrying for cover. It wasn't an edifying sight.

"Mr President, the first thing we need to do is resolve the current emergency, once the situation is stabilised we can go forward."

Loc, the Prime Minister, looked at him, his gaze searching through the thick, plastic rimmed glasses. "Yes, General, stabilise the situation. When can that be achieved?"

"As soon as the communist assault is finally defeated, Prime Minister. As we have no way of knowing how many troops and reserved the North has waiting to deploy, we can't make any firm assessment. All I can assure you is that we are fighting hard and we will prevail."

"General Vien, is that your assessment too?"

Cao Van Vien was the Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, he knew that he has to bear some responsibility for being caught unprepared.

"It is, Prime Minister, all of our intelligence suggests that the communists are being thrown back on all fronts."

"Except Hue," Thieu snapped at him. Vien inclined his head. "It is true that Hue presents special problems, but we are dealing with it, Sir."

"General Westmoreland, what are you doing about these attacks on Saigon, I thought your mission to clear the Iron Triangle was going to stop this sort of thing," Thieu continued waspishly.

"Peer, what is the intelligence situation for the Cu Chi area," Westmoreland asked the CIA chief.

"We're dealing with it, Sir. Even as we speak steps are being taken to deal with the incursions from that area."

"And how are you doing that?" the President asked him.

Da Silva looked at Westmoreland, who nodded for him to go ahead. "Well, Sir, we've identified the Saigon area commander for the Viet Cong, his name is Dung Vo Phuc. We've got a team in there to locate and take him out."

"Ah, good, good, I like that. When will you have more information?"

"In a couple of days, we hope," da Silva replied.

There was a brief silence. "Your newspapers are not giving us a good press," Thieu said abruptly. "Mr da Silva, why do you allow your people to print such lies about my country?"

"We have a free press in the US, Sir, we don't allow them to do anything, it's their right under the constitution."

"It's a stupid right," Thieu snapped. "Here, we would arrest such traitors."

Yes, and make thousands of recruits for the insurgents, Westmoreland thought sourly. The problem was he had felt forced to talk up the progress of the war in order to get the kind of congressional support he needed to fight the North. Now his words were coming back to slap him in the face, the Tet offensive directly contradicted his confident predictions that the communists were on the back foot and losing the war. It was ridiculous, he thought of Hitler's last ditch offensive in the Ardennes in December 1944. It was a

major German attack, launched toward the end of World War II through the densely forested Ardennes Mountains. They achieved complete surprise against a weakly defended section of the Allied line during heavy overcast weather which grounded the Allies' overwhelmingly superior air forces. However, fighting against hopeless odds, the German forces were forced to execute a fighting withdrawal and eventually escaped the battle area, although the fuel situation had become so dire that most of the German armour had to be abandoned. Finally, Hitler agreed to completely withdraw his forces from the Ardennes including the SS panzer divisions, thus ending all offensive operations. Westmoreland was in no doubt whatsoever that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army divisions would fare no better, already their losses were enormous. He tried to explain it to Thieu.

"Yes, I know of this fact, but I am not convinced that everything possible is being done in my country. I want to hear of progess, General, not faint possibilities."

"I will keep you informed, Sir. We are counterattacking in Hue, your Black Panthers from the First South Vietnamese Division have been deployed with units of the First Air Cavalry to retake the city, I am confident it will only be a matter of days."

"Very well. And let me know about Phuc, I want his head on a plate, General, on a plate, do you hear me," his voice had risen to a scream. They were all used to it, all wondered how long it would be before he cracked.

"Yes, Mr President."

# CHAPTER 6

*'This war in Vietnam is, I believe, a war for civilization. Certainly it is not a war of our seeking. It is a war thrust upon us and we cannot yield to tyranny.'*

*Francis Cardinal Spellman*

Diem led off, crawling along the narrow tunnel. Joe Russo went behind him, then Goldberg and the rest of us. It was totally silent in there, with only the glow from Diem's dim torch to show any light. After the first fifty yards, the tunnel seemed to get even tighter and we were forced to almost slither on our stomachs. According to the chart of the tunnel system, we had almost five hundred yards to go, I hoped to hell it was going to get easier than this. There was a faint sound, almost a click. Then I heard a grunt from up ahead. Goldberg whispered to me. "It was a trap, Russo got hit, looks like a poison stake. Diem has found a wider space up ahead, he's pulling him through."

We pushed on and the tunnel opened up into a small cave, the roof was supported by wooden beams to stop it caving in on us. On the floor Russo lay writhing in agony, Diem was tending to him, he gave him a shot of morphine and Joe relaxed a little.

"Is there anything we can do for him?" I asked the Vietnamese major.

He shook his head. "Poisoned punji stake, some sort of concoction the natives make, it kills in minutes. They used to use it for hunting large animals, now…" he pointed hopelessly to Joe Russo.

The most common type of booby trap was the single punji stake. They were sharpened lengths of bamboo or metal with needle-like tips that had been fire-hardened. They were coated with deadly poisons or excrement to cause infection. Dug into shallow camouflaged holes and rice paddies they were often mounted on bent saplings. The use of booby traps also had a long-lasting psychological impact on marines and soldiers. The fear of booby traps was so great that units in the field were under stress the whole time. This created severe mental fatigue on both the commanders at platoon level and the individual soldiers. They also caused death.

Joe gave a final sigh and stopped moving. Diem's eyes caught mine in the dim light of his combat torch.

"I gave him plenty of morphine, Jurgen. It's the only way."

I nodded. “I know, Major. I’ve encountered them before, they’re not pretty.  Poor Joe.”

“We need to push on,” Goldberg interrupted.

“At least let’s put Joe where his body won’t be discovered,” I protested.

“Make it quick, then,” the Colonel replied.

Ritter and Paul had come into the open space and were looking sadly at the body. We’d been through a lot with Joe Russo, fought almost the length of Vietnam, only for it to end here in a dank tunnel between Cu Chi and Trang Bang.

“There’s a recess in the wall here,” Paul said. “We can put the body in there and cover it with earth. It’s the best we can do.”

“Ok, go ahead,” Goldberg said. He was edgy, but leading this mission it was unsurprising. We were in the enemy’s backyard, every moment we risked discovery and a quick and untimely death. They dragged his body to the recess and used their knives to scrape earth to cover it. We all knew it would be discovered soon enough, but there was little we could do. Unless of course we could blow this part of the cave system when we fell back, but we had no way of knowing how things would pan out.

“Move out, Major,” Goldberg ordered quietly.

The tunnel roof was higher now and we could walk albeit hunched over, it was about five feet high. We carried on walking silently along the tunnel and it opened up even more. Then they stopped. Goldberg twisted around to me.

“VC sleeping quarters right ahead, we’re going to take them all out. We don’t want them behind us when we fall back.”

I heartily agreed with him, a dozen or more hostile Viet Cong would turn our withdrawal into a rout. We crept forward, there was an opening in the side of the tunnel. Diem was already inside, Goldberg slipped in. I looked around the doorway, the room was quite large by tunnel standards, about twelve feet on each side. It was fitted with bunks, stacked three high, there were a total of six stacks, which meant eighteen men if they were all occupied, and it looked as if they were. I pulled out my knife. Ritter and Paul came behind me, their knives ready. Goldberg nodded and we started out bloody work.

Experience had shown us that the best knife thrust was in the throat, it was quick and stopped the man being killed from crying out. I went to the left of the room and took my first man on the bottom bunk. He died with a slight

‘oof’ as his last breath left him. I moved to the middle bunk, took out the occupant and then stood up to finish the last man. All around the room there was the soft rustle of cloth as we stooped over each man to do our grisly work. The angels of death were visiting this subterranean room, each man not suspecting when he went to sleep that he would not wake in this world. The operation went like clockwork, there were two women amongst the bodies. The VC used women in many of their operations, they were big on equality, except at the higher levels, of course. Men would only let them go so far, enough was enough. But these two had no further worries about communist politics, their war ended with their lives.

“Let’s push on,” Goldberg murmured. We exited the room and continued along the tunnel. For another fifty yards or so the going was easy, the tunnel roof stayed at five feet high and we made good time. We started to smell food, of all things.

“If they’ve got anything to eat I’m starving,” Ritter whispered.

I ignored him. Ahead of us, Goldberg whispered for us to stop. We waited for a few minutes and then Diem came back.

“It’s the kitchen, there are a couple of cooks there. We’re going to try and take them alive, they could have some intelligence that would be useful.”

He crept away and we waited again. There was a faint light in the tunnel coming from the kitchen so we were able to see what was happening. Diem and Goldberg waited at the end of the tunnel. From time to time the silhouette of one of the cooks passed across the tunnel entrance. They were talking in low tones, perhaps so as not to wake the sleepers. It would take more than loud conversation to do that now, I reflected. Then Diem and Goldberg rushed in, there was a cry and a gurgle but quite low, not enough to alert any defenders.

Shortly, Goldberg came back to us. “The area is secure, one dead, Diem’s holding the other one.”

He went back to the kitchen and we followed. The strong smell was rice cooking in a huge cauldron, no doubt they were getting the food ready for the morning breakfast. Supplies were piled against one of the walls, foodstuffs, bedding, even respirators. I imagined that they would be used for when the enemy poured poison gas into the tunnels, a not infrequent occurrence. Diem had an arm around his throat, obviously stopping him from crying out. The terror in the man’s eyes was obvious to us all. He understood the situation perfectly. He kept quiet.

“Has the meeting started,” Diem asked him in French.

His eyes widened even more and he shook his head. Diem tightened his grip, and with the other hand brought up his combat knife putting the point almost touching the man’s left eye. The cook nodded and Diem relaxed his grip, but the knife stayed where it was.

“They are there now, the meeting started twenty minutes ago, they’re further along the tunnel,” he croaked.

“Will it go on for long?” Diem persisted.

“An hour or two, perhaps more,” he said.

Diem nodded and stabbed inwards. The knife buried in his eye all the way up to the hilt. The man died almost instantly as his brain was speared by the razor sharp blade. The Major laid him to the floor.

“Let’s go take these bastards down,” Goldberg said.

Paul, Ritter and I raised our eyebrows. Marine macho may have a time and place, but it jarred in this place of silent, dark death. Diem went ahead and we followed. The roof height allowed us to creep silently along, stooped forward so as not to bang our heads on the roof. We didn’t encounter any further problems until we rounded a bend in the tunnel and heard voices. Diem stopped and we all halted behind him. We listened for a few moments.

“That’s it,” the Major murmured. “That’s the command meeting. How do you want to do this, Colonel?”

It was an interesting problem, there were two ways to hit them. We could charge in all at once and overcome them with sheer force, but of course that didn’t allow for the unexpected. If there were two dozen VC in the room with weapons to hand it could turn the tables. I was relieved that Goldberg chose to opt for caution.

“Go ahead and see if you can estimate the numbers, Major. We’ll be right behind in case you’re spotted.”

Diem nodded and crept forward. Just short of the light that spilled into the tunnel from the room ahead, he stopped and started to crawl forward on the ground. He reached the end of the tunnel then crawled back.

“Six of them, they’re all seated at a table in the middle of the room, three either side. There are two tunnels leading off and a doorway to one side of the room. I can’t tell who is through the doorway, but I can’t hear any voices.”

Goldberg reached into his combat jacket and pulled out an automatic with a silencer fitted. “I’ll go first and take the three to the left of the table.

The rest of you go to the right, use your knives and work towards the left. Go when I fire my first shot. Clear?"

We all murmured that we understood. Goldberg crawled forward and waited, prone on the ground until we were ready. Then he crawled forward. We were tense and sweating, waiting to burst into the unknown, unseen room. Then he fired, a soft 'plop', we were rushing forward as the second shot, then the third spat out. They were looking up, startled, I rushed in and took the first one in the throat. Ritter and Paul were beside me, as was Major Diem. I dimly heard the silenced pistol spit out again and again. A VC was scurrying through a narrow doorway, it was fitted with a hatch that slammed shut. We'd have to worry about that later. In the meantime, I went back to check the enemy. They were all dead, but there was a problem. Phuc wasn't amongst them.

"He got away," Goldberg said bitterly. "Damnit, I missed him. He twisted at the last moment and my shot went wide."

"That's war, Colonel," Paul said quietly. "Let's see how we can retrieve the situation."

He was always the same, unflappable, I don't think I'd ever seen him any other way.

"He went through that doorway, it's some kind of a hatch," Diem said.

We went and looked at it, it wasn't particularly solid. We could hear someone moving around on the other side of the door, it obviously wasn't another tunnel exit, at least Phuc was boxed in.

"Maybe we can negotiate," Diem said. "He can become a prisoner, at least he gets to live."

Before anyone could comment, he stepped in front of the door. "Phuc, you can't get out, give it up and you'll live," he shouted.

The vicious chatter of an AK47 was his reply, the bullets smashing holes through the door.

"I think that was your answer," Ritter said wryly.

"He knows he's only got to hold out until some of his people come along, then we're finished," Paul said.

"So what the hell do we do?" Goldberg asked. "We must nail this guy, otherwise it's all for nothing."

I had an idea.

"Phuc," I called through the door. He must be able to hear more clearly now, with the holes he'd blown in the woodwork. "How about a good

payment, the Americans would pay heavily if you came over to them, it's better than dying."

There was a silence. "Jurgen?"

My God, he had Helene with him.

"Are you ok?"

"I think so," she said. Phuc spoke furiously to her and she was silent. I turned to Goldberg. "This changes everything, Colonel. That's my wife in there, we can't just bust in and take him."

"I'm sorry, Hoffman, we may have to, this mission is vital."

"Nothing doing, Colonel, we'll get her out but not with a direct assault."

He checked his watch. "I'll give you five minutes, after that we're going in there. Don't try and argue with me, Hoffman, that's the way it's going to be."

I looked at the door again. How the hell could I prise that Viet Cong bastard out of there without injuring Helene? It was so cruel. We'd come so far, then found her only to have the prospect of rescue almost snatched away. Then I had another idea.

"Phuc!" Goldberg shouted. "You're wasting your time with that woman, I've just had to kill her husband for trying to stop us."

I heard a cry from inside the room, Helene, distraught. But it had to be.

"We're leaving, Phuc" Goldberg ignored her. "We're setting fire to the tunnel complex. We're also placing charges, when we leave it'll blow as well, so anyone that the smoke doesn't kill gets caught in the explosion. You can come with us as a prisoner or stay there and die with the woman, it's your choice. I couldn't care less either way."

There was silence from inside the locked room, then I heard the sound of sobbing, my heart plunged.

"Ok, I'll take that as a no, my friend. Major, fire the place, we're out of here. We'll see you in hell, Phuc."

The Vietnamese produced a lighter and set fire to a pile of papers while Ritter and Paul smashed the chairs. They threw lumps of wood onto the flames and before long it was burning merrily with smoke filling every available space. It was time for stage two.

"Let's go," Goldberg said.

We piled back into the tunnel and away from the smoking charnel house, one of the corpses was too close to Diem's fire and the clothes had caught, the sweet, terrible smell of burning flesh started to fill the tunnel. We

donned the respirators that had been stacked in the kitchen.

At first, nothing happened, there was just the sound of coughing from the other side of the locked door. Then it opened cautiously and Phuc peered out. He had a cloth wrapped over his face and his eyes were streaming with tears. He poked the barrel of an AK47 into the room and looked around, but in truth he could barely see anything, the thick, choking smoke had all but blinded him. Then he came out into the room, pushing Helene in front of him. This time there was no mistake, Goldberg took him with his first bullet, it struck him through his mouth and upwards into his brain, he keeled over, dead. Helene cried out with fear and confusion until she saw me. Her eyes widened, then she recognised me.

"Jurgen, thank God."

We fell into each other's arms, I held her tightly. Although I'd worked hard to locate her, there had been times when I'd thought I would never see her again. I felt tears pricking at my eyes, I wiped my face and kissed her long and passionately. Her face was wet with tears too, but I suddenly remembered the gas, of course. Paul came up behind her and fastened a respirator to her face, she recoiled at first and then started breathing more normally, she gave him a smile of thanks.

"We're all finished here, Hoffman, bring your wife and let's get out and blow this place," Goldberg said abruptly.

Helene heard him and even through the mask I could see her glare. "You can't, Colonel, my patient is in there, he'll die."

"Which patient?" he asked her.

"He's an officer, a major in the North Vietnamese Army.

Goldberg shrugged. "Then I guess he can stay here with his buddies."

"He's the son of Vo Nguyen Giap," she said quickly.

We just stood there, frozen. "Are you sure?" I asked her.

"His name is Nguyen Tang Son, he is supposedly the illegitimate son of Giap. They've been looking after him like he's the new Messiah, yes, I'm perfectly sure. He is also my patient."

"So he's the guy you were tending to in Cholon when they took you?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's right. They were so terrified of anything happening to him that they took me along when they retreated, just to tend his wounds."

We didn't have much time, the smoke was swirling around the tunnel system, before long the Viet Cong would be along to check it out. I looked at

Goldberg.

"He would be a valuable asset, Colonel."

"Yes, he would. Can he be moved?" he asked Helene.

"Yes, of course. If he stays here and you blow the place up he'd die anyway, but he is recovering well, we can move him easily."

"Right, we'll take him with us. Sergeant Bond, would you bring the prisoner. Hoffman, would you help him?"

I nodded and Jack Bond joined me and Helene, we went into the room which proved to be a tiny infirmary. Major Son was lying on a gurney, coughing, his eyes streaming. He held a pistol but he couldn't see well enough to aim it. Helene relieved him of it and put it to one side. I looked at her.

"He looks familiar, I'm sure I've seen him somewhere before, but I can't work it out just now."

"Yes, he is familiar, I think I might know the answer to where you've encountered him in the past."

"You mean Giap? He doesn't look much like him."

"No, not Giap. I'll discuss it later. She bent over him. "Son, we're taking you out of here."

She put the pistol to one side and waited while Jack and I picked him up and started to carry him out.

"Be careful with him, he was badly hurt," I heard Helene say. He was still coughing and I found a spare mask and put it on his face.

"Thank you, Jurgen," she said sweetly. "Be gentle."

"Yes, doctor," I replied. She smiled.

We dragged him along the tunnel, it was too low and too narrow to carry him. He moaned and groaned in pain, there was nothing we could do to prevent the bumps and knocks.

"I'll give him a shot of morphine when we get out," my wife said.

I didn't reply, in truth we had a lot of other things on our minds. We were deep in enemy territory with the son of General Giap, the commander of the military in the North and regarded as almost a God even in the south, at least, by the communists. I remembered a previous mission where we had kidnapped a VIP and been relentlessly pursued across North Vietnam, almost all the way to Hanoi, while it was still French. I expected no less of a hue and cry once they knew that their General's son had been taken. We crawled through the first part of the tunnel, then finally reached the shaft where we

had left Abe. Major Diem poked his head carefully through the top of the tunnel.

"All clear, no trouble."

One by one we climbed out, when Abe saw the wounded Vietnamese officer he did a double take.

"What the hell is this?"Then he saw Helene. "My God, you really scored, Helene it's wonderful to see you. But why the prisoner?"

Goldberg explained to him and we watched his expression change to astonishment.

"Giap? My Christ, it's incredible. We have to get him back, my people in Langley will want a word with this gentleman."

I didn't pity Son if he fell into the hands of the CIA 'interrogators' that I'd encountered in Vietnam. Some were reasonably humane, others were not. But that wasn't my problem, we were deep in enemy territory and the only thing on my mind was getting out. Especially now that I had Helene back, it made it doubly, trebly important.

"I'm sure they'll enjoy talking to him, Abe, but in the meantime, would you make sure the charges are all set."

"Already done," he said. "I kept busy while you were down there."

He handed Goldberg a switch at the end of a thin wire. I saw Goldberg's intention and I lunged to stop him but it was too late, he hit the switch and there was a long, low rumble from deep in the ground as the charges ignited. A jet of smoke, flame and dirt shot up into the night sky.

We were silent for a few seconds. There was only one possible way out of here now that Goldberg had literally told the Viet Cong that we were here.

"We need to retrace our steps to the house of Le Van Ho," I said to them. "Abe, you're good at hiding our backtrail, can you take rearguard, Paul, will you help out?"

"Glad to," he said. Goldberg looked rather taken aback that I'd taken command.

"Hoffman, I'll organise this, we've got a perfectly good escape plan."

"Colonel, you've just stirred up a hornet's nest firing off the charges prematurely. How soon before your people can come in and get us out?"

"About thirty minutes after we all them, no more than that."

"We've got ten minutes at best, then there'll be at least a battalion of Viet Cong turning up to start shooting at us. They'll have anti-aircraft guns deployed in this area and they'll be itching to use them. If you call those

choppers in here now they'll be shot out of the sky."

He was silent for a moment, realising the magnitude of the tactical error he had made. Finally he nodded. "Ok, you're right, I guess. Let's go."

"The whole area will be buzzing with the enemy, so we need to make as little noise as possible."

"What about the Major?" Diem pointed out. "If he thinks his friends are nearby he will shout to them."

"You're right. Helene, give him some more morphine to knock him out. Otherwise we'll have to kill him."

She looked shocked, but she broke the end from an ampoule and injected him.

"Right, let's go."

We surged along the narrow path that led back to Trang Bang and the shelter of Le Van Ho's house. I estimated we'd gone half way before a stream of machine gun bullets hammered over our heads.

"Cover, take cover," Goldberg shouted. We flung ourselves into the jungle at the side of the path, Goldberg lay next to me.

"It must be some sort of a fixed sentry post, the tunnel explosion woke them up, we'll have to deal with that machine gun, we need to get past them quickly."

"It's my responsibility, I'll deal with it," Goldberg said grimly. He took two grenades off his webbing and started to crawl forward.

"Do you need any help, Colonel?" I asked him. He shook his head and kept on crawling.

Another burst sprayed over our heads. I assumed they knew we must have Son. To kill him with a stray bullet would be tantamount to a death sentence for the man that pulled the trigger. After about a minute there were two huge explosions and Goldberg came running back.

"They're gone, we can move out."

I stood up and called to the others. We picked up the pace, as much as we could carrying an unconscious man. We were about half a mile from our destination and I was beginning to think we'd make it, at least that far, when we ran around a bend in the path and we were finished. In the moonlight we could see a Soviet made Degtyaryov machine gun was set up on the ground, the gunner and crewman lying grimly on the ground behind it. They were flanked by a group of soldiers, North Vietnamese regulars, the familiar solar topee helmets marking them as different to the Viet Cong. In front of them

stood an officer holding a pistol in one hand and a loudhailer in the other. Suddenly a searchlight clicked on and we were flooded with dazzling bright light.

"Drop your weapons or we will shoot," he barked in good English.

"They won't shoot with Son here," Goldberg whispered. "We can take them."

I was amused at how little he understood the communists.

"Colonel, even Giap would shoot his son if it was the only way to beat us. We're out of options, it's over."

He slumped, realising the truth in what I said. These people were no respecters of human life, for sure. We threw our weapons to the ground. Six soldiers ran up and picked them up, four more came up and covered us with their assault rifles. The officer walked up to us.

"I am Major Ho Van Ba, where is Major Son?"

Helene stepped forward. "Son is well, Major Ba. I gave him a shot to ease the pain, but other than that he is fine."

"Ah, the French doctor, yes. So you were escaping with these men, were you?"

She said nothing, just stood looking at him with icy disdain. I admired her more than ever at that moment, she was totally unfazed by the armed Viets surrounding us. Ba looked at her and then nodded.

"It is as well for you that Major Son is unwounded. Release him, my men will escort you into custody."

We followed a group of soldiers, several walked behind us, their assault rifles cocked and ready to fire, they made a big show of showing us how ready they were to shoot.

They herded us into a stone building in the middle of the town, before we went in they frisked us one by one and found some of the weapons that had been hidden in our uniforms. Abe Woltz had a small automatic hidden in an ankle holster and Colonel Goldberg a combat knife in a sheath behind his back. Both men received a series of heavy blows to their heads for their pains. Our prison was probably a secure storeroom once upon a time, there were no windows and the door was made of thick timber, reinforced with iron slats. The roof was corrugated iron, at first glance there seemed no way out of it, other than the door we'd come in. Helene tended to Goldberg and Woltz's cuts and scrapes as we discussed the situation.

"Any ideas?" I asked them quietly. They all shook their heads. "Major

Diem?"

He smiled. "I'm afraid not, it would seem this is a good time to pray."

"The only praying I've ever done was with a large gun in my hand," Ritter said angrily. "Or even better the fire buttons of a Messerschmitt's cannon and machine guns. We'll need to do better than praying."

"But we don't have a large gun, or a Messerschmitt 109, my friend," I chuckled.

"Not yet we don't, but maybe we'll see an opportunity to grab a gun, you never know."

Goldberg snorted. "I wouldn't count on it, these guys seem to know what they're doing."

I had to agree with him, they weren't likely to drop their guard, but there was always hope. Then the door opened. Major Ba stood there, flanked by four of his men with AK47s pointed at us. "Who is in charge here?" he demanded.

Goldberg stepped forward. "That'd be me."

Ba eyed him for a few moments. "Good. You will come with us."

Goldberg walked forward and was seized by two soldiers. They marched him out and the door shut again with an ominous crash. We looked at each other in the gloom, then settled down to wait. The screams started about fifteen minutes later, the screams of the Colonel being tortured. It was searing, drilling through our minds like a red hot needle.

I was holding my wife tightly, in spite of our capture her nearness was something that I could treasure, I was certain she felt the same too. But it would be perfect if we could get back to our home and out daughter in Saigon. I was working on it already, calculating, looking at guard routines, activity around the building, looking for cracks and crevices in their security. Helene was sobbing, shaking with despair, rescued and recaptured within the hour, hope dashed and replaced by the agonised sounds of Goldberg's torture. She whispered to me, her voice strained and hoarse. "Will we ever get out of here, Jurgen?"

"I've got out of worse," I said, trying to make light of a desperate situation.

But she was too clever to be deceived, she just smiled wistfully. We could hear shouting, the sound of heavy blows on human flesh, a Vietnamese voice screaming questions, Goldberg's voice in reply, loud, defiant. Then a short pause before his screams started again. I vowed there and then that I

would find the bastard that was doing it and put a bullet in his head if it was humanly possible. War was brutal, but there was an awful inhumanity in what they were doing to the Colonel. The screams stopped and a few minutes later the door crashed open. Two soldiers dragged in Goldberg's limp body, threw it to the ground whilst two others covered us with AK47s, then turned and left, the door crashed shut and the heavy lock rattled. Helene rushed over to check out Goldberg.

He had been branded with a hot iron, his body was stripped to the waist and burned to the bone in parts. He was suffering badly, his mind almost lost in the hell of the agony he was suffering. He was muttering, "I don't know anything, nothing. Please, no.."

We looked at each other. He needed urgent medical treatment and we had been stripped of even the most basic necessities. Helene did her best, we had a little water and she tried to clean him up and soothe his physical wounds as well as murmur quietly to him to ease his mental wounds.

No one slept that night, we all dreaded the door banging open and another of us being dragged out for torture, but the door stayed shut. In the morning they brought us fresh water and a bucket of rice slop, evidently our breakfast. We ate, if we were to survive this ordeal we would the energy that we could glean from every single calorie of the disgusting mess. Then we waited. Ritter prowled around the room, searching every nook and cranny for a possible weakness. In the end he sat down, exhausted. Goldberg lapsed into an uneasy sleep, or possibly unconsciousness. It was interrupted by nightmares when he twitched and jerked sometimes shouting and raving.

"He needs treatment in a hospital," Helene said to all of us. "When they come we must insist that take care of him properly, or at least give us the means to do it. He needs morphine, ointment for his burns, antibiotics for the infection as well as basic bandages and dressings."

I nodded. "I'll ask them when they come, Helene. We all will."

It was quiet throughout the day. The Viet Cong slept through the day and began operations in the night, in order to avoid surveillance. Shortly after dark, Ba came back to us with six soldiers as escort. The door crashed open and he stood there looking at us balefully. He was about to speak when Helene went over and began haranguing him.

"The man you tortured needs medical attention, Major, I have a list of..."

He punched her in the face, so hard that she spun over and fell to the

ground. We leapt up to defend her but the soldiers levelled their assault rifles and the major quickly produced a small automatic pistol. Ignoring Helene completely, as if she had never even spoken to him, or he had not hit her so hard, he started shouting at us.

"You are all terrorists and spies, you will be questioned about your counter-revolutionary activities and then put on trial. When you are convicted you will be shot. You," he pointed straight at me.

"You will come first." He turned to his men. "Bring him, make sure he does not escape."

* * *

*'The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.'*

*Robert McNamara 1967*

"Mr President, we need men, pure and simple. That's the equation, give us the troops and we can prevail militarily, at least."

"You've had a lot more men already, Earle, we can't just keep throwing our young men into South East Asia, people are starting to ask when we're going to get out of that particular war, not get even more involved. It's just not popular."

"I understand, Sir, but I'm not asking for more troops to be sent over immediately, we need to recruit more to be stationed on U.S. soil as a reserve for when they're needed in any of our overseas commitments."

Johnson shook his head. "The electorate won't wear it, General, you know as well as I do. Recruits are getting harder to locate, lots of our young people are evading the draft, many going overseas. The numbers of volunteers is on the floor and the prospect of sending more of our people to their deaths in Vietnam is not one that appeals to me. They're dying for nothing. Robert, you agree, don't you?"

McNamara nodded. "Absolutely, Sir. The plain fact is we're not getting anywhere. The war is stalemated."

“That’s just not true,” Wheeler reacted angrily. “Our men are pushing the communists hard, enemy casualties are at an all time high, we’re winning the war, gentlemen.”

“Our people don’t know that, though, do they?” the President fired back. “A fortnight ago we were still getting reports from General Westmoreland that the Viet Cong were almost finished as a fighting force, that the war was as good as won. Then they start the new offensive and it seems that everything we’ve been told was, quite frankly, nothing more than fantasy.”

“Sir, there are steps being taken over in Vietnam that we feel will bring the war to a much speedier conclusion. But what we really need is the go ahead for more extensive bombing operations.”

“We’re looking at that,” McNamara interjected hastily.

“Mr Secretary, I’m aware of your views on the bombing, but I’m afraid that we have to be able to bring our technology to bear on the enemy if we are to make any substantial gains.”

“Bombing a few innocent civilians in mud huts isn’t going to bring about the end of the war, General. All it will do is recruit more soldiers for the enemy,” McNamara continued.

“Mr Secretary,” Wheeler went on, “If I could remind you of MACV Directive 381-41, specifically as it concerns our new Phoenix program. The intent of Phoenix is to attack the NLF with a rifle shot rather than a shotgun approach. We plan to target key political leaders, command/control elements and activists in the VCI. Studies have shown and you are correct in your assumptions, that heavy-handed operations, such as random cordons and searches, large-scale and lengthy detentions of innocent civilians, and excessive use of firepower are detrimental to the war effort. They definitely have a negative effect on the civilian population. We also plan to capture NLF members rather than kill them, after all, these people need to see that we behave differently to the communists.”

“How is Phoenix progressing, General?  Have you had any successes?”

“We’ve got a mission under way at present, Sir. We’re waiting to hear the result.”

Wheeler almost crossed his fingers, he knew full well that Colonel Goldberg’s operation to take out the Viet Cong leader responsible for the Saigon offensive was not strictly part of the Phoenix program, but it was near enough.

“Would you let me know when you do hear?” Johnson asked him.

“Yes, immediately, Mr President.”

“Good. Now, about the bombing, where are we there?”

“As you know, Mr President, Operation Rolling Thunder is continuing and constantly under review. In addition, we have the ongoing strikes against the Ho Chi Minh trail as well as the defoliation program, Operation Ranch Hand.”

Operation Ranch Hand was a U.S. Military operation that started in 1962, part of the overall herbicidal warfare program during the Vietnam War called Operation Trail Dust. Ranch Hand involved spraying an estimated twenty million U.S. gallons of defoliants and herbicides over rural areas of South Vietnam in an attempt to deprive the Viet Cong of vegetation cover and food. In 1964 the Federation of American Scientists objected to the use of chemical and biological weapons, stating that they felt the program violated the Geneva Protocol of 1925. The American Association for the Advancement of Science issued a resolution in 1966 calling for a field investigation of the herbicide program in Vietnam. In 1967 seventeen Nobel Laureates and five thousand other scientists signed a petition asking for the immediate end to the use of herbicides in Vietnam. Johnson was uneasy about that side of the war effort.

The President sat pondering where to go next. The two men waited patiently.

“We’ll continue as planned for now, we won’t change anything. But it’s no good pretending I’m happy, because I’m not. And now this Tet thing, which contradicts everything that came out of MACV, it could be the beginning of the end.”

“But we’re beating them hands down, Mr President,” Wheeler objected.

“So you say, Earle, but remember what Ho Chi Minh said, if they lose twenty men for every one of ours they kill, they’ll pay the price. Can we pay that kind of a price?”

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was silent. So was McNamara, but everyone in Washington knew that the Secretary of Defence was on his way out.

“Keep me posted on that Phoenix program mission, General. At least one bit of good news would be welcome. That’s all.”

The two men left the Oval Office. Wheeler spoke to his aide.

“Get me an update on that mission into the Triangle, find out if they’ve heard anything.”

“Yes, Sir,” the aide saluted and went to find the radio room.

# CHAPTER 7

*‘The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.’*

*Roger Allen LaPorte, an American pacifist who set himself on fire in protest of American policies in Vietnam.*

They fell on me and tied my hands behind my back with heavy cord while the other soldiers covered the others. Then they led me out and relocked the door. I was taken to a nearby house and pushed into an office. They forced me to sit on a wooden chair, two soldiers stood either side of me and two behind, their rifles pointed at me. Major Ba sat behind the desk and studied me for a few moments.

“You are Jurgen Hoffman, husband of Helene Hoffman, the doctor?”

I was surprised that he knew that much about me, but I should have guessed that being in Vietnam for as long as I had, they would have a substantial file on me. Besides, I had truly been a thorn in their sides, at least, I hoped I had.

“Part of our tunnel system has been destroyed, what can you tell me about it?”

Ba glared at me and I ignored it. He had an ugly face, not unlike a monkey, it was an easy face to ignore.

“You will answer me, what happened in the tunnel? Who ordered the explosives to be set? There are many men missing, presumed dead, I want to know what happened to them.”

His voice had risen to almost a scream. “You have damaged property of the People’s Revolution, someone must pay.”

I lost it then. “And what about my property, you ugly bastard? What about my two aircraft and my hangar? What about my house invaded, my wife kidnapped? Your People’s Revolution isn’t worth a pile of turd.”

He was shocked for a moment, then he ran around the desk, the guards held me and he started punching me in the face. He barked an order, the

guards threw me to the floor and he laid into me with his boots. Finally he stopped. I wasn't badly hurt, nothing was broken, he'd struck out in rage and as usually happened, his blows were poorly timed and delivered. His guards hauled me back up into the chair.

"It is a crime to make such remarks about our revolution," he continued.

I ignored him. Whatever he was going to do was already decided, I wasn't going to give him any satisfaction. Finally they dragged me back to the prison and dragged out the next victim, Jack Bond. One by one they took us until we had all been interrogated, all except Helene. The process was lengthy, by the time the last prisoner had been brought back, Ritter von Schacht, it was already starting to get light. The Viet Cong working day was coming to an end and all military activity started to wind down, until the immediate vicinity had gone quiet. We were all exhausted and settling down to get some rest when the door lock rattled and opened, Ba stood there, flanked by his guards.

"It is the decision of the military command that you are all to be executed as spies, sentences to be carried out at midnight tonight. Execution will be by pistol bullet to the back of the head. Long live the revolution."

He smiled coldly, spun on his heel and marched out, barking orders. The door slammed shut and was locked.

Goldberg was beginning to recover, though God knows how. He had managed to get some rest and with Helene's help, was trying to get some circulation moving in his battered body. The pain he must have been in was horrifying, but he made no complaint. We sat around and held a council of war. Paul spoke first, he had obviously been looking at any possible options that might be open to us.

"I see the only way out of here is to jump them when they come for us. If they have six guards and Ba, we should be able to take them."

Woltz was sceptical. "We're unarmed, Paul, against six assault rifles as well as the Major's pistol. They're not good odds."

"They're the only odds we've got," Ritter put in acidly. "So we'd better get used to them."

We talked about how it would work, jump the guards, grab at least one of their assault rifles. Providing that Ba didn't start shooting first with his pistol and providing that there were no other guards outside the prison. Providing there were not a hundred other imponderables we hadn't thought

of. But as Ritter had said, they were the only odds we had. We tried to get some rest, we'd need all the energy we could summon for our breakout attempt. Then the door lock rattled. It was only midday, much earlier than we'd anticipated, we weren't ready and they'd caught us by surprise. An officer in the uniform of the People's Army of Vietnam came into the room. It was Le Van Minh.

He held up a finger for quiet. "The guards are all asleep, if we hurry we can get you away."

"Minh, this is fantastic," I said to him as we scrambled out through the door. "How did you manage it?"

"Someone gave the guards some bottles of captured American whisky and dared them to drink it, said they weren't as tough as the Americans. They drank the lot."

I smiled as we ran along the track that led away from the prison. The guards were collapsed close to each other, their faces smiling happily in sleep. They wouldn't be happy when Ba found them. Probably he'd have them executed for dereliction of duty. That was their problem. Minh led us to a building that was on the eastern side of Trang Bang, well away from both the prison and his house. Two young boys approached us with a small handcart. Inside the cart were our weapons and radio that they'd lifted from Ba's headquarters. We were back in business. We went through a side door into the house and the boys followed pushing their cart. We were shown into a bare, empty room where we picked out our weapons and equipment, Bond checked the radio.

"It's all working, I can contact Saigon any time."

Goldberg looked at him, his face was strained and stretched with the pain he was suffering.

"Send them a brief signal, Jack, I don't want anything intercepted. 'Mission ongoing, will need possible backup and extraction during next four hours.' That's it."

Bond spoke briefly into the radio, nodded as the acknowledgment came through on his headphones, then turned off the set.

"They've been messing with the set, the batteries are almost gone. Maybe one more transmission, maybe another two, that'll be about it."

"That should be enough," Goldberg said.

He looked terrible, he was sliding backwards, clearly his treatment had hit him harder than any of us had realised. Then he collapsed, his eyes rolled

upwards in his head and he lay on the ground unconscious. Helene immediately rushed to check him over. She listened to his breathing, then put her head on his chest and listened. Goldberg's breathing had become very erratic, he was gasping for air, his body starting to shake. His skin went blue, then he jerked and stopped breathing altogether. Helene started to give him mouth to mouth resuscitation, she worked hard to get him breathing again but after ten minutes or so she gave up and stood up.

"He's dead, I'm sorry."

We just stood there in shock. Then Minh came into the room.

"You need to get moving now, when the Viet Cong find out what has happened they'll alert the whole countryside," he looked down at Goldberg, then up at us. "Dead?"

I nodded.

"We will dispose of the body, don't worry, we'll see he gets a burial. Now please, go before the communists realise who is helping you."

I held out my hand. "Thank you, Minh."

We shook hands. "Good luck."

I looked at Major Diem. With Goldberg gone he was the most senior officer. "Major?"

He nodded. "I will lead, let's go."

We left the house and started along the jungle path that Minh had told us to take. As we were unburdened by any casualties we were able to make good time, we were almost running. I held Helene's hand, I'd intended to pull her along but she seemed quicker than me, she was very lithe and athletic and she ran on slightly ahead.

"How far are we from Saigon?" she asked me breathlessly.

"About thirty miles. About two days on foot."

"I don't think we have two days, do we?"

I shook my head. "We'll be lucky if we have two hours. But they should pick us up, they'll be sending in a helicopter."

"And if they don't?"

I didn't answer. We ran on, must have got five miles before we hit trouble. It was a causeway between two rice paddies and initial reconnaissance showed it to be clear, so we dashed across. The first bullets whistled over our heads and we dived for cover, sliding down the slope towards the rank, foul smelling water. Then a machine gun opened up, a long burst stirred up the water but he couldn't quite see us.

“This’ll alert them for miles,” Diem said. “Sergeant, would you call for air support?”

“Sure thing.” Bond took out the radio and called it in. “They’re sending in a gunship, it’s only a few minutes out, they need us to mark where we are.”

“Does anyone have a brightly coloured piece of cloth?” I asked them.

They all shook their heads. Then Helene ripped off her shirt and removed her bra, a bright blue silk garment I had bought her years before. Their eyes almost popped out at her naked breasts.

“Will this do it?” she asked innocently.

“Er, yeah, I guess,” Jack said. He hit transmit and told them we would be waving a bright blue brassiere.”

“Would you repeat that?” came back through the speaker. Then the set died.

“I think they got it,” he said.

I took hold of Helene’s bra while she buttoned her shirt back on. If anyone was going to wave her bra in the Vietnamese countryside, it would be me, her husband. We kept our heads down and heard the approaching ‘whop whop’ of a helicopter. Then it came into view, a Cobra gunship. I waved the bra and saw a hand wave out of the open door in acknowledgment. The machine gunner realised their danger and switched their aim to the gunship, there were two riflemen there too, they both started firing short bursts. They missed, then the nose of the gunship swivelled around and fired. It sounded like a revving engine, a machine-like noise as thousands of rounds hit the Viet Cong position. Their guns fell silent and we climbed back up to the causeway and carried on running. We reached the end of the path and came across the remains of the Viet Cong ambush, three soldiers, their bodies unrecognisable after the gunfire had shredded them. I saw Helene shudder with distaste, but it was them or us.

Then we stopped. In front of us the Viet Cong had a long line of defences, slit trenches that formed part of the natural contours of the land, widened and fortified for emergencies. Even as we looked, guerrillas were swarming into the defences as if from nowhere.

“We’ve come upon one of their main tunnel systems,” Paul said laconically.

“I can see that, the question is how do we get past them?”

“I think we’ll have to leave that to the Americans.”

The gunship fired burst after burst at the defenders. A few fell but the

rest sheltered behind the timber and earth bulwarks of their defences. Then they started firing with a heavy machine gun, forcing the gunship up and away from us. We could clearly see the machine gunner, squatting behind the shield of a Russian built Degtyaryov 12.7mm machine gun. The heavy bullets reached out for the gunship but the pilot jinked away and avoided the burst. Then it was his turn, once again the nose swivelled around and the awful sound of the minigun reached us, simultaneously the rain of bullets showered the machine gun position. They were clever, sheltered behind a dense shield of timber and earth and although the gunner was thrown back to fall bleeding and shredded to the ground, another man stepped up to the gun and brought it to bear again.

The duel between the machine gun and the gunship continued. It was a one sided event, or should have been, the awesome destructive power of the gunship gradually whittled away at the defences and another gunner fell. But another one stepped up to take his place, then a second Degtyaryov 12.7mm started firing from about three hundred yards away. They'd obviously brought one up from underground and suddenly the helicopter became vulnerable. The Viet Cong scored a hit for the Cobra started trailing smoke and began limping away in the direction of Saigon. We looked around for an escape route but all we saw was a huge phalanx of Viet Cong running towards us.

"I estimate at least a battalion," Paul said to me quietly. "They seem determined to get us back."

"Any suggestions?"

He smiled. "Not this time. Now we really do need a miracle."

We didn't get our miracle, what we did get was a squadron of F4 Phantoms out of Tan Son Nhat. They swept across the countryside, flying low. I waved Helene's bright blue bra, but it wasn't necessary, the gunship must have given them accurate coordinates. The first two aircraft out of eight flew across the VC positions, dropping canisters from under their wings. The canisters hit the ground and huge gouts of flame flowed over the enemy, even from five hundred yards away we could hear their screams. Two more Phantoms roared in and dropped their napalm. Where the bombs landed the burning napalm spread out and dropped down into the trenches and foxholes. It was especially effective against the trenches and improvised protection they had constructed, the drainage and irrigation ditches where the enemy were spread out along a wide front. The effect was devastating, but the

Phantoms were not finished. The second wing, four aircraft zoomed into the attack. They were fitted with Vulcan cannon in pods, designed for both air to air and ground attack after the early Phantoms felt the lack of close quarter armament.

This time they were used against the Viet Cong besieging us. Both machine guns had fallen silent after the napalm attacks, now the Viet Cong had nothing to fire back with. A few AK47s fired bursts at the incoming aircraft, a light machine gun was hurriedly set up but just as quickly swept aside in a hail of cannon fire.

The lighter minigun of the gunship had had little effect against the primitive earthworks and thick balks of timber, but the Vulcan cannon churned them into muddy splinters. The enemy battalion literally melted before our eyes, many of them destroyed by the massive weight of gunfire. But I knew it was only half the story, this area was riddled with tunnels, many of the guerrillas were simply disappearing into their holes in the ground, from where they had complete freedom of movement to move around the area and pop back virtually anywhere they chose. The firing died down, but we were still unable to move out. The VC positions lay between us and Saigon. We were back to stalemate.

The Phantoms patrolled above us, occasionally they came in to attack when they saw the enemy moving. There was little that was visible to us, but we knew they were there. Then a Cessna arrived high overhead. Used for reconnaissance and battlefield command and control, it was obvious that the military were stepping up their rescue mission. Then a flight of gunships appeared, Huey UH-1s fitted with a door mounted minigun. They went into action, hovering over the enemy position and hosing them down with precision gunfire every time a Viet Cong soldier put his head up.

We waited a little longer and sure enough, a troop carrying helicopter came in towards us, a Sikorsky S-61R military transport helicopter, the backbone of the search and rescue operations during the Vietnam War. With a crew of three it could carry more than twenty passengers, even when fitted with door gunners, as this one was. Two M60 machine guns were mounted, one either side, each crewed by a gunner wearing a heavy flak jacket. The helicopter touched down twenty yards away from us, we were already moving towards it. The loadmaster appeared in the doorway, beckoning us on. A burst of machine gun fire hit the body of the Sikorski, then the Phantoms swooped and the machine gun fell silent.

Ritter was the last man aboard the aircraft, even as his foot left the ground we shot up into the sky. Another machine gun opened up but he missed completely, then it too was obliterated by the thunderous gunfire of the Vulcan cannons. We were still climbing, soon we were out of range of all but the heaviest guns of the enemy and the pilot set course for Saigon. The helicopter was going flat out, behind us the gunships were keeping station, but it was no escort. The Phantoms flashed past, leaving the area, then the first of the bombs began to fall. The loadmaster shouted across to us.

"They redirected a strike on the Ho Chi Minh trail, when the brass heard you were in trouble they alerted the bombers. They were passing overhead anyway, so they've just been waiting for us to clear the area."

The first bombs hit, we couldn't hear the whistle of them falling but when they hit the shock wave seemed to hurl the helicopter forward, it staggered in the air and the pilot fought to keep it in level flight. The next salvo of bombs fell, once again our helicopter lurched and staggered. It went on and on, an endless rain of destructive power, the most awesome explosive devastation that has been unleashed from the sky, short of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. Even when we approached Saigon we could still hear their destructive power smashing the countryside for miles around the paddy fields and fortifications that lay to the east of Trang Bang. Then we were hit, the aircraft mortally wounded.

The pilot expertly brought the Sikorski down for a landing, the burst of machine gun fire from the ground had hit something critical and both of the General Electric T58-10 turboshafts had cut out almost instantaneously. We landed in a field, overhead the gunships had started to hunt for the machine gun, they fired burst after burst and only stopped firing when it fell silent. Jack Bond asked the pilot for our position.

"We're about eight miles out from Saigon," he said. The crew were arming themselves with M16s, ready to take on a Viet Cong assault if it came. Where there was one enemy machine gun position, there could well be others. And assault troops.

"I've radioed for a pick up, they need about ten minutes to reach us," the pilot said.

I nodded and looked around. "I don't think we've got ten minutes, my friend, I think it's time to get out of here."

Diem took command, as was his right. He pointed southeast. "We'll head off at a tangent, follow the contours of the ground, let's go."

“Major,” Ritter shouted, “give me half a minute, we’ll take the M60s.”

Diem nodded. “Hurry, we’re running low on time.”

Ritter and Paul unclipped the machine guns from their mounts and draped the ammunition belts over their shoulders. The door gunners looked sheepish at their weapons being commandeered, but they were planning on abandoning them, so there was little argument. Besides, they still wore their heavy flak armour, I suspected the added weight of the M60s would prove to be too much for them to carry if they were to keep up.

Diem led the way and we stumbled along after him. I helped Ritter with the burden of his M60, the loadmaster saw what I was doing and helped out Paul. We kept away from the enemy fire that swept overhead occasionally. The gunships had headed back to Saigon, obviously to refuel, but the Phantoms came back and circled overhead, but this time their targets were much better hidden, or they were cleverer. They waited for the Phantoms to be furthest away, then they popped up and took pot shots at us. Fortunately, no one was hit and we made good time. We were heading for a line of trees, a thin strip of jungle, when a group of Viet Cong stepped out and started shooting at us. Every time the Phantoms came around they ducked into the jungle and disappeared, then raked us again with gunfire when they sky was clear. We had to take cover and couldn’t move any further, the ground ahead was empty of cover, if they caught us there we’d be mown down.

“Time for some SS tactics”, Ritter shouted. “Give us a few minutes, Paul and I are going to set up the M60s on the flank.”

I nodded and kept my head down, I held Helene close to me. She’d been in a few actions but was not a trained soldier, I didn’t want her to get hit due to an incautious look at the enemy. My two friends disappeared, hiding in parallel folds in the ground, I spoke rapidly to Diem and explained what was needed.

“You’re right, the longer we wait here, the more reinforcements they’ll call up to stop us. The whole countryside is alive with Viet Cong, they’re obviously still pressing the Tet assaults on the city.”

The helicopter crew declined to have any part of our mad plan, but Jack Bond was with us. Three of us against at least a platoon of Viet Cong, but we had our ace in the hole. They were too crafty to be caught by the fighter bombers patrolling overhead, it was time to see what a more basic tactic would achieve. The bombers circled away and the first of the enemy faces appeared in the jungle ahead, then they all broke cover. We charged. We

screamed and shouted, firing from the hip. I hadn't done this since the days of the Indochina war, where necessity had sometimes demanded that we meet the enemy head on. I'd have preferred to fix bayonets, they always had a psychological impact, twelve inches of cold steel at the end of an assault rifle charging at you was a sobering prospect, but we didn't have bayonets.

They were too stupefied to react at first, they had us outnumbered and outgunned, we were supposed to be cowering behind cover. The few seconds of delay were enough, I felt a bullet graze me arm, then we reached the first of the enemy and we were in amongst them.

We kept up a barrage of gunfire, emptying clip after clip. When we were amongst them we had a decided advantage, wherever we turned we had targets to shoot at, they were hesitant, demoralised by our astonishingly reckless tactics.

We were fighting hand to hand, forced to draw out knives and start a series of bloody struggles, for a few moments the tide turned against us as their greater numbers began to tell. Diem took a knife thrust in the shoulder, he manfully pressed on the attack but he was bleeding profusely. Paul and Ritter had to stop firing because of the danger of hitting us, Jack Bond was limping as he fought, a bullet lodged in his upper thigh. I thought we'd had it when Ritter and Paul came howling in from the flanks and the pilot and gunners, seeing the urgency and desperation of our struggle, ran forward to join in. It was enough to tip the balance, the Viet Cong turned and ran, disappearing into the jungle.

We stood panting for a few minutes, looking at the carnage we had created. The Phantoms had hit some of the Viet Cong when they first arrived, we had killed at least another ten by the time the fight was over, the bodies lay festooned on the ground. Helene came running up and began to check out our wounds, but there was little time to spare. As soon as the enemy recovered their wits they'd come back at us, we needed to get as far away from them as possible.

The Phantoms were still circling, so we had our air cover. Helene was putting a bandage on Jack Bond's wound, but I dragged her away.

"There's no time for that, we need to get away from here fast."

"But he'll bleed to death if I don't finish dressing his wound," she protested.

"He'll bleed to death from the next Viet Cong attack if we're not out of here right away," I told her. "He'll have to manage, let's go."

She noticed my arm then. “Jurgen, you’ve been hit too.”

I shook my head. “Scratched it on a branch, let’s go.”

We stumbled across the open ground, away from the Viet Cong. There was a clump of trees ahead of us, the other side an open piece of flat ground. Two Hueys were on the way to take us off, I wanted a screen between us and the enemy while we were embarking. We reached the trees and stumbled through the tangle of vines and undergrowth that plucked at our legs. It slowed us down and I was worried we wouldn’t make it. Then we emerged from the other side and into the open ground. In the distance the Hueys were approaching, we quickened our pace towards the open space where they would land. Then the Viet Cong opened up again with a heavy machine gun. We threw ourselves flat and the stream of heavy bullets flew overhead. They’d somehow flanked us, anticipating where we were headed and brought the machine gun around to bear on the landing ground. Another machine gun started to fire, this time at the Hueys. They shot up into the sky, too vulnerable to the weight of ground fire to risk coming in to land. Then two more Hueys hurtled towards the battlefield, but these were not UH-1’s, they were Huey Cobra armoured gunships.

The miniguns started their song of death, the ripping, tearing sound of thousands of metal jacketed slugs hurtling towards the enemy. They’d set up in the jungle, out of sight of the patrolling aircraft, but the slower moving Cobras were able to calculate their positions and send their rain of hot metal directly into the area where they sheltered. The bullets were part incendiary and I could see smoke rising from where they had struck. It was enough for the Phantoms, still patiently patrolling overhead. Now they had a target. The jet engines roared in, the Cobras politely flew to one side to give them space and the Vulcan cannons started hurling huge quantities of explosive shells at the targets that the Cobras had lit up for them. We never saw the end result, it was hidden behind the screen of the jungle, but the machine guns stopped abruptly and when the guns stopped firing and the aircraft flew away, we could hear some of the screams faintly in the distance.

The Hueys came in to land close by and they helped us on board. Helene, not to be deterred, took the opportunity even before the helicopter left the ground to start bandaging our wounds, starting with Jack Bond’s leg that was a bloody mess. We left the ground and the pilot set course for Saigon. I thought about our mission, we lost two men, Aaron Goldberg and Jack Russo, but the blow we’d dealt the enemy was enormous. I’d like to

have killed Major Ba with my bare hands for the torture he'd inflicted on Goldberg, but had to content myself with the possibility that he would be dealt with by Hanoi for allowing us to escape. We'd killed Dung Vo Phuc, the VC commander in charge of the assaults on Saigon, I wondered if it would slow them down. Probably not, but what we had achieved was bringing small and even medium sized units to battle and seeing them destroyed in the process, whether by gunfire, explosives in the tunnel system, B-52 bombing raids or the devastating miniguns and Vulcan cannon of the Hueys and Phantoms. That, in itself, would certainly slow down the attacks on Saigon, the simple mathematics of attrition, killing the enemy. If we were to look at any real success of the mission, it would be there, in sapping the enemies will and ability to fight. Then I thought about Son.

Helene came to me and started to bandage my arm. Our eyes met.

"Thank God it's all over," she said to me. But it wasn't over, I explained about Son. "Didn't he remind you of anyone?"

"Yes, I believe she did."

"We'll need to deal with it as soon as we get back," I said firmly.

"I don't want any more deaths, Jurgen."

"We nearly lost everything. We can't just ignore it, we could get hit again at any time."

"No more killing, Jurgen, please!"

I didn't reply, I didn't always have a choice in these matters. The crewman came across to have a word with us, shouting over the roar of the engines.

"We'll be landing at Saigon racetrack, Sir. You know they took out the helipad at Tan Son Nhat?"

I nodded. "I do, yes."

"Ok. Well, the racetrack has been allocated as a temporary landing field, so they'll lay on transport to take you on from there back to Tan Son Nhat, they want you to report in at MACV."

"Very well."

He went back to speak to the pilot. Helene rested her head on my shoulder as the aircraft flew on, soon the racetrack came into view, covered with helicopters, vehicles, refuelling tankers, armourers and men running everywhere to keep the Hueys flying. The skids touched the grass and we climbed stiffly out onto the ground. Helene had just said 'thank God it's over', but it wasn't over, not by any means. The Viet Cong, repulsed from the

city, were counterattacking.

* * *

*'I've seen major changes in Vietnam, however there are still problems and difficulties that need to be overcome.'*
*Vo Nguyen Giap*

The smell of smoke was rank, acrid, lingering in every nook and cranny, a permanent reminder of the recent attack. There was an air of pessimism in the room, the unthinkable had happened, the enemy had actually penetrated their inner tunnel system and caused terrible damage to their efforts to successfully assault Saigon.

"So Phuc is dead?" Binh asked them.

He already knew the answer, of course, that was part of the craft of a politician, a commissar, always know the answer to a question before you asked it. That way you never got hit with the unexpected. Major Ba inclined his head.

"I am afraid so, his body was buried in the explosion but we understand from Comrade Son that he was already dead. He was meeting with some of the local commanders to go over the new deployments. They all died."

"Except for Major Son," Binh said acidly.

"Yes, of course, no doubt they saw him as a good hostage to take back with them to Saigon."

"A pity you allowed them to escape," Minh continued.

Ba shot him a vicious look, both knew that someone on the outside had helped them, possibly Special Forces. There was no way to prevent it.

"Enough of this," Son said loudly. His face was still screwed up in pain, but he was determined to do his best to repair some of the damage these fools had created.

"We need to continue the offensive, Dung or no Dung. How do we stand?"

"The Sixth Viet Cong Battalion has been ordered to attack the Phu Tho Racetrack, Comrades. The Americans and their Vietnamese puppets have started to establish the racetrack as a helicopter base to replace their facility at Tan Son Nhat that my men destroyed."

The inclined their heads. While Son had been getting himself shot and his unit decimated in Cholon for little gain, Minh had ordered a series of daring attacks on the helicopter base near Tan Son Nhat. The base had been destroyed and now the Americans were using the racetrack. So it was time to destroy that base too and deny them the use of their airpower.

"Is the racetrack well guarded?" Son asked.

Thank God he was still too wounded to take part, Major Ba thought to himself. The damn fool would go and get his head shot off, as well as the heads of the men he led into battle, just as had happened at Cholon, where some of his units were still pinned down and fighting for their lives.

"Not particularly," Binh, the Commissar said with a satisfied smirk. "It is only guarded by a few units of American military police, perhaps a hundred men in all. Evidently they do not think that lightning will strike twice in the same place. They are about to learn how wrong they are."

"So you have a thousand men of the Sixth Battalion attacking a hundred defenders, it sounds like a sound strategy, Comrade Commissar. Let us hope that they do not reinforce the defences before your attack begins."

"We go in tomorrow morning, Major Ba. There is no time for them to bring in reinforcements."

"Then you will be successful, Comrade. We wish you good fortune, are you leading the attack personally, in view of the death of Phuc?"

Binh smiled widely, the others noted the slight edge of fear that crept into the corners of his eyes, belying the easy confidence he tried to project. "Alas, no. In spite of my personal health difficulties, I wanted to lead the attack but other of our commanders insisted that they should have that honour. But I will be close to the battle to direct operations."

Both Son and Ba suppressed their smiles. They knew that if Binh was within half a mile of the action, he would be deep underground, safe in a deep, dark tunnel. Still, he was a good communist, his stirring words and persuasive, if somewhat threatening speeches had inspired thousands of men to fight for the Viet Cong. Sadly, many of them had also died for the Viet Cong. Too many. But that was the nature of war. Besides, after the war, the North would be in charge of the whole of a unified Vietnam. These people from the South, who thought they would have a hand in running the country when the Americans had left, were in for a shock. Nguyen Cong Trong, the local commander in Cu Chi, picked up a bottle of wine and poured glasses for all of them.

“Gentlemen, a toast to Comrade Binh and the soldiers who are about to crush the Americans and drive them into the sea. To victory, always to victory.”

Son and Ba, who had both enjoyed a good, communist education in Moscow paid for by the Russian government, recognised the toast. It was the caption to the well known propaganda poster carrying the image of Che Guevara, the Cuban communist deputy leader to Fidel Castro during their revolution.

‘Hasta la vittoria, siempre’.

It was most appropriate as both recalled what they had learned of the fate of Che. Many said he had been betrayed by Fidel Castro, a convenient way of getting rid of a rival who was becoming both a threat and a nuisance.

“Hasta la vittoria, siempre,” they chorused.

# CHAPTER 8

*'The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient, and as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.'*

*General William Westmoreland*

There were hastily assembled sandbag defences near the landing pad and we hurried to take shelter. Mortar shells were falling around the racetrack, machine guns spat bullets across the open spaces and it was clear that to go out in the open would be tantamount to suicide. There were only a handful of MPs bravely trying to defend the place, it was clear to me that they had a problem. The amount of mortar and machine gun fire suggested a large enemy force, perhaps a battalion in size, possibly more. There were only a few dozen MPs, I didn’t see how they could possibly hold it. An MP Captain was on the radio, urgently calling for reinforcements. Dozens of rotary wing aircraft lay smashed on the field, a testament to the ferocity of the Viet Cong attack. All over the field small units of VC were converging on the main helicopter command and control compound where we sheltered alongside the MPs and the bulk of their helicopters. A Cobra gunship flew in

for a strafing run and it poured fire down on the enemy, but a heavy machine gun opened up concealed outside the base and hit the Cobra, it seemed to stagger in the sky, then it literally exploded in mid-air. The black clad guerrillas took heart and mounted a head-on attack on a sandbagged outpost, the MPs fought back with their M60 and M16s, the barrels must have been smoking by the time the communists pulled back, leaving half their number dead and dying on the field. But there had been eight MPs in the fortified position, I could see three stretched out, dead or critically wounded. With their overwhelming numbers they could keep attacking us and sooner or later would overrun our positions. Then I heard a scream and looked behind me.

A guerrilla, heavily camouflaged, had popped up right behind our position, he was bristling with grasses and pieces of brush woven into his uniform, whether he'd been there for a long time or had crawled through the undergrowth was impossible to say, but more of his companions leapt at us screaming bloodthirsty battle cries.

"Captain, they're inside the defences," I shouted at the officer in command.

He whirled around. "MPs, behind us," he shouted.

Several of his men turned back and began to engage the Viet Cong. Paul, Ritter and I were still armed with our M2s. The door gunners shed their flak jackets and had taken back possession of their M60s and Major Diem and Jack Bond raised their M16s. Together with the MPs we let loose a hail of fire that slashed through the VCs and hurled their bodies aside to lie bloody and ruined in the grass. I estimated that ten men had attacked us, now ten bodies lay broken in front of us. But more were coming already, I could see that another fifty VC had taken advantage of our struggle with the insurgents to rush forward on the field. Now they were attacking furiously, running forward and firing in short bursts, then dropping into cover, out of sight or our guns. In the distance behind them, we could clearly see more VC massed ready for the next assault. In front of our position, it was a similar story, VC loosing off short bursts and dropping into cover whilst more of their number waited to press the attack.

The MP Captain, whose name on his tag said Parker, his full name was Norman Earl Parker, listened intently to his radio. Then he turned to his men.

"They've got two companies on the way, they're landing them from Hueys. They've got the fifth of the sixtieth mechanised infantry and the thirty-third ARVN Ranger Battalion heading this way, we just need to hang

in there.”

It was almost as if they sensed that reinforcements were en route, the communists redoubled their efforts and they launched attacks both to the front and to the rear. We fired clip after clip at the oncoming troops, the M60s slashed their ribbons of fire at the enemy columns and dozens of them fell. But it wasn’t enough, dozens more, hundreds more kept coming. There was a cry to my side and I saw Major Diem go down with a bullet to his throat, he lay against the sandbags choking up blood. One of the door gunners was flung back by a heavy burst from an AK47 that stitched across his chest and destroyed both him and his machine gun, smashing through the firing mechanism. Then the pilot of the Sikorski Jolly Green, who had picked up an M16 and was firing short, aimed bursts at the enemy, suddenly jerked and then fell back slowly. A bullet had struck him through the nose and had gone straight through his brain. As if that wasn’t enough, the second M60 suddenly jammed and our desperate rearguard action became a doomed last stand.

I was reminded of the famous battle of Thermopylae, when King Leonidas of the Spartans had led his troops in defence of the famous pass, faced with an overwhelming horde of Persians they fought on to the last man.

There were just too many of them, I wondered how the hell I could get Helene out of this, she was lying on the ground out of the firing line. She was no coward, I had my boot on her bottom, pressing her down despite her squirming constantly to get up and begin taking care of the wounded. Then I heard the distinctive noise of the Huey AH-1s approaching, we all looked up, there were at least twenty of them coming in fast, escorted by Huey and Huey Cobra gunships. Two lines of machine gun fire probed up in the sky to towards them but the enemy gunners had given away their positions and the gunships swooped, the pneumatic road-drill thunder of the miniguns spoke and the earth around the machine gunners was ploughed up with thousands of bullets as the miniguns hammered out their message of death. The first of the troop-carrying Hueys landed and suddenly the situation was different. The VC could still beat us, they had the overwhelming advantage in numbers, but the men who had just arrived beefed up our defences and now the attacker’s job was made much harder.

We kept up our barrage of fire, the VC kept up their pop up and shoot attacks, getting nearer and nearer. Then we heard the sound of engines, lots of engines, heading our way. A huge dust cloud preceded them but as we got closer we could see the silhouettes of American armoured personnel carriers.

The fifth of the sixtieth mechanised infantry and the thirty-third ARVN Ranger Battalion had arrived. They stopped adjacent to our positions and the doors swung open, men poured out and began taking up firing position. A Lieutenant Colonel emerged from one vehicle and came over to us.

"I'm Colonel Gibler, I've got two of my companies here and the ARVNs, what's your situation?"

The MP Captain hastily brought him up to speed on the situation on the battlefield. Gibler surveyed the carnage in front of him.

"You've done well to stand this long, Captain. I'll order the gunships to start a sweep of the enemy, and then we can go in and finish them."

"Yes, Sir," the captain replied, obviously relieved to have the burden of an indefensible position removed from his shoulders. In the past minutes, the whole pitch of the battle had altered. The Viet Cong were no longer faced with a few dozen MPs, the defenders now had armour, superior numbers and firepower and of course, the devastating killing power of the gunships. Then the Colonel caught sight of us.

"Mercenaries?" he asked Paul.

Schuster smiled. "We're not that well paid, Colonel. We're just guides, we did our killing in the last Vietnam War, a few years ago. We're just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The Colonel looked keenly interested when he heard the accent. "And before that?"

Paul hesitated, and then shrugged. "Russia."

"SS?"

"Waffen-SS, yes."

"So you're no strangers to fighting these people?"

"Well, no. But we were rather hoping that someone else would take up the baton now, Colonel."

He laughed. "I hope we can manage to do that. In the meantime, you've all done a good job. Radioman!" he shouted.

A corporal with a radio came rushing over to him. He picked up the handset and called in the gunships. He was quick and efficient, issuing a stream of orders that got his forces moving as one deadly, cohesive unit. The gunships went back in on the attack, chewing up the VC. The APCs had turret mounted machine guns, they traversed backwards and forward decimating the enemy in an awesome display of coordinated firepower. Soon, the situation was reversed, the Americans and the ARVN rangers moving

forward in short runs, the machine guns and miniguns keeping the VC heads down. Finally a flight of Phantoms came roaring in and dropped napalm on the remaining VC positions and many of the survivors of the attack were incinerated in the flames of jellied petroleum.

There was a strange silence that descended over the battlefield then a low noise, as the crackle of flames ate at burning equipment and uniforms that still covered their dead owners. There was an occasional cry from a man in desperate pain, but there were few of those. I even heard the wind sighing through the grass and the wrecks that littered the field.

"I think it's over," I heard Colonel Bibler tell the MP Captain.

I helped Helene to her feet. She was shaking with rage. "I should have been helping the wounded, you had no right to keep me down there like a dog."

Then she caught sight of the battlefield, the bodies strewn over the field like so many worthless logs of wood. There were hundreds of them, mainly Viet Cong, stretching all the way from our position out to the perimeter and beyond. The stench of burnt flesh was appalling. She slumped her shoulders in despair. "There are so many."

"Yes, Sophie needs a mother, my darling. You couldn't have survived out there."

Ritter and Paul came over to us. They had both sustained wounds, nothing too major and Helene patched them up with bandages she borrowed from the unit medics. Bibler was shouting orders at the men to begin operations to clear the field, this was, after all, the temporary helicopter base serving Saigon.

I asked them to look after Helene and make sure she didn't expose herself, just in case the battle was not fully over. Then I went looking for Abe Woltz. He was on the radio, presumably to the Saigon Chief of Station. He nodded a greeting. When he'd signed off, I put my request to him.

"Abe, I need a favour."

"Anything, buddy, we've been through a lot together, I reckon I owe you at least one."

"Thanks. Our daughter, Sophie is still in Cholon in our bungalow, I need to get through to her. The ARVN have a roadblock, they weren't letting anyone pass. I could do with some heavy persuasion to get me through."

He smiled broadly. "I'm in the heavy persuasion business, Jurgen, suppose I borrow some wheels and we head out there?"

I thanked him and he said he'd join us in a few minutes. I went back to the others and told them to get ready to leave.

"Where to?" Helene asked with a worried expression.

"Cholon. We're going to get Sophie."

She smiled, the first time I'd seen a genuine happy expression on her face for some time.

"That's wonderful, Jurgen. How will we get there?"

Just then an M113 armoured personnel carrier clattered up and stopped. Abe looked out.

"I think this should get us there in one piece," he grinned. "I borrowed it from the Colonel, he said he owed us a favour and lent us a driver as well. Why not jump in and we'll get moving?"

The M113 was a fully tracked armoured personnel carrier that formed the backbone of the United States Army's mechanized infantry units in Vietnam since 1962. It was in fact the most widely used armoured vehicle of the U.S. Army in the Vietnam War, earning itself the nickname 'Green Dragon' by some people. They used it extensively to break through heavy thickets in the midst of the jungle to attack and overrun enemy positions. All I wanted it for was to break through a supposedly friendly ARVN roadblock, it should certainly do the job. I helped Helene get aboard, Abe was fiddling with the breech for the fifty calibre gun mounted on the top turret. Ritter and Paul joined us. Abe looked around and then called out to the driver. "We're ready, let's get over to Cholon."

The vehicle shot away with a jerk and we settled down to endure the journey. Like all tracked vehicles it was a shockingly uncomfortable ride. However, the thickness of the armour was more than adequate compensation for any discomfort we suffered, Saigon was still in the dying throes of the communist Tet offensive. We rode inside the hot, stuffy cabin that stank of petrol and oil, Abe rode on top, manning the turret. He'd found a helmet and a flak jacket, so was amply ready for anything other than a direct assault by communist armour or artillery. In the event, we were not troubled on our journey.

We reached the roadblock and found the same officer in charge. At first he was adamant that no one could pass his checkpoint, even military vehicles. When Abe asked him exactly how his men, armed with M16s were proposing to stop him, he went quiet. Abe shouted at him and the man nodded to his trooper who lifted the barrier rather than have it smashed by the APC. We

were through. We clattered our way through the devastated suburb, it was largely deserted. The whole place had been virtually destroyed during the battle for Saigon, I felt a deep sense of foreboding as we drove through the quiet streets. The driver had to keep swerving and manoeuvring around heaps of debris to continue making progress, but finally we came to our bungalow. Ritter, Paul and I climbed out with Helene and walked up the path to the front door. I asked Abe to stay with the APC, he covered us with the fifty calibre. Then the front door opened and Lan was standing there holding Sophie's hand. Helene rushed forward.

"Sophie, my darling."

"Mama," our daughter cried. Helene scooped her up and gave her a huge hug. She carried her into the house and I followed with the others. I ran to join them and for a brief moment the dreadful slaughter of the past few days was forgotten as I hugged my wife and daughter to me. Then I said hello to Lan while I looked around the room. Everything seemed to have been well looked after, there were no signs of any serious damage.

"How is everything?" I asked her.

"Good, we're fine," she said. "God, I'm so glad to see you back, Jurgen. What happened?"

I stood looking at her for a few moments, I had things to say and didn't quite know how to say them. Maybe the direct route was the best, it usually was.

"I take it you were asking after Major Son?"

She looked quizzical. "Major who?"

I smiled. "Major Son, the communist officer who was here, Helene was tending his wounds. He is an officer in the North Vietnamese Army, the PAVN."

"Oh, that man. I wasn't aware of his name. It was a terrible time when they overran the district, they came in here and we had no choice but to let them do as they wished, Jurgen."

She heard a noise and looked behind her, Ritter was stood there with his Colt automatic drawn.

"Ritter, what's going on, why have you got a gun pointed at me?"

"It's no good, Lan, we've put it all together. Major Son is related to you, isn't he?" I said to her. "When the MPs found the leaflets hidden in the bungalow it was you that put them there, wasn't it? There was no way the communists would have bothered to hide them. It was you. What is he, your

brother?”

She was frozen with indecision. I saw her eyes glance slightly to one side, there was a table against the wall with a narrow drawer underneath it.

“Don’t think about it, Lan. There are three of us here, all armed and we’ve got the armoured personnel carrier outside mounting a fifty calibre machine gun. Tell us about Major Son.”

She was stiff for a few moments, then her shoulders drooped, she was beaten.

“He is my cousin, a first cousin.”

“So Giap is your uncle?”

“Yes. Are you going to shoot me, Jurgen?”

“I don’t know. What is your rank in the Viet Cong?”

She had lost everything now, it all came out. “I am a Captain in the Office of the People’s Commissar, my task is to offer armed assistance to our commissars.”

I heard Ritter give a low whistle. It was a very high rank, probably carrying a similar weight to that of colonel in a line regiment. But of course, she was related to Giap.

“You invited them here, didn’t you?”

“No, no, please believe me, it was the last thing I wanted. They had specific orders to stay away from me to preserve my cover, but when Son was injured they knew I was here and would be able to help them.”

“Jurgen, you can’t kill Lan, you must realise that, she’s been looking after Sophie.”

“She was also responsible for you almost getting killed and her being here brought armed Viet Cong into our home, threatening all of you.”

“But surely...”

“Take Sophie outside, Helene. Get her safely into the APC.”

“But Jurgen, no, you can’t do this...”

“Get her out of here,” I shouted.

White faced, she picked up our daughter and left. Lan knew what came next, but I had to hand it to her, she was unafraid. She stood erect, proud and defiant.

“You’d better get it done, Jurgen, I’m not afraid.”

“I know. You’re aware that I met your uncle once, a long time ago?”

She smiled bitterly. “Yes, he told me the story.”

“I would let you go, Lan, on one condition. That you leave South

Vietnam and agree to never, ever return, not for as long as the war lasts. I would need your parole."

"You're letting me go?" she was astonished."

I nodded. "Are we agreed?"

"You have my word."

"Right. Wait here until we're gone, then you can start making your way North."

"Thank you, Jurgen."

I cocked my pistol and fired a single shot into the floor. Then I nodded to her, "Now you're dead."

We turned and went out to the APC. Ritter said quietly as we walked up the path, "You'll give the SS a bad name, my friend."

We all burst out laughing. Helene was red with rage. "You bastard, you killed her and now you're laughing about it. You're scum, all of you, SS scum."

Ritter and Paul rocked with laughter even more. Paul leaned across and whispered in her ear. I saw her expression change, her eyes widened and she looked across at me. She tried to keep a straight face, but her expression was still rueful. Eventually she lamely said, "Well, it wasn't very nice."

"No, my darling, I'm sorry, but it had to be done."

I could see Abe Woltz nodding grimly, he'd known the situation before we went in. We stared straight ahead as we drove out of Cholon, in truth we had all agonised over how to deal with Lan. Helene would never know how close the Vietnamese woman had come to being shot. After all she was responsible for much of the terror that had come to Saigon, she had deserved to die. But she was our Lan, our office manager and Giap's niece. It was an impossible decision, whatever we decided to do there would be enormous problems as a result. Not least of which was Helene, Lan had looked after and guarded Sophie, albeit as a result of the fighting that she had been a part of. But Sophie was safe. Maybe there was an unwritten law, you don't shoot your children's nanny, no matter what. It seemed a sound philosophy.

We returned to Tan Son Nhat, the driver parked the APC outside out hangar. Work had already begun repairing it, more importantly Emile had good news.

"The DC-4, it's fully operational, we're ready for you to take it on a test flight."

We were all astonished. "Emile, I thought you needed several parts that

were going to be difficult to obtain."

"Yes, but I got talking to one of the ground engineers, he looks after a couple of USAF DC-4s that come and go from here. He had some spares that were lying around doing nothing, we did some trading."

I grinned, it was best not to ask. But we were in business.

"I have to go to MACV in the morning, I'll talk about getting the aircraft re-certified. They're guaranteeing a leased DC4 to replace the second aircraft, so we should be back in business shortly. Provided the Viet Cong leave us alone, of course. Well done, Emile, a brilliant job, you too, Joe."

They nodded and looked away, embarrassed with the praise. Helene, with a woman's touch, was already clearing away the wreckage of the office, it was starting to look more like home. All we needed was to rent a bungalow and we could start again.

We left the hangar and went into the city to check into to a hotel. We found one and ate a good dinner. We kept Sophie close to us, we'd been apart so long, days when we thought we may never see her again that we appreciated every minute that we were able to spend with her. Afterwards we walked around the city centre of Saigon, it was cheerful and bustling as ever and I treated my wife and daughter to small gifts of jewellery from the stalls in the street. Afterwards we went back to the hotel and to our room where there was a cot made up for Sophie. She was already very tired and we put her straight to bed where she fell instantly into a deep sleep. Then we fell on each other, ripping each other's clothes off and falling onto the bed. Afterwards we lay in each other's arms. God, how I'd missed her.

"What made you let Lan go?" she asked me. I told her that it wasn't done to shoot your nanny.

She smiled. "Really, what decided you?"

I thought for a moment. "I guess because I didn't want to become an animal like they are, Helene. The communists fight the war here with no concern whatsoever for human life. To them people are like grains of sand on a beach, there are so many that if the tide takes away a large quantity, there are plenty more to keep the beach whole. It was the same in Russia, they'd send men and women against one of our Tiger tanks armed only with rifles if it suited them. It's not my way, Paul and Ritter both feel the same.

"My word," she smiled, "so you're something of a liberal, Jurgen. Maybe you should consider a job working for the United Nations, working towards world peace. Would you ever consider a different line of work,

something other than running a small airline in a war zone?"

I pretended to consider. "It would depend what the women are like, Helene, if they were as beautiful as the ones here in Saigon."

I received a hard punch for my comment, then we slept, the best night either of us had had in a long, long time.

In the morning, after a luxurious soak in a hot tub and a three-course breakfast, I left Helene to look at some bungalows with a view to renting and setting up a new home. Then I reported to MACV headquarters at Tan Son Nhat. Security in the city was still tight, my cab had to run through eight separate checkpoints guarded by trigger happy ARVN troopers before we drove onto the airfield. Ritter and Paul were already waiting there for me, this was to be a full debrief on the recent mission to the tunnels. Captain Vincent was back on duty, heavily bandaged and walking with a stick but he was well on his way to recovery. There was no sign of Westmoreland, the General was apparently in a heap of trouble, Ritter had whispered that he was in serious talks with Washington.

The word was the General was likely to be replaced. His previous statements that the war was going well for the Americans, that the Viet Cong were virtually defeated, had proved to be far wide of the mark. The American public and politicians were very unhappy with the massive shock of the Tet offensive had. Edwards led us into a room, Abe Woltz was already there with Jack Bond. I was surprised to see him, but he seemed ok following the injury to his leg.

"Gentlemen, the first question we want answered is about the casualties, let's begin with Colonel Goldberg. I understand he was tortured, is that correct?"

We went through the whole thing, starting with the North Vietnamese captain's torture of Goldberg, then right back to the beginning of the mission through to the end when we re-entered Saigon. We omitted any reference to the 'borrowed' M113 armoured personnel carrier, other than that there seemed to be little to be cautious about.

Like all missions, it had its good and bad points, although this particular one had seemed to involve excessive quantities of military ordnance to bring about its conclusion. I thought about the B-52 strikes, the Phantoms with their Vulcan cannon and napalm, the Cobra gunships, the Hueys. Edwards carefully noted all of it. When we were finished, he seemed satisfied.

"Thank you for that, we consider it a mission properly carried out.

Despite the casualties, the mission objective was satisfied and most of the participants returned safely. A good result, the General is well pleased."

The mission had been to assassinate one man as a kind of punishment for the Tet attacks on Saigon. I wondered how many millions of dollars it had cost to achieve that, as well as lives lost, both enemy and friendly South Vietnamese who had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. High Altitude heavy bombers were not a pin-point method of attacking a target. But then Edwards pulled a pile of documents out of his briefcase.

"Mr Hoffman, Mr Schuster, these are the lease agreements that relate to the replacement Douglas DC-4. The General insists that the military has priority on its use, other than that you are free to use it to transport general cargo. Apparently General Westmoreland thinks that a civilian aircraft could be more useful in certain situations, which is why he is able to help you."

Woltz broke into the conversation. "But surely, Captain, there's Air America. There is already a civilian airline able to operate anywhere in Vietnam, or in the whole of Asia, come to that."

There was a silence at the table. We tried hard to suppress our grins, but Edwards had no qualms about clearing up this one for Woltz, the CIA man.

"Abe, you know that Air America is about as civilian as the U.S. military. Wherever it flies it's known to be showing the flag for the CIA. Generally, that's not a problem, but it sure doesn't win any hearts and minds. What we're looking for is a purely civilian operation for certain uses. If the CIA doesn't like it, they can complain to the President."

Abe was silent for a few moments. Then he nodded. "I see your point, I don't think the company will be making any waves about it. After all, it's only one aircraft."

One aircraft for now, my friend, I thought. But Emile has the other DC-4 ready for flight testing, that will make two. And if the Viet Cong stop bombing our hangar and aircraft, we'll be looking for more. One thing there is no shortage of in South Vietnam is money to pay for the transport of cargoes, both military and civilian. Military meant Special Forces and civilian meant drugs. Invariably. I wondered about the drugs, it was a nasty business to be mixed up in, drugs caused considerable misery and deaths. But so did war. Where did I draw the line?

I signed everything, as did Paul. Then we left the office and walked across the airfield to the hangar. Emile and Joe were waiting, as was Nhu, Lan's office assistant.

“Where is Lan?” she asked me. “Was she hurt in the battle?”

“No, Lan is fine. But she left our employment, she had to go and visit her family in the North.”

She gave me a sharp glance. Visiting one’s family in the North was a euphemism for defecting to the communists.

“Did you keep up with her duties, Nhu? Could you take on some of her work?”

She nodded emphatically. “Lan was often busy with other things, I covered for her frequently, I can do all of her work.”

“Good, in that case you’re promoted to Office Manager. There won’t be any more money just yet, but if things go well in the future, there will definitely be a good raise.”

She smiled. I wondered about the ‘other things’ that Lan was often busy with. Like running the Viet Cong cell inside Saigon and liaising with Hanoi. But in spite of everything, I didn’t harbour any grudges against her. Well, perhaps not too many. Emile came into the office.

“The DC-4 is fuelled up and ready to go for the flight test, when do you want to take her up?”

The three of us, Paul, Ritter and myself looked at each other, smiling. I turned to Emile.

“I think now would be as good a time as any.”

* * *

*‘We were children of the 1950s and John Kennedy's young stalwarts of the early 1960s. He told the world that Americans would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship" in the defence of freedom. We were the down payment on that costly contract, but the man who signed it was not there when we fulfilled his promise. John Kennedy waited for us on a hill in Arlington National Cemetery, and in time we came by the thousands to fill those slopes without white marble markers and to ask on the murmur of the wind if that was truly the future he had envisioned for us.’*

*Joseph L. Galloway*

“Mr President, the only way for us to win this war is to employ more

troops and re-commence the bombing of the North Vietnamese. It's the only way we'll ever really finish them off."

General Westmoreland sat back, satisfied that he had acquitted himself well during the recent offensive. Recalled to this meeting in Washington, he felt he had done everything expected of him. The trouble was, it was a two way process and the things he needed had just not been forthcoming. The other men were silent. Then Johnson gave him a fierce look.

"General, several weeks ago you were on record as stating that the Viet Cong were as good as defeated, that the war was almost won and our boys could look forward to the day when they could come home."

Westmoreland opened his mouth to explain, but the President overrode him.

"Damnit, General, many of the boys won't be coming home at all, they're dead. What do I tell their folks who listened to you on the television? They got the flags out ready, baked the cakes, now their boys are coming back in body bags. What do you want me to tell them, William?"

There was another period of silence. Westmoreland tried again.

"Mr President, are you aware of the communist casualties for the Tet offensive? They're enormous, vast. My staff estimates that the back of the communist fighting ability has been almost totally destroyed, we beat them hands down. It's a disaster for them, Sir."

Wheeler supported his General. "That's true, Mr President, those losses have been verified, the North lost heavily in Tet."

"Not so heavily that they can't continue fighting at Khe Sanh, they're giving our troops a hammering as I hear it," McNamara said.

"It's nothing we can't handle," Westmoreland hit back. "Khe Sanh isn't going to be another Dien Binh Phu, of that I can assure you. We've got aircraft flying around the clock to supply our troops that are fighting there and I've ordered units to prepare to break through to them and relieve the siege."

Johnson raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Jesus Christ, am I hearing this correctly? You're talking about having to supply our men that are under siege, units to break through to relieve them, and you think we're beating the communists? Because we're losing the war, gentlemen, and where we're losing it may or may not be on the battlefields of Vietnam, but it sure is on the streets of the USA. It's gone on too long, we're losing too many men. Our people hear one thing, and then something contradicts it entirely."

He looked sharply at Westmoreland, who kept silent.

“First of all, General, here’s the deal. I will not order any more troops to be sent to Vietnam, and that’s final.”

Wheeler and Westmoreland exchanged glances, it was what they had expected, but they had hoped for more.

“Secondly, I’m going to re-start bombing operations on the North, limited targets only.”

McNamara’s face fell. “Mr President, is that wise? Since when had bombing ever won a war? Surely we should be looking at negotiation for a solution, not bombing.”

“And get an agreement like we had before the Tet offensive, Robert? Wasn’t that a mutual ceasefire for the period of the holiday?”

“Bombing will not bring this war to an end, Sir. It never has and it never will,” McNamara said, shaking his head.

“That’s as maybe, but that’s the way I intend to go, I think it’s got a good chance of bringing them to the negotiating table.”

“I don’t agree,” McNamara said. “I think it’s the worst move we could make. It could ruin your re-election chances, Mr President, the American people could see it as just another way to prolong the war and vote against you just to put a stop to it.”

“I’m not planning to seek another term, Robert. I’ve had enough, I plan to retire from politics when this term is ended.”

They all looked horrified. All owed part, at least, of their positions of power to President Johnson.

“That would be a crying shame, Mr President, you’ve had a very successful presidency,” Wheeler said hurriedly.

Johnson gave him a scathing look. “Well, some may agree with you, Earle. I hope a lot of people appreciate the efforts I’ve made, but too many things have happened, the Vietnam War, the country in uproar, protestors, draft dodgers, shootings, riots. It’s time for a change, so I’m standing down at the end of my term.”

“And the bombing?” McNamara asked again.

“As I said, Robert. We resume the bombing and try to get the North to the negotiating table. Maybe this time it will work.”

He sat back and indicated that the meeting was over. They got up, all with mixed and different emotions.

Whether for or against the war, one thing was for sure. It wasn’t over

yet, not by a mile.

# CHAPTER 9

*‘We discovered in that depressing, hellish place where death was our constant companion that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers. In battle our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around. We held each other's lives in our hands and we learned to share our fears, our hopes, our dreams as readily as we shared what little else good came our way.’*

*General Hal Moore*

Ritter took the right hand seat, fuming slightly that he had to fly as co-pilot. He considered himself the leading authority on all things to do with aircraft and felt that the only place for him in an aircraft was the pilot’s seat. Paul sat on the jump seat at the back of the cockpit, smiling at his discomfort. But I guessed most of it was for show, he was a good man to have around, if a little arrogant, but I understood that most of us Germans were considered that way. So perhaps it was forgivable in Ritter’s case if he was a little bit more so around aircraft. We’d managed to retrieve our old tail number, SS1, although technically it was SGN-SS1. The SS1 was some local’s nod to my origins during the Second World War when I’d fought in the SS, rising to the rank of Sturmbannfuhrer. I heard the tower give us clearance, Ritter throttled up and released the brakes and we hurtled down the runway, just behind a Phantom F-4 that took off ahead of us. We could smell the kerosene as he hit his afterburners for a military take-off, shooting almost vertically into the sky and disappearing into the cloudbase. Our take off was more leisurely, the wheels came up and we started gaining height. The aircraft flew like a dream, we circled Saigon twice and then I handed over to Ritter to land her. We were back in business. When we landed and taxied to the hangar, Helene was waiting holding Sophie’s hand.

“Jurgen, we’ve found a bungalow, midway between Tan Son Nhat and the city centre, it’s perfect. I want you to come and take a look.”

I nodded to her. Ritter and Paul were climbing out of the DC-4.

"I want to go and look at a place that Helene has found, would you go and put us on the board at MACV as available for operations, we could do with some contracts to get us moving again. I'll see you later."

I joined Helene and Sophie and climbed into our Land Cruiser. We drove into the city and threaded our way past the checkpoints and over the occasional piles of rubble that still littered the ground. We arrived at the point she directed us to and got out of the vehicle. The bungalow stood in its own grounds of about half an acre, very spacious. It was surrounded by a high wall and the entry was through a solid looking iron gate, my first impression was that it would be easily defended. On the roof was a kind of lookout tower with a widow's walk in front of it. That would be ideal for a sentry or for an observation point if trouble flared in the city. Not if, but when it occurred!

"I like it, I think we could be very happy here," I said to her.

"But you haven't seen inside. It's because it's a bit like a fortress, isn't it?"

I nodded. "That's true, but bear in mind if you don't survive to live in it, you're not going to enjoy it."

"That's a sobering thought, Jurgen. Let's hope that the communists will give up now that they've been beaten so resoundingly."

"They're still fighting in Cholon, not too far from here. Hue is still besieged and Khe Sanh is under daily attack. I'm afraid it's not all over."

She was about to reply when I looked across the road, the barrel of a machine gun was pointed towards us.

"Get inside the gate and wait, I need to check something out," I said to her quietly. I went across the road carefully, drew my Colt automatic and peered around the corner at the machine gun position. But I needn't have worried, the gunner was dead, a victim of the Battle for Saigon. I heard a noise and whirled around but it was only Helene, who had brought Sophie with her.

"For God's sake, keep Sophie away from this," I said to her angrily.

She blanched, but not at my words. She'd caught sight of the dead body and the face that we both recognised. It was Lan. Fortunately, she had Sophie's face buried against her shoulder.

"I thought Lan was going back to the North."

"So did I," I said grimly. I looked down at her body, then I spotted the manacles on her ankles, the other end was fastened to the steel support of the

machine gun. Helene saw it too.

"My God, Jurgen, she's chained to the gun."

"Yes, they obviously forced her to do it, the chains were to make sure she didn't try and run."

There had been several reports recently where American and ARVN soldiers found PAVN Viet Cong and People's Army of North Vietnam soldiers chained to fifty calibre machine guns, to ensure that they weren't tempted to run away from the battle. It was also used for punishment details, the unfortunate soldier would be given the opportunity to redeem themselves by fighting bravely during a battle, albeit without any choice in the matter.

We walked back to the bungalow and entered through the gate, there was no back gate I was pleased to note. I wondered about a pair of dogs to patrol the grounds, they would give warning if anyone tried to infiltrate, whether robbers or Viet Cong guerrillas. The bungalow itself was light and spacious, there were four bedrooms on the ground floor and a huge bedroom on the first floor under the eaves that looked out onto the widow's walk. I went and looked out, if necessary an escape would be possible if we had a rope ladder stowed somewhere handy. A hidden ladder would help us to get out of the grounds over the wall. It was dismal having to think in such terms, but my family had suffered enough. We couldn't stop the war, but we could do our best to prevent it from destroying us utterly, as it had with so many families in Vietnam.

"We'll take it, if you're happy," I said. "I'll contact the military to get that body and machine gun moved out later today."

It was already 'that body'. Not Lan, the pretty Vietnamese who had run our business operation so well. It was just another bloody casualty of the war. Another dead body amongst so many thousands. And we were alive.

I dropped Helene and Sophie at the real estate agency to tie up the details and arrange for staff. We'd need a cook and a cleaner as well as a gardener to do the place justice, it was so large. They were to go back to the hotel until it was ready to move into, I drove back through the wearisome checkpoints to the airfield. Ritter was hopping up and down with excitement, as he so often was. A pair of trucks were unloading dozens of cartons into the doorway of the DC-4, where Paul was supervising them being stowed.

"Jurgen, thank Christ you're back. We're got a job, a cargo to leave as soon as possible."

"That's great news, my friend. Where to?"

“Hue. It’s an easy one, in and out.”

“But Hue is still under siege, there’s a lot of shooting still going on.”

The Battle of Hue had been one of the bloodiest battles of the Vietnam War. As far as I knew, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry had mounted a counterattack to retake the city, but the fighting was vicious and bloody. The Citadel, the old centre of the city, was reported as still being in communist hands.

“Ritter, isn’t that a bit of a hot one for our first job after losing two aircraft? We still haven’t taken delivery of the leased DC-4, if anything happens to this one we’re out of business again.”

His face took on a sober expression. “I know, Jurgen. I was trying to put a brave face on it. MACV called us to HQ while you were away, the cargo is food, they’re desperate up there, people are starving. They made it quite clear that this contract was not going to be an option for us. I’m sorry.”

They never changed, the military. They used what they wanted, people, soldiers, materials, chewed you up and when they were finished spit you out. But living in Vietnam and running an airline was never going to be easy.

“You’re taking her up there?” I asked him.

“Yes, I’ve already filed the flight plan. Jurgen, it needs all three of us for this job.”

“Can’t Paul go as co-pilot, you don’t need me?”

“Not as a pilot, no. But we need every gun we’ve got, my friend, who knows what we’re going to find up there, or even on the way. You and Paul are the craziest soldiers I’ve ever seen in action, just one sight of you and the enemy turns and runs.”

I smiled. If only it were true. But he was right, we needed to pack as much firepower as we could take.

I managed to get through to Helene at the hotel and told her we were leaving to take a cargo to Hue.

“Jurgen, isn’t Hue a dangerous place at the moment?”

“As is all of Vietnam, my darling. Just take care of Sophie and yourself, I’ll be fine. See you tomorrow.”

I put the phone down and went to get my weapon, the M2 assault rifle. I already had my Colt Automatic in a holster on my belt. I checked the M2, put ten loaded clips into a backpack and went out to stow them on the aircraft. I swung into the cockpit, past the piles of cartons that were loaded into the cabin area and opened the steel cabinet where we kept our weapons on board.

Paul's M2 was already there, with a bag of clips. The third weapon was there too, but Ritter had left his trust M2 and brought along a Thompson M1A1. I'd no idea where he got it from, but it was heavy firepower, a .45 calibre bullet and he had it loaded with the longer, thirty round clip. There was a bag of spare clips hanging on the hook next to it. Well, if we did need heavy firepower, the Thompson would certainly give us something of an edge.

Finally the cargo was aboard. We closed the door and started the engines, then waited for clearance from the tower. I looked out of the window, a squadron of F-105 Thunderchiefs were on the tarmac, waiting to go. There was a huge barrage of noise as they throttled up for takeoff, at maximum power they seemed to leap forward and almost jump off the runway, then banked steeply for form up in a V shaped group for their flight North.

The Republic F-105 Thunderchief was a supersonic fighter-bomber used by the United States Air Force increasingly for Wild Weasel missions, suppressing enemy flak and missile sites just prior to bombing raids. The Mach 2 capable F-105 was also used extensively in the bombing of North Vietnam. These were the two-seat F-105F, so they would be bound for a Wild Weasel mission. Armed with sensors and electronic jamming equipment, together with AGM-45 Shrike anti-radiation missiles and conventional bombs, the F-105s were a formidable fighter bomber, wherever they were used to prepare a path for the bombers. The last of them disappeared into the sky and we got the order to proceed.

Ritter took pleasure in executing a flawless take-off as usual. Paul had the right hand seat this time and I took on the duties of navigator. In fact, this meant there was little to be done, the air route to Hue was one we'd travelled many times before. Any problems we hit were likely to be during or after the landing, depending on the strength of the enemy forces. We flew high, almost at our ceiling of twenty two thousand feet. Small arms ground fire was an increasing problem and not one we cared to encounter. Twice, fingers of machine gun fire reached up towards us, but we were well out of their range. Anti aircraft artillery was another problem that was increasing as the guerrillas got more and more support and ordnance down the Ho Chi Minh trail, the network of paths that ran along the border between Vietnam and its adjoining neighbours.

The Ho Chi Minh trail was a logistical system that ran from North Vietnam to the South through the neighbouring kingdoms of Laos and

Cambodia. The system provided massive support for the enemy incursion in the form of manpower and materiel. The end result for us was the possibility of any and every weapon available to the communists eventually showing up here in the South. There were also rumours that the communists were getting access to man portable missile systems, which would be next to impossible for us to counter. The only way to deal with that was to put it out of our minds, if such a sophisticated weapon was ever launched against us we were in serious trouble. A lumbering civilian transport would find it difficult to evade a fast, agile ground launched missile.

When we reached Hue we were ordered to maintain a holding circle in the sky above the airfield. The reason soon became obvious. Pillars of smoke littered the city and the airfield itself had obviously just been the site of a major attack. The tarmac was littered with debris and a bulldozer was shunting wreckage to one side while teams of men were clearly visible with shovels, filling in the unmistakable holes caused by exploding mortar shells. I was leaning against Ritter's seat to look out of the window.

"Ritter, what was that you said, 'an easy one, in and out'?"

He shrugged. "I could have been mistaken, Jurgen. But at least it's all over, we weren't here when the battle was going on."

"If the battle was still on I think I would have parachuted you in with that fancy new Thompson sub-machine gun to sort them out."

"So you like my new toy, Jurgen?"

"Provided it does the job, I don't care which gun you use. I understand they're very solid and reliable, so it should be ideal if we run into any trouble."

By the appearance of the airfield, it could become useful sooner rather than later. Although the attack had clearly ended, the Citadel was still alive with explosions, jets of smoke and flame spurting into the air marking their location. Clearly the enemy were not too far away, I prayed that we might get ourselves and our newly repaired aircraft out of here without any damage. It took another twenty minutes while we circled lazily. Then the tower radioed our clearance and Ritter banked the aircraft into the approach, dropped the wheels and settled the DC-4 onto the tarmac for a landing. It should have been a text book landing, but the strip was still pockmarked and rutted with small amounts of debris and we bumped and lurched along until we slowed almost to a stop. The marshaller was guiding us to our unloading point with his bat-shaped wands and we edged towards it, and then came to a stop. I ran

back and opened the cabin doors and dropped the ladder. A gang of Vietnamese were waiting to unload the cartons onto a nearby lorry, two climbed up and started throwing the boxes out to their men. Ritter and Paul came out to watch and the pile of cartons gradually shrank in the cabin as they were offloaded. They had taken off about three-quarters of the load when the first salvo of machine gun bullets whistled overhead. The workmen scattered for cover, the three of us went into the cockpit and took out our weapons.

"I'll get the engines started," Paul shouted. "We might need to get off in a hurry."

Back in the cabin, the unloading process had ground to a halt. We looked at each other, there was nothing else for it. Ritter jumped down to the ground, his gun slung over his back and waited while I threw the cartons down to him one by one. The airport was peppered with gunfire from assault rifles and machine guns. The occasional grenade exploded, but thankfully they were not using mortars.

The work proceeded slowly, it was hot and heavy in the humidity of Hue. Paul had the engines ticking over, we had to be ready to take off at a moment's notice. If the Viet Cong attacked, the only place for us was in the air. He came back and helped us unload, leaving the cockpit unattended. It speeded up the process and we soon had the last carton unloaded and the cabin empty. The supervisor was still cowering in the cover of one of the trucks so I went over to speak to him.

"We've finished the unloading, I want you to sign the paperwork."

He looked at it dismissively. "I cannot sign that, the load has not been checked." While he spoke his eyes were darting around the airfield, watching carefully for any increase in enemy activity.

"Very well, you'd better come and check it over. Come on over."

I started dragging him towards the stack of cartons, as we reached it a heavy machine gun opened up nearby, it wasn't aimed at us and there was no immediate threat, but the Vietnamese threw himself flat to the concrete.

"It's ok, it's fine, give me the paperwork, I'll sign it."

He scrawled his signature and then ran back towards the lorry where the rest of his people were sheltering. He was screaming and shouting at them I'd no idea what he was saying as he ran, gesticulating. At the same time a Willys jeep was coming towards us with a mounted Browning M60. The gunner saw the Vietnamese acting strangely, aimed and fired a short burst in

one swift, fluid motion. He crumpled to the tarmac, the jeep came to a stop next to us.

"What the hell was all that about?" the driver asked as the gunner looked curiously at the man he'd just shot. "We thought he was attacking you, are these guys VC?"

He was looking at the unloading crew, his gunner was covering them with his machine gun.

"No, they're just civilians, unloading the aircraft."

"No shit? Ok, we brought out a package of documents to take back to Saigon, they're expecting them at MACV."

He passed me a locked metal briefcase. I had to sign for it, then he drove off, neither bothered to glance at the body lying broken and bloody on the tarmac. This was Vietnam, there'd be plenty more. We were climbing back on board the DC-4 when there was a whistling sound and then a huge explosion. The tower had been hit with a rocket, probably an anti tank rocket.

The communists were known to be using the RPG-7 extensively. The RPG-7 was a portable, shoulder-launched, anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launcher. It was capable of substantial ranges, over five hundred yards in ideal conditions and was normally used with a high explosive warhead. There was also a fragmentation warhead in use. If that had been employed in the one that hit the tower, there would be no survivors.

I didn't need to say anything, Ritter had throttled up, taken off the brakes and was taxiing out to the runway. The tower would not be issuing any take-off or landing clearances today, nor for some considerable time.

We had a comfortable but sober flight back to Saigon. Although we hadn't come under attack at Hue, it had been a close thing. The enemy was better and better equipped and the sudden rocket attack had reminded us of how they were becoming more sophisticated. They were becoming more difficult to counter, there were even rumours of North Vietnamese Army units in the South equipped with Soviet built tanks. The war was hotting up, despite the American's confident predictions of impending victory. Even after more than twenty-five years, I could still remember the strident proclamations of the German High Command while we were fighting and bleeding in the snows of Soviet Russia. Even after Stalingrad they were still trumpeting the invincibility of the Nazi war machine. Then came the French at Dien Bien Phu, the same besieged army, the same optimism in final victory. Now the Americans had Khe Sanh. I thought back to our desperate

flight in and out of that beleaguered airstrip, the tarmac constantly under fire. For the Americans, the base had to hold out at all costs. The psychological impact on the French of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, guarded by elite paratroopers and men from the French Foreign Legion was overwhelming. The defeat marked the end of France as a colonial power. Khe Sanh was also guarded by elite troops. Both General Westmoreland and President Johnson knew that the U.S. public would neither tolerate nor accept defeat by a Third World nation such as the Vietnamese communists. Defeat at Khe Sanh was out of the question, they said. As had the Nazis said at Stalingrad and the French at Dien Bien Phu.

The siege at Khe Sanh was especially difficult because the North Vietnamese Army had established large artillery guns in Laos, which were out-of-range of U.S. artillery at Khe Sanh. It was not unusual for a hundred artillery rounds to fall on the base in a day. Route 9, the main supply route that connected Khe Sanh to the South, had been cut early in the battle. It was clear that although the air operation to resupply was keeping the garrison alive, the road would have to be retaken in order to lift the siege. But in the meantime they needed aircraft to resupply and pilots to fly them. The only sensible and sane way to deal with Khe Sanh, from a civilian perspective, was to stay well away from it.

We made a safe landing at Tan Son Nhat, the worst of the offensive seemed to be over. All I wanted was to get back to my wife and daughter at the hotel, but it was not to be. They must have been waiting for us to land, a jeep came rolling across the airfield and an MP Sergeant got out.

“Message from MACV, you are requested to attend for an urgent meeting.”

We looked at each other. Nothing good ever came out of that kind of summons.

“Which of us do they want?”

“The pilots. Everyone that is able to fly.”

“Ok, give us a chance to clean up and we’ll be right with you, “I said to him.

“They’re waiting for you now, Sir. I’m ordered to take you straight over there.”

“Very well.”

The three of us climbed into his Willys and he roared over to MACV. We walked in and were shown straight into an office, Captain Edwards was

there with two obvious Special Forces soldiers, their unconventional uniforms and weapons marking out their trade.

We refused his invitation to sit down, we'd had a long, tiring flight to and from Hue and wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

"We want you to take another cargo of food back to Hue." Edwards said. "The Tet offensives have been heavy on our resources, we need to get food to those people urgently."

"When do you want us to leave?"

He looked up at us, there was an odd expression on his face, more to this than he had said.

"Dawn tomorrow would be fine. These guys will be going with you."

Paul walked over and stood in front of him. "What's the catch, Captain? You haven't called us over here to discuss shipping a few boxes of food and two passengers back to Hue."

I hoped there would be no more complications. Hue was still in uproar, but with reasonable guarantees on the safety of our aircraft, including compensation for any damage, I was fairly confident we could fly in and out again and get back in one piece. But as Paul had said, we weren't here to discuss the simple transport of food.

"We want you to collect the other men from these guys' unit, they're waiting in Hue," he said. "Between you and me, they've been engaged on a mission for the Phoenix program. We accelerated everything once the communists broke the Tet truce. As you know."

Indeed we did, we had recently returned from their mission to terminate the local VC leader.

"Right, so why are these men coming with us if we're bringing their unit back, can't they wait here for us? We went to Hue this morning, Captain, we don't need an escort."

"We don't want you to bring the unit back here, Mr Schuster."

I could feel Ritter stirring behind me. Paul leaned forward. "Exactly where do you want us to take them, Captain?"

"They have a mission in Khe Sanh, we want you to detour there."

He could see our looks of disbelief. I felt it was time to explain the situation at Khe Sanh to him.

"You're aware that the only safe way to get in and out of Khe Sanh is with the Fairchild C-123K Provider with the jet assisted take off system. They're still using C-130s, of course, but they're taking a beating from the

anti aircraft fire. You're suggesting that we land our DC-4 under fire and take off again, it's a disaster waiting to happen."

"Excuse me, Sir," one of the soldiers interjected. "I'm Master Sergeant Ed Robbins, this is Specialist First Class Will Blaine."

We introduced ourselves. "I know of your record, gentlemen," Robbins smiled. "Both here in Vietnam and before."

I assumed he meant the Second World War. That was a long time ago.

"As I'm sure you're aware, our mission is to go behind enemy lines and attack the enemy command and control systems, just as I understand you have just been involved with close to Saigon."

I nodded. "Yes, and I'm sure you are aware how futile these missions are, Sergeant. A lot of people get killed, a lot of equipment gets destroyed, and for what?"

He inclined his head. "Point taken, but what are we supposed to do? Nothing? Do we let these people crap all over us and sit back letting them do it?"

I reflected that they could always try running South Vietnam in a more efficient and democratic way. If they put the efforts into reforming the political system that they put into fighting the war, they would almost certainly get results. But it was hardly my place to offer advice.

"Khe Sanh had become critical," he continued. "Success or failure there could mean victory or defeat in the war, as it did at Dien Bien Phu. If we lose there, we all may as well pack up our bags and get out of Vietnam."

I thought about a Vietnam run by the communists and I thought of Soviet Russia, I shivered.

"But why us to take your people in, it seems crazy when you have more suitable military aircraft."

"Because you are a civilian outfit, running in supplies of food, it's the perfect cover. You know, as well as I do, that everything we do in this country is watched by Viet Cong spies. It's vital that they don't know we're at Khe Sanh. They're well aware of what my unit does, if they see us arriving there, they'll be ready for us when we go in. So we'll just be part of a simple, civilian relief flight carrying food."

It made a warped kind of sense. He was quite correct that the communists had people watching and reporting back all over South Vietnam. The flaw was that our aircraft was quite unsuitable for the operation they intended. Quite simply, if Hue was risky enough, Khe Sanh was an aircraft

destroyer. But sometimes you have to bow to the inevitable. The military ruled this country as ruthlessly as any dictator. Without putting it into words, everyone in this room knew that to refuse them would be the end of any ambitions in this country.

"We'll want guarantees on the aircraft, Captain," Paul said to him. "We need a signed agreement to cover any and all damage plus, the charter fee up front to cover our expenses."

He named a figure that was approximately triple our normal rate for the job. Edwards didn't even flinch.

"I'll have a bank draft drawn up for you straight after this meeting ends, the contracts and insurance guarantees will be ready before you take off."

I understood the pressure the Americans were under to achieve victory at Khe Sanh. The communists were openly threatening to drive them into the sea, a defeat at the beleaguered firebase would mean that heads would roll in large numbers. Perhaps Paul should have quadrupled the price, I thought, they were in a mood to agree to anything. There was little else to discuss, for us the job was straightforward, a cargo to Hue with two passengers, unload and take on several more passengers. Then on to Khe Sanh and back to Tan Son Nhat. It was quite simple, unless the communists started shooting at us, and they almost certainly would at Khe Sanh.

As we walked out of the meeting, I was trying to work out how to explain it to Helene without her going through the roof.

* * *

*'No, I am not going 10,000 miles to help murder kill and burn other people to simply help continue the domination of white slavemasters over dark people the world over. This is the day and age when such evil injustice must come to an end.'*

*Cassius Clay*

Thieu was looking more confident they noted, since the Viet Cong assault on Saigon had largely been defeated. The worst of his hysteria had ebbed now that the communists were no longer knocking on the door of the Presidential Palace. The meeting was about to start when a messenger came

in and whispered in the President's ear. He looked around at his advisors.

"I am informed that there has been more fighting in Cholon, what can you tell me, General Westmoreland? I understood that it was all over, the Viet Cong had been routed and killed."

"That information was incorrect, Mr President, there is some limited fighting in that area."

"What are you doing to finish it, General? It has gone on long enough, this is the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam, not some backwater collection of mud huts in the delta."

Westmoreland felt under pressure from all sides. Public pressure was mounting in the U.S. the scale of draft refusals and dodgers was escalating enormously. The politicians were refusing to back the war and here the President of South Vietnam was almost blaming him for the failure to beat back the communist attacks in Saigon.

"President Thieu, if you're unhappy with the progress of defeating the remaining terrorists in Cholon, why not send in your own troops? You certainly have enough to get the job done."

They were all open mouthed at the General's open challenge to Thieu. Everyone knew that the ARVN and the police were deliberately kept on a short leash, serving both as a vehicle to control the Buddhists and to provide officer advancement to Catholics who supported the regime. As a result, their fighting effectiveness was severely limited. How would they fare in the brutal street fighting that was necessary to clear the residential suburb?

"Are your men then not able to take on the business of defeating these insurgents," Thieu fired back, neatly evading the question.

"Mr da Silva, what's your take on the Cholon business?" the General asked his CIA station chief.

"Sir, gentlemen, whoever goes in there is going to stir up a hornet's nest. They've got nowhere to run, signs are that they're planning a fight to the death to inflict maximum casualties on our forces."

"Your suggestion, Mr da Silva?" Thieu asked him.

The CIA man exchanged glances with Westmoreland. However they played this, there were going to be casualties and that meant more negative publicity back home, more problems in Congress at a time when the army needed friends. They just couldn't afford to lose too many more men, it was a simple fact. This was one the ARVN would have to handle.

"Mr President, we've got an ARVN Ranger battalion at the racecourse

as well as two of our armoured infantry companies. That area is now secure, I suggest they be directed to begin clearing operations in Cholon, the Rangers to go in backed by the firepower of the infantry and armour."

"This will succeed, this operation?" Thieu asked.

"Yes, Mr President," Westmoreland answered him. "It's a simple plan, they should sweep through Cholon and clear out the last of the VCs."

"Prime Minister, what do you think?"

Until now, Nguyen Van Loc had remained silent, he was still stunned by the suddenness and the ferocity of the Viet Cong assault on the capital.

"What kind of collateral damage do you estimate will be done to the people and their homes and business, using an armoured assault?"

"For God's sake, Loc, you know very well there will be a lot of damage, but what is that compared to the necessity of getting rid of the communists? It has to be done, no matter how many peasant shacks get wrecked or shop girls lives lost. Besides, it is the Chinese quarter, most of them are Buddhists."

Loc didn't answer, Thieu took that as agreement, or at least, lack of any coherent argument. "General Vien, do you have anything to add? Are your Rangers up to the job?"

Cao Van Vien, the Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff looked at his President.

"No, Sir, the Rangers will be proud to sweep out the communists. I agree with you, Sir, a few Buddhists should not stand in the way of us doing our duty."

Westmoreland noted that the Chairman was a Catholic, another of Thieu's appointees. He realised that Thieu was speaking to him. "I'm sorry, Sir, what did you say?"

"I said to do it, General, get it over with and report to me when all of the enemy are dead. Clear?"

"Yes, Mr President."

"Good. You are all dismissed."

They stood up and left. Outside in the hallway, da Silva turned to Westmoreland.

"You know this is no way to win a war, Sir, don't you?"

The soldier nodded. "I do Peer, I do. But where else do we go?"

# CHAPTER 10

*The war against Vietnam is only the ghastliest manifestation of what I'd call imperial provincialism, which afflicts America's whole culture, aware only of its own history, insensible to everything which isn't part of the local atmosphere.*

*Stephen Vizinczey, 1968*

Helene, as expected, went totally crazy. “You cannot be serious, Jurgen? Cu chi, Trang Bang, Hue! Now this! When are you going to stop risking your neck?”

I shrugged. “We need money, my darling. You’ll need to furnish the new bungalow, we need money for so many things, it all depends on the airline. If that’s the work that needs doing then that’s what we have to do.”

“If they want a civilian aircraft for this, what’s wrong with Air America?”

“Because an Air America aircraft means CIA, they may as well land in a B-52, it’s the same thing. American military, or at least, American government.”

“And what about Sophie, don’t you want her to have a father when she grows up?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there.”

She shook her head. “Not if you stop a Viet Cong bullet. Jurgen, this has to stop! You’re getting too old and I want us to have a family life. Tell me you’ll stop.”

She had a point, who knew when the bullet that came towards you was going to strike you between the eyes or miss by a yard? In the end I agreed to curtail my activities after this mission and talk about taking on a younger, fitter pilot to fly some of my missions. I hated doing it, it felt wrong to be passing over responsibility for a crucial part of the operation of the airline, but she did have a point. When she received my solemn promise to deal with it the second I got back she was slightly mollified, but we still spent an uneasy night.

I awoke in the chilly hour before dawn, quickly showered and dressed. Helene was awake, she watched me dress, then I kissed Sophie goodbye and embraced my wife.

“I’ll be fine, Ritter is flying the DC-4, Paul will be along too and we’ll have Special Forces with us all the way to Hue and then to Khe Sanh. They’ve laid on a big operation to protect us, especially at Khe Sanh, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

She smiled wanly. “There’s always something to worry about, Jurgen. Just get back to us safely.”

I said goodbye to her. We wouldn’t be back until the following morning, but I knew she wouldn’t sleep that night. We held each other for long moments, both of us reluctant to let the other go. Then we parted and I left the room and went downstairs. The hotel was deserted at this hour, even the night clerk was asleep. I stepped out, got into the Land Cruiser and drove to the airfield. The aircraft was already loaded, the two Special Forces men were already there, dressed in civilian clothes but the weapons they carried were anything but civilian.

Robbins held an XM16E1, the modified version of the M16, his was fitted with a huge night vision scope. An assassin’s weapon, I reflected. Will Blaine had a short-barrelled Colt XM177, the carbine variant of the M16. Both were Special Forces assault rifles. They sported shoulder holsters with Ruger pistols and Blaine had a wickedly long fighting knife strapped to his leg. It was unfortunate that they had so armed themselves, if any Viet Cong observers saw them they were a walking billboard advertising the fact that they were embarking on an undercover mission.

Paul saw me looking at them and understood my concerns immediately. “I know, they could have worn fluorescent vests printed ‘Special Forces’, but there’s nothing we can do about it now. The aircraft was loaded and fuelled up late last night, so hopefully there aren’t any Cong spies in the area.”

Ritter climbed down from the cabin. “The pre-flight is complete and the tower has given us permission to taxi out to the runway, we’re all ready, Jurgen. Shall we leave?”

I nodded at him and asked the two soldiers to board. Then I closed the cargo doors and Ritter started up. One by one, the four Pratt & Whitney R-2000 engines burst into life, he did a final check on the flaps, ailerons and rudder and then taxied slowly to the holding area. We didn’t have long to wait, a C-141 Starlifter was inline ahead of us, the four huge jet engines screamed and the giant cargo plane lumbered along the runway and took off. We got immediate clearance, Ritter opened up the throttles and we lifted off on the first leg of our journey.

I had little to do, Paul was in the right hand seat so I went into the cabin to check on the two passengers. Robbins looked up. “Everything ok, Jurgen?”

I nodded. “We’re all good, we’ll fly high to keep out of the small arms fire from the ground, we should be on the ground in Hue in three hours or so. Are your guys ready for us?”

He nodded. “I contacted them on the radio before we left, they’ll be waiting.”

“Right. Sergeant, a word about your weapons.”

He looked me in the eye. “What’s the problem with our weapons?”

“There’s no problem with the weapons themselves, but they’re unmistakably military. You might consider being a little more discreet with them while we’re on the ground if you want to keep your mission undercover.”

He was about to make a sharp reply, but Blaine stopped him. “Ed, he does have a point. We do look a bit warlike, at least if we’re supposed to be on a mission to carry foodstuffs to starving natives.”

He calmed down. “You’re right, we’ll leave the assault rifles in the aircraft while we’re loading and unloading on the ground. Thanks.”

“No problem. How many men do we pick up in Hue?”

“Ten of them,” Robbins answered. “They’ve been doing a bit of behind the lines work in Hue, bumping off a couple of their top people there. I know you don’t think it makes much difference, but I can tell you it sure put the frighteners on the gooks when they found their head commissar of whatever was dead.”

I didn’t enjoy the use of the word ‘gook’ to describe Vietnamese natives, the Americans had used it before in Korea and before that in the Japanese war. But it was after all a theatre of war. They were entitled to be disparaging about their enemy, besides, I was the Nazi racist, not them, or so I was occasionally reminded.

“I hope you’re right. Have you been to Khe Sanh before?”

They both shook their heads. “First time, all we’ve seen is on the newsreels.”

“They’re pretty accurate. The place is constantly under fire, the communists seem determined to take it off you.”

“And we’re even more determined to keep it,” Robbins said confidently. “Believe me, Jurgen, we’ll beat those bastards, come what may.”

I thought of the airstrikes, the napalm, the rockets, the B-52 bombing

raids. Yes, they would almost certainly beat them, but at what cost? Besides, sooner or later the Americans had to go home. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army were locals, all they had to do was wait them out

"Yes, I'm sure you will beat them," I replied. Paul came back into the cabin.

"We're about to land in around ten minutes. Everything secure back here?"

We all nodded. "Very well. We need to make this quick, Hue is still pretty hot."

I went back into the cockpit and sat in the radio operator's seat in the cubicle behind the pilot's seat. Ritter got clearance to land, they were using a temporary communications system in a military radio truck parked at the side of the airfield. He gently put the aircraft down and taxied to the ramp. As we approached we could clearly see the ten soldiers waiting for us, they were sensibly dressed in black trousers and white open necked shirts, looking for all the world like civilian staff. Albeit very young, very fit and tough civilian staff. Next to the pile of cartons were several wooden boxes, I assumed they carried their weapons and combat kit. The aircraft stopped, the engines were still running and I ran back to open the cargo doors. Instantly the men were throwing cardboard cartons and boxes into the cabin, Robbins and Blaine stacked them on the floor. Then the men were clambering aboard the aircraft, I slammed the door shut and went forward.

"We're all ready to go!"

Ritter acknowledged and throttled up and let off the brakes. "We've already got clearance to go straight out."

The aircraft picked up speed and we left the ground. This was the tense moment, when an aircraft was at its most vulnerable. Loaded, clawing for height it was a sitting duck if a VC machine gunner had positioned himself near the end of the runway. It made me think of poor Lan, almost certainly trying to return to the North, as we'd agreed, being pressed into manning a heavy machine gun, chained to prevent her from running off. Perhaps she'd got what she deserved for the misery she'd caused in Saigon, but she was a soldier, fighting the war in her own way. I didn't think she'd deserved that.

We weren't hit with any machine gun fire. Paul shouted suddenly, "Smoke trail coming up from the starboard side, take her down low and left, Ritter."

Our pilot responded immediately, using his fighter pilot's instincts to

fling the aircraft into a tight bank to port.

"I can see it, don't worry, it's all under control," he said airily.

I doubted it, this was something new, something we'd never seen before. We'd heard intelligence reports about man-portable missiles being shipped from Russia and brought south along the Ho Chi Minh trail, but so far it had been just rumours. Now it was more than that and we had no way of knowing how lethal this new weapon was. As we plummeted down to treetop level, I could see the missile smoke trail alter as it followed us.

"It's targeted us," Paul said calmly to Ritter. "Perhaps on the heat of our engines?"

"I've got it," he replied.

I wondered about our passengers in the back, flung around with the cargo in that violent manoeuvre. They would have to manage we had our own problems. Ritter threw the aircraft around again in a tight bank, this time towards the missile. We had been flying at about a hundred feet above the jungle canopy, now he dropped even lower, we were a huge, four engine cargo plane, flying at a hundred and fifty miles an hour and could almost feel the tops of the trees touching the underbelly of the fuselage. We watched the missile, fascinated by the way it seem have a mind of its own, which I found out later it did. It swung away from us, looped around and then disappeared, exploding in the thick foliage below. There were no more smoke trails and Ritter started to gain height. I went back into the cabin.

Robbins looked up angrily, he was just extricating himself from under a pile of cardboard cartons of powdered milk.

"Jesus Christ, Jurgen, I thought your guy knew how to fly this plane."

The other soldiers were helping each other, lifting cardboard boxes away and bandaging some of the cuts and grazes they'd received from being flung around the cabin.

"He does know how to fly the aircraft, you're lucky he was as the controls."

I explained about the missile, how near we'd come to disaster.

"Where did a guy like that learn his trade?" Robbins asked.

"In the skies over Germany shooting down American B-17s and P-47s, as well as British Lancasters and Spitfires."

The twelve men stiffened and looked at me. A lieutenant, their commander got up and came across to me. "You're telling me he was shooting down our boys?"

“I’m telling you he was a soldier, like yourself. Yes, while your bombers were dropping thousands of tons of bombs on our homes, our women and children, he was trying to stop them. And what he learned just saved all of our lives.”

A soldier called across.

“The guy’s right, Lieutenant. That war was a long time ago, everyone fought on one side or the other, not their fault where they happened to be born.”

The officer nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. You’d better thank him for us.”

“I will.”

I went back to the cockpit and we droned on towards Khe Sanh. I got out weapons out of the cabinet, the two M2s and Ritter’s new Thompson M1A1, the variant of the Tommy Gun. Paul joined me and we checked each weapon over carefully, made sure that each was loaded with a full clip and that the spare clips were all ready for use. Then we checked out our pistols, the Colt .45 automatics that were ‘de rigueur’ for almost every male adult in South Vietnam. Except the Vietnamese, of course. There was little left to do. We would be landing during a battle, by all accounts it was becoming the hardest fought contest of the current war. We had few illusions, we could be shot at during the approach, on the ground or taking off. I was mulling over all the possible outcomes when I heard Paul speaking to me.

“This mission, do you think it’ll change anything?”

I smiled. “Do you?”

He shook his head. “Not really, nor did our last job, guiding those men into Trang Bang. But we did get Helene back, so it wasn’t all bad.”

“No, I was grateful for that. But there were a lot of casualties.”

“Yes, too many,” I replied. Then I saw the puffs of smoke on the horizon, the unmistakable sign of an artillery barrage. We were coming up on Khe Sanh.

Paul went back to the co-pilot’s seat and prepared for the landing. We got clearance to go straight in, he throttled back, dropped flaps, dropped the landing gear and put the heavy aircraft neatly onto the runway. And into the teeth of an artillery barrage. As he was taxiing to the ramp, I went into the cabin.

Lieutenant, the second we stop I’ll open the doors, I want this cargo straight out, we’re not planning on hanging around here.”

“You’ve got it,” he said. They were still dressed in their black trousers and white shirts, I wasn’t sure if they would fool anyone here into thinking they were innocent civilians. There were no innocent civilians in Khe Sanh, everyone here either fought or they were dead or wounded. The aircraft came to a halt, I flung the doors open and the men frantically started to unload. If there was any need to underline the urgency, an artillery duel was in progress. Heavy shells fell constantly on the base, the American artillery thundered and roared as they sent dozens of shells back towards the enemy. A pity that the war couldn’t be decided on the number of shells fired, the Americans would certainly win hands down. Within a few minutes, the cartons were all out of the aircraft and I slammed the doors shut, Ritter throttled up and we were taxiing out to turn around and take off. We were facing the runway, Paul moved his hand forward to throttle up to maximum power ready to take off, when a salvo of shells hit the tarmac. A series of enormous holes appeared five hundred yards in front of us, we were trapped.

The artillery duel continued as we pondered out next move. The strip was very narrow, too narrow to avoid the holes. We might thread past them, but the strip wouldn’t be long enough for us to take off. “It seems we are stuck here,” Paul said, calm as ever.

“The hell we are,” Ritter snapped. “I’ve had enough of this place.”

He opened up the throttles wide, the DC-4 leapt forward.

“Ritter, for Christ’s sake,” I shouted at him.

“Relax, calm down, I’ve got it,” he said quietly.

But his eyes were fixed on the runway. I looked ahead and spotted what he had seen. One of the shell holes was separate from the others, either side of it there was a narrow strip of concrete, very narrow. So narrow, it was not much wider than our wheels. I wanted to ask him if he was sure, to make certain that he’d calculated correctly, if the wheels went into the shell holes at speed the Douglas was lost. But if we stayed here and got hit by an artillery shell, it would be the same result. Faster and faster we rushed towards the holes in the runway. Paul was icy calm, staring ahead with a disinterested look on his face. Perhaps he really was disinterested, I considered. After so much war, so much killing, the line between life and death had blurred his reality, they were all one and the same to him. But not to me, I wanted to do something but whatever I did would distract Ritter. Then we were on the shell holes, the port wheel seemed to lurch as the hole left side of the aircraft dropped slightly, then we were over it and gathering speed. I heard a

transmission over the headphones.

"SGN-SS1, this is Khe Sanh control, you must wait for clearance before taking off."

We were still open mouthed with astonishment as the DC-4 lifted off the runway and into the sky. I had to stop myself from sending a suitably abrupt reply, we had enough problems without upsetting the U.S. military. Besides, they had problems of their own, big problems. I didn't envy them. We were out of Khe Sanh, I could hardly believe we were unscathed.

"That's it, that's the last time I fly into that place," I said, almost as an afterthought.

"You've said stuff like that before," Paul observed. "But when the shit hits the fan, you're the same as the rest of us, you're attracted to war like flies to a piece of camel shit."

"You're very eloquent today," I smiled at Paul.

He shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. But it's true, you're a warrior, like the rest of us."

"I've told Helene I'm going to take more of a back seat," I told them. I felt ashamed, slightly ashamed, almost cowardly as I said it. They just roared with laughter.

"My friend," Ritter said, "the day you take a back seat is the day you lay down and die."

I thought about that. There was some truth in it, what was it about the sudden excitement when bullets started to fly, bombs started to fall and yes, the satisfaction of seeing the enemy fall, beaten, dead.

"But I have to do something, I have a wife and daughter to consider."

"Don't worry, we'll take care of you, old man," Ritter smiled.

"That's what I'm afraid of, my friend."

We got back to Saigon safely and I was re-united with my wife and daughter. A week later we moved into our rented bungalow and had to put up with the chaos of workmen who were making the alterations that Helene had set in motion. During that first week we took delivery of our leased DC-4, we now had two large cargo aircraft again with which to develop our little airline. Although fighting was still going on in Hue and Khe Sanh, it was clear the enemy offensive was running out of steam. Saigon had become relatively quiet, due more than anything to the colossal casualties the Viet Cong had suffered. Put simply, they were running out of fighters. Not this it would stop them, each day, more and more men flooded down the Ho Chi

Minh Trail from the North. I had little doubt that when they had re-gathered their strength, they would try again. And again and again.

It was a pleasant, mild day and we sat at a pavement cafe in Saigon, Helene and Sophie, Paul and his current girlfriend, Cam and me. Paul had become like an uncle to Sophie and we had something resembling a normal family life. The street was busy, even in the middle of the day, cars and mopeds rushing along, churning up the dust. It was April, the end of the dry season here in the South.

"Business is looking good," Paul said. "We're avoiding the military stuff, they're pouring so many resources into the country that they've got whole fleets of transport aircraft, a massive infrastructure. But it means the spin-off for us is good demand for civilian operations, mainly cargo."

I knew he'd spoken mainly for Helene's benefit, she didn't take such an active part in the business these days, preferring to spend her time bringing up our daughter. Sophie sat quietly next to her, sipping a glass of coke through a straw, a thoroughly modern child of the sixties. I thought about what Paul had said, we both knew the truth of it.

"You mean the American military bring in thousands of tons of supplies every week, give them to the ARVN, the ARVN officers sell them on the black market and we move them around the country?"

He smiled. "That may be so, I wouldn't like to speculate about that. But it's good business all the same."

I reflected on the corruption, the wholesale theft that the American intervention had brought to this country. They had always been pretty lax in terms of some things that we Westerners were more morally rigid about, like prostitution. But now, the whole of Saigon was becoming a sink of squalid excess, especially after dark. Whatever benefits the Americans brought to it was not evident in the way many people conducted themselves. Family honour and dignity had given way to avarice and self–first. There was just too much of everything, too much food, too much money, too much equipment, too many soldiers with pockets full of money looking for somewhere to spend it, especially in the brothels and sex shows that had sprung up everywhere.

"It won't be so good if the Americans leave," I told him.

"Have you heard anything?"

I shook my head. "Not from MACV. But I read the papers and the political mood in the U.S. is changing rapidly. They're looking for a way out

of the war and it won't be long before they pull out completely."

"So it'll be down to the ARVN to protect us, eh?"

He was laughing as he said it. We both knew that man for man the ARVN soldier could be as good a fighter as the next man. But too many of them were badly led by dishonest officers and generals who were unhappy about their troops suffering too many battle casualties.

"God help us," I replied.

Helene looked at us sharply. "So what are we going to do, we have to make some long term plans. How long do you think we've got?"

I looked at Paul.

"Maybe five years," he said to my wife. "Not much more."

"Then we have to have a plan to get out. I assume there is no possibility of working with the communists?" she replied.

We both nearly choked. We'd seen the communists in action, in Russia and here in Vietnam since the French Indochina war.

"None whatsoever," I said quickly. "Forget it, if the communists come to power they'll steal everything they can get their hands on."

"So we need to start moving operations out of Vietnam," she said.

Cam looked uncomfortable, I think she genuinely cared for Paul and was distraught at the thought of his leaving. I saw him squeeze her hand and whisper in her ear. He would take care of her I knew that. Maybe he'd take her with him, perhaps marry her, why not? She was pretty and she probably loved him, not a bad basis for a marriage.

"Where would you suggest we move to?" I asked her.

"Cambodia would be worth considering. It's close to here, it would be easy to arrange and we could begin operations sooner rather than later. South East Asia is our home, it wouldn't feel like we were being forced to leave it."

"What do you think?" I asked Paul.

"It's a good idea, it's a peaceful place, they don't have any serious issues with the Vietnamese, we should be able to set things up quite easily. Yes, it's a good idea. Phnom Penh has good facilities, we could start with a small satellite operation there and share aircraft between both operational bases."

I nodded. "Fair enough, at least, it would expand our business into new markets and if we ever felt it would be politic to leave Vietnam we could just fly across the border."

I ordered a new round of drinks and we toasted to the success of our

new idea. I had little doubt we could make a success of it, nor that one day we would need an alternative to Vietnam to live and run our business.

A moped pulled up on the street outside the bar, laden with fresh pineapples temptingly displayed in a large basket fixed in front of the handlebars. A pretty, young Vietnamese girl was astride the bike, selling to the people like us enjoying a relaxed drink in the sunshine. It crossed my mind how similar the pineapple was to the enemy grenades we'd encountered during the Second World War. Whatever jarred in my mind I would never know, but something made me look at the face of the seller. She was reaching into the basket yet I hadn't seen anyone buy one of her fruits. Her face was contorted with hate and range, it all clicked into place. Everything happened at once, she was drawing her arm back to throw, I shouted 'grenade', relying on Paul to do the right thing. Then I drew my pistol in one smooth motion, cocked it, took off the safety, aimed and fired.

It was as it was in slow motion, I could see Paul throwing the girls down to the floor, under the table. The pineapple seller was thrown back into the road, still clutching the object she was about to throw. For one terrible moment, I thought I'd made a mistake and shot an innocent person. As I was tumbling to the floor, another instinct was telling me to go and take care of the girl I'd shot, to remedy a terrible error of judgement. Then just as I hit the floor there was a huge explosion as the grenade she'd been about to throw went off. Immediately, the area became total chaos, a shower of metal fragments hit the inside of the bar, wounding several of the patrons. I checked out the girls, but they all appeared uninjured. Paul started to help them up while I went to check out the terrorist. She was dead, her body blown apart by the force of the grenade. One of her arms had disappeared completely, the rest of her was battered and bloody. Sirens were sounding and the police would clearly be here any moment. I went back to my party. They were just clambering to their feet, except Helene, who was already up and attending the wounded.

"Are the girls ok?"

Paul nodded. "None of our people were hit, we're fine. Cambodia sounds pretty attractive to me at this moment."

"I know what you mean. At least it's peaceful, no wars going on there."

The police arrived and questioned us briefly, but it was a regular occurrence in this city. We'd had enough and when Helene was finished with the wounded, we made our way back to our bungalow. I served drinks on the

table in the garden. I noticed that Paul was checking around the perimeter of the wall, making sure. I called him over.

"Hey, Paul, you're making us all nervous, come and join us."

A few moments later he walked over. "I think you need to look at the wall, you could do with adding some rolls of barbed wire, it's easy for someone to climb over as it is. Maybe some security lights too, at night you'd be a sitting duck."

I got up. "Show me where you think the weak points are, I've been thinking about additional fortifications since we started moving in."

"Stop!" Helene shouted. We both stopped.

"I can't go on like this much longer, Jurgen. You men go and sort out your barbed wire or whatever, but it's no way to live. I'll start coming to the hangar from tomorrow while Sophie is at school. We need to plan our exit."

I looked at Paul. "What do you think?"

"We've had a good run, we've been lucky, generally. But this is where the money is, Jurgen."

"For how long?"

He shrugged. But I knew what he meant, we could clean up here, Cambodia could swallow us up like the minnows we were in the air freight business. We exchanged glances.

"We'll think about it," I said to Helene. "But not tomorrow."

She gave me a furious look. Between her and the Viet Cong, life would never be boring.

* * *

*By intervening in the Vietnamese struggle the United States was attempting to fit its global strategies into a world of hillocks and hamlets, to reduce its majestic concerns for the containment of communism and the security of the Free World to a dimension where governments rose and fell as a result of arguments between two colonels' wives.*

*Frances Fitzgerald*

Clark Clifford and Earle Wheeler watched the broadcast from the office of the Chief of Staff, next door to the Oval Office. Jim Jones, the newly appointed White House Chief of Staff, although serving under the nominal title of Appointments Secretary, sat behind his desk. He was not watching the

broadcast, only half listening. He had already discussed the speech in depth with the President.

"So what do you think, Clark?" the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs asked the Secretary of Defence. "We could get a Republican in the White House next time around. Will that be good for us, for our efforts in Vietnam?"

Clark Clifford shook his head, amused at the idea that a Republican would necessarily be in favour of expanding the war in Vietnam. "General Wheeler, the one thing on the mind of the American electorate at present is how to get out of the war in South East Asia. The president that gets elected will be the one that makes that promise. You can forget any more resources, chances are we'll be out of there in the near future."

"But that's crazy, we're finally winning the war and they talk about pulling out."

"The American people don't believe we're winning, and they're the ones that vote, General. Besides, that 'war is almost won' rhetoric is wearing a bit thing, Westmoreland was spouting that line just before Tet, as I recall. People remember things like that."

"One second, he's getting to it now," said Jim Jones, who was now watching the screen. The President was still speaking.

"I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President. But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honourable peace, and stands ready tonight to defend an honoured cause, whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice that duty may require. Thank you for listening. Good night and God bless all of you."

They looked at each other, it was real, it had finally happened. Their futures were now all up for grabs. Not one man expected to be in this august building by this time next year.

"So that's it then. You reckon the next guy will start pulling us out of there?"

"I do," Clifford replied. "Not totally immediately, there'll need to be some way of saving face, they'll have to agree some kind of a formula, a form of words, I guess, but it won't take too long. Two or three years, would be my best guess."

"So it'll be peace, General," Jones said. "You'd better start looking for a new job."

"Or a new war," Clifford quipped.

“The only peace the American people would accept would be peace with honour,” Wheeler insisted.

They all turned and stood up, the President had just entered the room. He nodded to them.

“If that’s what it takes, General, that’s what we’ll do.”

THE END

# DEVIL'S GUARD AFGHANISTAN

By Eric Meyer

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# Chapter One

*I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God, the other of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast…the promise of Bush is that there is no place on Earth where I can hide that he won't find me. We shall see which promise is fulfilled.*

*Mullah Omar*

The man looked at the assembled group, watching carefully as they returned his gaze. He was tall, at least six-three, and lean, yet he was different from them for other reasons. Not because of the patch he sometimes used to cover his one useless eye. Not for his black robes and black and gray patterned turban, which were little different from the clothes of his companions. Not for his beard streaked with gray, which was no longer than the other beards in this room. It was for the power that emanated from him, from his gaze, and the way he held himself; the awesome mental strength that seemed to flow from him to inspire and command those he led. Until the Americans came, he was Head of the Supreme Council of Afghanistan. Now, he had even more power, the power to change political shape of the entire world.

"I am ill."

Three words, yet they sent a ripple of fear into the assembly. He held up his hand.

"No, I am not about to die, but I will have to travel to a location where I can receive treatment. It is essential that I regain the strength to continue the fight to drive out the infidels. I need a band of fedayeen, men I can trust to be my personal bodyguard. I will ask for volunteers when this meeting is over."

He knew there would be no shortage of volunteers for his proposed band of fanatics, the fedayeen, who would guard him with their lives. It would give them, and their families, everlasting prestige if they lived and an assurance of immortality if they did not.

"Next, our intelligence about the American intentions has dried up. We have lost so many men over the past few months that we are fighting blind."

Commander Abdul Qadir held up his hand. He was in his early forties, bearded and sinewy, like the men he led. His sunbaked face was lined and cruel.

"We have a man who expects to be appointed to the traitor Barzai's personal staff very soon. As soon as he is in place, our information will flow

once more."

Omar nodded. "That is good, Commander Qadir. As soon as you have anything, let me know straight away. In the meantime, I want you to make certain that the areas we control between Jalalabad and the Khyber Pass are kept clear of the infidels. It is important you do not fail. If any NATO patrols are sent into the area, you know what to do."

"You are going to Pakistan again?"

Omar stared at him. "Perhaps, perhaps not. I will keep you informed. Let me know about the informant in the palace, and enlarge your operations in that area. That is all."

He got up, stiffly. All of them remarked how tired he looked. Some were terrified; they could not lose this man, the man who was hunted by every resource the foreign infidels could employ. He was Afghanistan, and they had vowed to protect him to the last breath in their bodies. They laughed aloud when they heard the question translated into Pashto, the question that was uppermost in American minds. For the infidels would never learn the answer to the problem that vexed them more than any other.

"Where is Mullah Omar?"

* * *

"How are things going, Max?" she asked me.

I smiled at Avizeh, the pretty young woman who ran our shoestring operation in Kandahar. She wore a clean, white dress that accentuated the olive tint of her skin. Her hair hung loose under the obligatory headscarf, and unusually for the local women, she wore gold hoops in her ears.

"Going? They're fine, everything's good."

She kept the skeptical look on her face. I sighed. "Ok, it's not so good, but I'm hoping things will pick up."

"Hah!" she grimaced. "If I lose this job, I don't know what I will do."

"You won't lose it, we're fine."

"Fine! Do you think I haven't seen the overdue bills, Max? We're in trouble, aren't we?"

I nodded. "Yes, we're not so good. Rachel hasn't been paid in weeks, and we're struggling to find the money for the aviation gas."

"I hope we keep the airline afloat. If I have to look for another job, it will be difficult."

"For you? Surely not!" Avizeh was fluent in English, Pashtu, Dari and

Thai. She was also very efficient; anyone would be glad to hire her, and not just for her looks.

"You know what they call me in town? A dog washer."

"What are you talking about? What's a dog washer?"

"You know that Muslims regard keeping dogs in the house as unclean?"

I nodded.

"They say that those Afghans like me, who work for a Westerner, are put to work washing dogs, menial and unclean work. It is a great insult."

"I'm sure it is. I'm sorry, Avizeh. I promise you I'll do my best to keep things going."

Rachel, my co-pilot, came into the hangar. A former Air Force pilot, she'd been dumped after an accident left her grounded with only one eye and a permanent limp. To compensate for any shortcomings, the feisty brunette, short and barely five feet tall, possessed a dark beauty both on the inside and the outside that could light up a room. I wondered daily which particular god had been smiling on me the day I managed to recruit her for Helene Air.

"We're all ready to go, Max. I'm not sure about the refueling. We'll need two stops, I'd guess."

I grimaced. "Let's hope the budget can squeeze it. It's a long haul to Vietnam. Did you find out about the cargo? I'd be more comfortable if I knew what we were carrying in the hold."

"Not a chance, I'm sorry. The crates are secure, but I'd guess we already know what's inside."

Yes, we had a good idea. Drugs, in the form of raw opium. It was both the scourge and the salvation of Afghanistan, a deadly dichotomy of wealth for the people who ran the rackets, and a slow agonizing death for the consumers. After 911, a politician stated that Afghanistan exported more than five hundred tons of opium each year. The invasion would be justified if meant stopping that 'evil' trade. They'd reported that eleven years later, exports were running at over eight thousand tons a year. We refused to carry drugs but were adult enough to know that some cargoes would be bales of opium sealed inside wooden crates, and we couldn't check every one.

"Let's hope the Vietnamese customs officials have been paid off," I added grimly.

She smiled. "You know it'll be fine. It's what keeps this part of the world spinning."

"You mean drugs or pay-offs?"

“Both. Around here, it’s one and the same.”

She stopped speaking as a pair of fighters flew off the airfield in a roll of kerosene-fueled thunder, NATO Tornado ground attack aircraft. We hardly took any notice these days, just waited until the noise abated and then carried on speaking. Kandahar served NATO and the ISAF forces as a military airfield, as well as a civilian airport for Southern Afghanistan.

“Do you fancy a drink before we leave? It could be a long time before we get the chance.”

I could see her considering it, the Air Force fighter jock that she’d been struggling with the co-pilot for a backwater airline that she’d become. The Air Force lost.

“I’d love one,” she smiled.

“Can we take your car? My SUV is out of action again. I’m waiting for a new gearbox.”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s go.”

We walked outside, or rather, I walked and Rachel limped, but it was very slight. She didn’t need two good legs because there was no doubt in his mind that her beauty would attract admirers wherever she went, limp or no limp.

We drove slowly through the streets of downtown Kandahar. I still found it strange, where almost everyone seemed to carry a weapon. Foreigner-filled SUVs jostled for position with ancient timber carts pulled by donkeys and sometimes Afghans. We found our way to our usual haunt, the Millennium bar. Some people argued it was named after the Millennium Falcon, Han Solo’s ship from Star Wars. I was certain it was a throwback to the year two thousand, and the name was no more exciting than that; like the rest of Afghanistan, a stale reminder of a stale past. We ordered drinks and a meal. It wouldn’t do to fly on an empty stomach.

“What the hell are we doing?” Rachel asked out of the blue.

“Doing? We’re eating and drinking.”

“No, I meant in Afghanistan. Look at the place! It’s a toilet, after all these years.”

“It’s better than it was under the Taliban. Women couldn’t go outside without a burqa or a male chaperone. Men were forced to pray or they were punished. They had to grow beards and cut their hair according to the religious rules. There was no music. It was banned. No TV, no photographs, of people, anyway. No gambling, for sure, and you know how these people

love to bet on bird and dog fights. The poor bastards couldn't even fly a kite."

"So that's what NATO and ISAF is fighting for. The right to watch TV and bet on a cock fight."

I looked at her. "What's up? You've been here for several months, so you know what it's like."

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just feeling down about it all. You know that stadium we went to, last time we flew into Kabul?"

"Sure, we watched a soccer match. It ended in a riot, as I recall, and we had to make a run for it."

"Right. The Taliban used it for public executions, where they'd behead criminals, including women, and cut off the hands of alleged thieves. The whole place is soaked in blood."

I couldn't think of an answer for that, and just then the food arrived. The waiter put two plates down in front of us. As far as I could make out, it was an orange oil slick of potatoes and meat that turned out to be mostly gristle. Maybe Rachel was right.

We finished our unappetizing meal in silence and drove back to Kandahar International. The aircraft sat waiting outside the hangar, a de Havilland Twin Otter. She was a 19-passenger short take-off and landing utility aircraft developed by de Havilland, produced by Viking Air. The aircraft's fixed tricycle undercarriage, STOL abilities and high rate of climb had made it a successful cargo and passenger carrying aircraft. She was tough and reliable, and able to take the knocks and bangs in a country like this one where smooth tarmac was just a dream in most places. We finished the walkaround inspection and climbed into the cockpit for the pre-flight checks.

"I miss Jahandrah. He was a good man," Rachel murmured as we were checking the flap operation."

He'd been our maintenance engineer, a local Afghan, one of those men born with oil running through their veins. He could fix everything, from a kid's cycle to the turboprop engine of a cargo aircraft. Since he'd been gone, we'd relied on maintaining the aircraft ourselves or calling in someone when we were out of our depth. There was usually someone from the ground crews willing to earn a few extra bucks.

"What happened to him, did you even find out?" she continued.

I nodded. "Avizeh told me the whole story. He was a Tajik, and as you know they're mostly Pashtuns around here. It was a vendetta, something that happened during the Soviet occupation. One of the Tajiks accused a local

Pashtun leader of cowardice, and you know what they're like where their macho pride is concerned. Never forget an insult. He was gunned down going home from work."

"Poor bastard," she said. "I suppose the cops never found out who did it?"

I shook my head. "They're mostly Pashtuns around here. They wouldn't life a finger for a Tajik."

"Fucking assholes," she exclaimed. I'd noticed her swearing more of late. It was a natural reaction to the dismal chaos that surrounded us, a defense mechanism almost like a talisman against the evils of the Afghan conflict.

We had to wait for clearance, a flight of NATO helicopters came clattering in to land, disgorging scores of weary troops almost the moment they hit the concrete, American Airborne Infantry.

"They look so young," Rachel muttered.

"You're not so old yourself," I reminded her with a grin.

"Yeah, but I'm not spending my time in some FOB, waiting for an enemy contact to start shooting at me."

A forward operating base, or FOB, was often nothing more than a flyblown pile of rocks and sandbags with rudimentary protection for its defenders. The troops hated them.

The headphones came to life. "Helene Air, hold for take-off. We have to clear an obstruction on the runway. There will be a short delay."

I looked across at the tower, something about the guy's voice didn't sound right. He was nervous, so what wasn't he telling me? I looked across the expanse of the airfield and saw that halfway along the runway there was a vehicle lumbering in our direction. A BTR-80, an eight wheeled amphibious armored personnel carrier designed in the Soviet Union. They sent thousands of them to Afghanistan in the 1980s, and there were a few around in use by the Afghan National Army, the ANA. During the mujahedeen resistance to the Soviets, the rebels stole hundred of them and put them to use against their former owners. But there was something badly wrong with this one. It was in the middle of a friendly, well-defended airfield. Yet it was battened down, as if it was going into action. In any case, the Afghan Army had no part of the defenses inside the airfield.

"Rachel, emergency power! Get her off the ground."

She hadn't been a fighter pilot for nothing. She slammed the throttles

forward, released the brakes and the aircraft began picking up speed.

"What's up?" she asked, concentrating on keeping the aircraft as level as possible as we bumped over the rough taxiway heading for the tarmac, and the onrushing BTR. It seemed huge and deadly, like a prehistoric monster thirsting for blood. Our blood.

"That APC, there's something wrong. It's ANA, yet she's buttoned up ready for action."

"Insurgents?

"It could be, so I'd prefer to be out of here while the military deal with them."

We had picked up speed and then we were on the smoother surface of the main runway. The BTR was still hurtling towards us. A hatch opened, and a turbaned head appeared. We watched as someone passed out an RPG missile launcher to him. He pointed it in our direction, and there was no doubt now about their intentions.

"Oh Christ!" Rachel exclaimed. "He's going to launch that thing at us."

"I can see that." She was handling the aircraft well, keeping it on a straight, accelerating path for a take-off; if the BTR hadn't been about to open fire on us. It was on a path that was slightly converging with us, and I calculated the angles in my head.

"Turn five degrees to port, now!"

"But we'll be heading straight for him," she objected.

"It'll make us a smaller target, head on. Don't give him the whole of the fuselage to shoot at."

"Got it."

She touched the rudder bar, and the aircraft moved so that it was head on to the armored vehicle. There was nothing we could do. We had to wait and pray that he missed.

He missed. The sudden spurt of flame and smoke as he fired, the certainty that we could see the missile speeding the short distance towards us; everything conspired to force Rachel to swerve the aircraft away. Yet it would only have opened up the length of our fuselage as an easy target, and with iron resolve she kept the aircraft on course. The missile zoomed over the top of the cockpit, missing us by only a few feet.

"Veer away now," I shouted. "Get her airborne before he takes another shot."

I was happy to leave her piloting the aircraft. Her reflexes were honed to

a fine level of acuity that I couldn't hope to match from my experience flying lumbering cargo transports. I watched the enemy and called the shots, and she handled the Twin Otter as if it was a thoroughbred Ferrari racing car. We vectored away from the APC, all the time picking up speed to that crucial factor, V1, when we could rotate off the runway and fly out of trouble. But he'd altered course too.

"He's coming towards us, Max."

"I see him. Stay on course."

"He'll hit us!"

"I don't think so."

But there was another danger. From inside the vehicle, someone had passed the missileer another rocket, which he prepared to fire. I looked down at the ground speed indicator. Almost. I checked the shooter and could see he was having trouble preparing his missile as their vehicle jolted over the rough ground at the side of the tarmac. A convoy of four Humvees with roof mounted fifty caliber machine guns were rushing towards the enemy to intercept, but they would be too late for us. I glanced at the indicator again and calculated the approach of the BTR. Maybe Rachel was right.

"Rotate! Level off just above the tarmac."

If we clawed for height, we'd be a sitting target. She pulled back gently, and the aircraft lifted to fly just above ground effect, slowly gaining altitude as the wings felt the lift from our forward speed. A dark shape appeared in the windshield. The BTR, he'd gone clear underneath us. We both watched the shooter as he in turn looked up at us. The missile was almost ready to fire, and I could swear I could see his finger tighten on the trigger.

"Ten degrees port, now!"

She made the adjustment to the rudder, the wing slid around and she chalked up her first kill. The starboard wheel on the aircraft's fixed undercarriage swung around and smashed against the head that stared up at us. He didn't see it coming. One moment we could almost count the blackened, rotting teeth fixed in a frozen snarl, and then the wheel caught him, dashing his head against the iron rim of the hatch. His RPG was thrown off the body of the vehicle to tumble uselessly to the ground. Rachel pulled back a little on the stick, and we started to gain height now that the danger from the missile had gone.

"Christ, look at them go!"

I followed Rachel's gaze to watch the Humvees bracket the BTR with a

hail of heavy, steel jacketed rounds from their fifty calibers. The thin armor of the Soviet vehicle was no match for the modern weaponry; the BTR slewed around, went up on four wheels and then overturned. The guns kept firing, and a sheet of flame and smoke leapt up from the beleaguered APC.

"Yeah, they aced the sucker!" Rachel cheered. Ever the fighter jock, she couldn't help but gloat over the defeated enemy. "I reckon that was a suicide mission. Those Afghans must be getting desperate."

"A suicide mission, for sure. They couldn't hope to escape from a heavily defended airfield. But not Afghan, they don't believe in dying in the fight against the foreign infidels, not if they can avoid it. But the foreign fighters, volunteers, they'd offer to carry out that kind of a mission."

"Foreign fighters? Who'd be stupid enough to fight for this crazy country?"

"Islamists have been flocking here for years. Chechens, Bosnian Muslims, even some Americans and Brits."

"They should have asked me," she said with some bitterness. "I could have told them the place is not worth fighting for."

"Amen to that."

She'd been here for less than six months. She'd spent most of that time working day and night to keep the airline running, flying more hours than safety or sanity would allow; the rest of the time prowling around the aircraft in an old set of my overalls, checking and rechecking that it was not coming apart at the seams. The repairs we had to make would not have cleared a CAA inspection, even if the guy had a white stick and a trained Labrador to guide him.

The headphones crackled again. "Helene Air, you took off without permission. You must observe proper procedure when using Kandahar International Airport. Your actions could have jeopardized safety, and I will be forced to make a note in the operational log."

We exchanged glances, and both of us collapsed into laughter. Before Rachel could make an acid retort that would upset them, I switched to transmit.

"Our apologies, Kandahar International. It was a misunderstanding. It won't happen again."

There was a hesitation, and then a few seconds later they continued. "Very well.  NATO liaison says they were aware of your emergency, so perhaps it will not be entered in the log. Climb to five thousand feet and turn

one hundred and eighty degrees to overfly Kabul. Have a good flight."

"Thank you, Kabul International. Helene Air, out."

"You were pretty good back there, Max. Where did you say you served?"

"Thai military, nothing special."

"Hah! You must tell me about it sometime. You'd make one mean fighter pilot."

No, I wouldn't, not now. At the time, I'd wanted my military career to be something special, and had volunteered for Special Forces. I'd enjoyed the unconventional soldiering that came with special operations, until a joint mission that took us across Cambodia to their border with Vietnam. I'd never know if we'd crossed the border in error, but the Vietnamese Army trooper that had pointed a gun in my face was no error, and I'd shot him, twice. I still woke with nightmares thinking about him. Was he really going to shoot, or was it just a threat? Did he have a family, a wife and kids? Were they now impoverished because of his death? I'd started drinking heavily until I was invalided out. I'd eased off the booze, but the memories had stayed. And when that missileer was aiming at us, I could almost see the face of the man I'd killed superimposed on his face. No, I hadn't been cool. The truth was I'd been anything but cool. All I'd seen was more kids about to lose a father.

"Maybe," I acknowledged with a tight smile. I left Rachel to carry on flying the Twin Otter and closed my eyes to think. But all I saw was a father, a husband, and the wife and kids he left behind. It was no problem for Rachel. She lived for flying. Flying was the only activity that kept her sane through the miseries of Afghanistan, despite the mind-numbing hard work and perpetual danger.

As we climbed towards our cruising altitude, I looked down at a long line of vehicles kicking up dust along the road. Officially, it was known as a Highway, but the reality was different. A one-lane dirt road that was too dusty in the summer and frequently a quagmire in winter. It looked like a NATO fuel convoy. At least they hadn't ambushed that one in the mountains.

"What's our refueling schedule?" she asked, her memory jogged by the lumbering line of tankers. "I assume you've planned where we're going to stop for gas?"

"Oh yeah, the refueling stops. I estimate we'll be fine to reach Islamabad, so you'll need to take her up high to clear the Hindu Kush. After Pakistan, we'll land at Dhaka in Bangladesh and tank up again, that should do

us for out final destination."

"You looking forward to seeing the sights of the Saigon cesspit?"

I smiled. She was, like most Americans, and not enamored of the communist regime that had taken over Vietnam in 1975, not that I found much to like about the new rulers of the People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Despite their corruption and ramshackle lifestyles, the southerners were in general easy going. Not so the northerners, who were from a different race and different culture. Why was it that totalitarian governments always named themselves democratic? Weird.

"I doubt we'll have much time for that. We only have time to fly in, unload, and fly out again."

"Have you ever been to Saigon?"

I looked across at her. I'd been there several times before. After all, my family had something of a history in that city.

"I have, yes."

"Like it?"

"Compared to Afghanistan, it's not so bad. But it's not like the old days, or so they tell me. I gather it was once known as the Paris of the east."

"I'd like to see it sometime," she mused.

"From the flight deck of a B52 bomber?"

She grinned. "Now you're talking, buster."

A short while later, she asked me a question about Afghanistan. "I mean, what the hell's their problem? Don't they want the kinds of things we're trying to do for them? Schools, roads, industry, and sanitation?"

I nodded. "Sure they do, some of them. But those things are not their priorities. You have to remember that they've successfully repelled a number of invaders, including the British and the Russians, so the people and the warlords think they're invincible. They hate and distrust foreigners. They're only friendly to their own people, those that are born to the life. And even then, their life is all about fighting. Afghan men learn to fight as soon as they learn to breathe. It's an automatic reflex with many of them. They fight with dogs, cockerels. You name it, and they fight it. They play polo with the head of a goat. I've even seen them pit tiny birds against each other, so small they'd fit in your hand. They've fought for centuries, so long that I doubt many of them can even remember what they're fighting for. Certainly not a new road or village school."

"So you don't think there's any hope?"

“There’s always hope. I guess they want to be left alone, to work it out for themselves. No drugs, no foreign armies, no foreign Islamists stirring up trouble, just Afghanistan for the Afghans.”

“At least they’d only kill each other,” she grunted.

“That’d be progress, wouldn’t it?”

She laughed. I liked it when she laughed. I liked it a lot.

* * *

The phone was ringing, and for a short time he was tempted not to answer it. He’d only arrived at his folk’s place the night before, and he was on furlough. Second Lieutenant, Class of 2012, United States Military Academy at West Point. He’d made it, after all the hard work, the good grades at school, then college, a real struggle for his parents. He’d worked his ass off too, pumping gas in the local garage, and then off to West Point for the endless series of grueling entrance tests. The biggest moment was when the letter popped into the box. He was admitted. Now all he had to do was work his butt off some more, and he’d been a real, live military officer. He intended to enter the survey branch. He wanted to study archaeology after his military service, and maybe he could take a second career as a college professor. Everyone loved a soldier, well, most people did. The Vietnam days were long gone, and now it was a profession that people admired, as they should. He’d missed the cut for the engineers, and instead had been assigned to infantry. They told him that he’d be posted to Fort Benning. ‘There’s plenty to survey down there, Second Lieutenant. It’s a big place. Keep your head down and your nose clean. If a vacancy comes up in the survey branch, you’ll be the first to know’. That was fine with him. He’d go wherever he was sent. At least he wasn’t sweating his ass off in some foreign hellhole. They were bringing the boys back from those places, since the war was over in Iraq, and Kosovo that was a tiny police action. And they wouldn’t send him to Afghanistan, not a fledgling second lieutenant. They wanted real soldiers over there, not nerds like him. He sometimes wished he was a bit tougher, but maybe it saved him from some of the, let’s face it, more uncomfortable assignments. When they wanted a warrior, they were inclined to overlook him. He remembered that mom and dad had got up early to go to church, as it was Sunday, so he picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Second Lieutenant Rains?”

How did they get his number? Oh yeah, he always had to leave a contact number.

"Yes, I'm Rains."

"Corporal Reardon from HQ, Sir. I have your new assignment."

He smiled. They'd all told him about the army screw-ups.

"That's good of you, Corporal, but I already have my assignment. I'm due to report to Benning in forty-eight hours."

"Yes, Sir. I mean, no, Sir. That's been changed."

"Oh, really? Where are they sending me?"

Christ! That was quick. This could be it, the survey unit he'd wanted.

"Afghanistan, Sir. You need to return to headquarters ASAP. You're ordered to fly out tomorrow."

"No, there must be some mistake. I'm not down for combat, Corporal, it's..."

"You're an infantry officer, Sir?"

"Well, yes, I guess so."

"There's no mistake, Sir. You're taking over a platoon of infantry, Lieutenant. They're moving up to Camp Phoenix in Kabul as soon as you join them. Your written orders will be ready for you when you report here. Thank you, Sir. Have a good trip."

He decided to take an ice cold shower. He needed to clear his head. Fuck! It was crazy. Rains checked his appearance in the full-length mirror. Did he look like a combat soldier, really? He was pale and thin to the point of being gaunt, fair and blonde, a legacy of his Scandinavian ancestors. His hair was short, not quite a buzz cut, combed straight back. No, he looked like an associate professor of archaeology. At that moment, he wished to Christ it were just a dream. He couldn't even shoot straight, and he'd sure never fired a shot in anger. Damn what was he to do? He thought for a few moments. He was a second lieutenant in the United States Army. He'd follow his orders. But what would he actually DO? He hadn't got the faintest idea.

# Chapter Two

*Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the war on terrorism have reduced the pace of military transformation and have revealed our lack of preparation for defensive and stability operations. This Administration has*

*overextended our military.*

*The President of the United States of America*

The Situation Room at the White House looked strange in its unaccustomed emptiness. Mathew Mann, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, glanced around at the cold, gray, bare walls and the naked electronic screens; at the solid, institutional furniture, executive quality, that would seat the horde of senior administration apparatchiks who made the decisions about who would live. And who would die. He caught his reflection in the mirrored glass wall opposite where he sat. He was looking at a trim six-footer with black hair, cut so short it was little more than a shadow on top of his head. His eyes were dark, and he liked to think of them as veiled. Especially when he played poker, or politics, which were essentially the same game. Bluff and counter bluff for high stakes. He loved his country, his job, and the Army. Some said he mixed up his priorities at times, but he was not a man who spent a great deal of time soul-searching. He knew that behind his back, he was nicknamed 'Action Mann'. It wasn't a name that caused him any difficulty. He knew he was getting old when he felt irritated that the air conditioning hadn’t been adjusted to account for the empty room, for the small group that was gathered for this meeting. He smiled at his frailty. The room was designed to cope with the raised adrenaline, perspiration, even the fear of a large number of political and military hangers-on. Even with his tunic buttoned up, he felt the cold, almost as cold as the chilly Washington. He grinned to himself; he was getting too old for this particular kind of armchair warfare. There were only two others present, the President, as elegant, fit and trim as ever; a handsome, dark Othello, who weaved the spells that changed their lives, and not always for the better. Although he knew that Barrani was a good man. The Secretary of State sat near to him. Short, trim and power dressed as usual, her fragrance even managing to overpower the aircon in this place. But this morning her usually immaculate blonde hair and perfect makeup were slightly askew, which was no surprise given the early hour. The President had a full diary, so when he wanted to discuss one of his pet concerns it had to be fitted in outside of normal working hours, like this morning, at ten minutes after six. He realized they were both staring at him, and he made an effort to stop the woolgathering. What was the question? Damn, he should have paid attention. These people were not used to asking twice.

“Could you repeat the question, Mr. President? I’m not quite clear on

what you're looking for here."

President Barrani stared at him, a lawyer's stare. "General, I said that I'm less than satisfied with our progress in Afghanistan. It seems to me that every time we attack the enemy, especially the leaders, the important targets, they fade into the mountains and just wait for us to leave. Then they start shooting again, taking back territory we've spilled blood to win. What are you doing about it? And what's more to the point, where is Mullah Omar? Now that bin Laden is gone he's the man the Taliban look to for leadership."

He wanted to give an honest answer, but he'd liked to do a whole lot of things, except that his hands were constrained. Tied by the politicians in Kabul, the United Nations, and here in DC.

"We're doing everything we can, Sir. But we do have to consider the political implications of our every action. If we get it wrong, it makes life difficult for the soldiers on the front line."

"That's crap, General, and you know it!" Mrs. Chalmers leaned forward and glared at him, another lawyer's stare. "The President asked what you're doing. All you've told him is what you're not doing. I'll ask the same question. What are you doing about it?"

The General sighed. Ok, if they wanted it, they'd get it. "Nothing." He looked at both of them. "The rules we operate under prevent us from taking the kind of direct action that's needed."

Barrani smiled. "At least that sounds like an honest answer, General. Now tell us, what would you do if your hands weren't tied by the politicians?"

General Mann nodded. So it was to be that kind of meeting; they wanted honest answers. Answers they could beat him over the head with later. It explained the lack of any staffers and the numerous assistants that were always thick on the ground at this kind of a head to head.

"You want the absolute truth?"

They both nodded emphatically. "Go ahead, General, tell it like it is," the President ordered him.

"Yes, Sir. It's really simple. The only way to contain the enemy in Afghanistan is to cut off the head. Kill the leaders. It's a tactic we used in Vietnam, when we were allowed to, the so-called Black-ops."

"General, I seem to recall we lost in Vietnam," Mrs. Chalmers reminded him. He grimaced. Sure, it was the public perception, that the US had lost that war. But it was only half right, and also half wrong.

“We lost the Vietnam war politically, Ma’am. Only politically! In military terms, we won every single battle. And the Black-ops operations were a success, every one of them. It was the single most effective weapon in our armory.”

Oliver Barrani wore a thoughtful expression. “So in effect, you’re saying that we need to adopt this Black-ops method of working in Afghanistan? Send in undercover teams, Special Forces, I assume, to assassinate the leadership of the Taliban?”

The General sighed with relief, at last, a politician who understood the military reality.

“Exactly, Mr. President.”

Harriet Chalmers cut across them. “Is there no other way to gain the initiative, General? Surely an undercover assassination program isn’t likely to earn us a good press.”

Mann replied to her challenge. “You’re right, if it gets reported, but undercover means that it never finds its way into the press. As far as I know, there’s only one way to ensure a good press.”

“And what’s that, General?” Oliver Barrani asked, sensing an opportunity for political gain.

“It’s obvious, Mr. President. We need to win the war. Everyone loves a winner. As for assassination, that’s just another name for fighting battles. In war, you kill people, period. The Islamists started it by killing plenty of our folks in the World Trade Center. I’m saying we should finish it. Killing the leaders is the fastest, most economical way of achieving that end.”

Harriet Chalmers made to object, but Barrani waved her down.

“What are the figures?”

Mann smiled inside. That word ‘economical’ had caught his ear, as intended. He spent some time comparing the costs of a limited number of Strike Teams as opposed to Main Force Battle Groups and aircraft, including drones. Even as he spoke, the figures sounded impressive to him, and he’d written many of them himself. Eventually, the President held up his hand.

“Enough. You’re saying we get the biggest bang for our bucks? That’s good enough for me. Draw up a plan, General. We’ll go down that route.”

“But Mr. President, the United Nations will never…”

The President stopped Mrs. Chalmers’ objection dead by finishing her sentence.

“Will never know anything about it,” he grinned. He turned to Mann.

“Is that clear? This is to be kept undercover. You can do that?”

The General shook his head. “Not one hundred percent, Sir, no. Something always leaks out, but enough to make it deniable. I’ll make sure we use contractors to go in and carry out the strikes. No American troops need be involved.”

“You mean mercenaries?” The Secretary's sneer was enough to show her feelings for that kind of soldiering.

“I mean contractors,” he replied firmly. “We’ve been using them for a long time, and nobody has shown any objections so far. Especially when it means less of our troops being flown back in body bags.”

Barrani nodded. “Contractors are fine by me, General. How about transport, getting these people in?”

“We’ll use small, commercial air transport outfits. There are one or two flying around the country carrying a range of cargo and passengers. They’ll do most things if the price is right.”

“Good, keep me informed, General.”

The President stood up and the others followed. Harriet Chalmers looked grim, but Mann shrugged to himself. She’d just have to deal with it, and make it right with her opposite numbers in the United Nations. She was welcome to that side of things. He knew what he’d do with that bunch of whining chair polishers. It wasn’t anything pleasant. He started towards the door, to return to the Pentagon so he could pursue the real business of the American military. As he exited the room, a question surfaced in his mind, one that nagged at him on a daily basis, and one that needed to be answered if they were ever going to win this war. ‘Where is Mullah Omar?’

* * *

Our flight from Kandahar International Airport, Afghanistan to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, was uneventful, as it should have been. We had the two stops to refuel, but for once, there were no foul-ups; no problems with paperwork, no officials claiming that the ‘consideration’ we had to pay them to avoid any screw-ups wasn’t enough. The de Havilland Twin Otter flew well too, which was as good as we could expect given the constant shortage of money for spare parts and maintenance. The tough little high wing cargo aircraft was robust and reliable, the pride of our tiny fleet. The cockpit was Spartan but comfortable, and a huge improvement on the old C47 Dakotas that we’d flown in the early days. We even had comfortable leather seats, a

heater that worked and a degree of soundproofing. And best of all, the war had been over for a long time, so they didn't shoot at you these days when you flew over Vietnam; the way they'd shot at my grandfather when he flew numerous missions across the country. I could see Rachel smiling as I stared down at the steaming hell that was the jungles of Vietnam. What was it really like for my ancestor, fighting for the French during the Indochina War? I turned to look at her.

"You're wondering why I look at that awful sea of green, so I may as well tell you. My grandfather was a soldier in the French Foreign Legion, and he fought in those jungles."

"Really? What was his name?"

"Jurgen Hoffman."

"Right. I thought you said your grandfather owned the airline. Your grandmother took over after he was killed, didn't she?"

"That's right," I replied. "But before he ran the airline, he was a soldier."

"How could he have been French, with a name like Jurgen Hoffman?"

"Most Legionnaires weren't French. They came from almost every country in the world. Still do, I believe. He was a German. In fact, before he joined the Legion, he was an officer in the Waffen-SS."

She looked at me sharply. "He was a colorful guy, your grandfather! Care to tell me more about him?"

It was something I preferred to keep to myself, but it was a long flight, and I saw no reason for her not to know. She got little enough from my almost bankrupt airline. If she didn't receive her pension from the US Air Force, she'd certainly starve. Wages were not our number one priority, so they often had to be postponed to pay the fuel bills; as well as the bills for aircraft spares, equipment and the never ending bribes that sapped the strength from all of South East Asia.

"He came to Indochina in the French Foreign Legion, fighting as a sergeant in 'A' company, Second Battalion, 13th Half Brigade. At the time he was on the run, evading the hunt for Nazi SS officers that took place after the end of the Second World War. I should add that my grandfather was no war criminal. He was a Sturmbannführer in Waffen-SS Das Reich, a Panzer Infantry division. But it was enough to put him on the wanted list of the Allies after the German collapse."

Rachel grimaced. "That must have been pretty tough for him."

I nodded. “It was. My grandmother told me a number of the tales he’d passed on to her. Stories of how hard it was back then, fleeing before the victorious Russian hordes, fighting a series of desperate rearguard actions that saw more and more of his comrades slaughtered for no reason, other than Adolf Hitler’s stubborn lunacy. Like a lot of other SS troopers, he found a bolthole in the French Foreign Legion, which until 1947 didn’t ask too many questions about links to the Waffen-SS. He fought through the jungles we’re flying over right now, against the Viet Minh. They were the communists back then, before they became the Vietcong. After the French debacle at Dien Bien Phu, when the Legion pulled out, he went south to Saigon, with the French wife he’d met in North Vietnam. Her name was Helene, and she was my grandmother. He used his discharge pay from the Legion to buy a couple of worn out cargo aircraft, and they started this airline. They were looking for a peaceful life, for a time to prosper and start a family, and a chance to help to build the two newly created countries - South and North Vietnam. But Ho Chi Minh had other ideas, and there would not be any peace.”

“And then we Americans came along.”

“Yes, then the Americans came,” I agreed. “They exploited my grandfather ruthlessly, and he had to struggle to keep afloat while they fought their proxy war against the Russian surrogate, North Vietnam. In 1973 my grandparents moved their operations to Thailand. They could see the inevitable communist invasion of the south was about to happen. My grandfather continued flying in and out of Vietnam. In fact, my grandmother often flew as his co-pilot.”

“She was a commercial pilot, too?” Rachel asked, surprised.

I chuckled. “She was a pilot, that’s for sure, and a damn good one. I believe she only ever got her private pilot’s ticket, but that’s more than many of these local pilots had. The rules around here are different than in the States.”

“Obviously. So what happened to him?”

“He was killed during the mad scramble to escape the North Vietnamese communists when his aircraft, carrying refugees, was shot down by a North Vietnamese Mig 17. My grandmother was flying co-pilot for him that day, and she told me she held him in her arms as he lay dying in the wrecked cabin of the aircraft. Amongst the passengers on board was their daughter, Sophie, my future mother. When my grandmother Helene died, Sophie wasn’t interested in the business, so I inherited the airline.”

“How about your father, what happened to him?”

“I never met him. My mother never told me his name, but I understood he was the son of one of my grandfather’s comrades who fought with him in Vietnam.”

“That’s strange, why did she keep it quiet?”

I shrugged. “I’ve no idea. All I know is that she was a single parent when I was born.”

“He went off with someone else, eh?” she said sympathetically. “That’s real tough.”

“No, my mother told me he was killed when his aircraft was shot down by the Russians. He was flying a cargo into Afghanistan in the early days.”

“Jesus Christ, the fucking communists again!”

“Yeah, it was during their invasion. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It wasn’t even one of our own aircraft. I guess he was just doing someone else a favor.”

I realized what a dismal story it was, so many deaths in this small part of the world, South East Asia. Yet we were still here and still fighting. I sometimes wondered what it was all for, what were we doing here. I never found the answers. Maybe it was something in the blood. Or was it a challenge, like asking a mountaineer why he risked his life to climb Everest? ‘Just because it was there,’ they’d reply. Were we all mad? I could still remember my mother trying to hide her bitterness when she told me about my father. It was the last time I’d seen her, two years ago, in Paris, where she now lived.

Rachel was silent for a time, and then she said, “You’ve had some rotten luck in your family, Max. And now the airline’s almost out of money. Is it really that serious, are we in trouble?”

We’d located to Afghanistan, to Kandahar, when work became scarce. It was a dangerous and hard business in Afghanistan, but if you lived, it should be possible to earn enough cash to pay back the bankers and finance companies and move on to a sane environment. But you also needed some luck, and lately that commodity had been in short supply. I smiled at her, trying to make light of it all.

“I’m lucky enough to have a fantastic co-pilot, Rachel, and God only know why you work for me.”

“It sure ain’t the money, buddy,” Rachel smiled back. “The way things are going I reckon I might even have to pay you to let me fly. I guess you

ought to know, it's the exact opposite of the way business is normally done."

"Things will get better, Rachel. It won't always be like this."

She stared at me. Then she broke out in a gale of laughter. "In your dreams, buster. The only way we'll see any money out of this outfit will be if you win the lottery."

"I don't do the lottery," I protested.

She nodded. "Why had I guessed that? Maybe it's time you did."

"So why do you stay with me?" I asked her, knowing the answer already.

"Because you let me fly, Max. No one else will." She looked at me closely and grinned. "The pilot is pretty handsome too."

"Get out of here, Rachel."

"No, I mean it," she said earnestly. "You're a nice looking guy."

I looked back at the jungle to hide my embarrassment. I wanted to mumble, 'The co-pilot isn't so bad either'. But I kept silent.

We droned on for another hour, and I dozed, thinking about what it would have been like, fighting down in those steaming jungles, the heat, and the humidity. Snakes. Vietcong. Rachel touched my arm. "The starboard engine's running a little rough, and we're overdue for a service, Max. It's not going to get any better. Can we get it looked at in Saigon?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. We're already overdue with our maintenance bills. And don't mention the name Saigon while we're there, you know how it upsets the locals."

She looked grim. "I couldn't give a shit about the locals."

I glanced across at her, curious about the dislike in her voice.

"Was your father in Vietnam? He was a pilot, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was. I never saw him either. I'm told he was a red-hot pilot, but he died of cancer soon after I was born. What a waste!"

I wondered did she mean a waste that he'd died, or that it was from something as mundane as an illness? Then there was the other thing. She'd told me before that she found me attractive, but I had a business to run. I stared into her eyes, trying to make her understand why it couldn't be. Except they were such beautiful eyes, and it wasn't the first time I'd noticed, even though I knew that one of them was false. Which one?

"So we both know life can be crap, but we also know we have to move on."

She nodded and looked out through the cockpit window. She was using

extreme care to fly the aircraft, squinting ahead into the cloud and mists that hung over the Vietnamese jungle, like an old, wet army blanket. She had a slight squint because of the eye she'd lost in the accident that ended her Air Force career, the same accident that had damaged her leg. She had changed back into civilian clothes and turned her back on her military career, leaving with a slight limp, a small pension and a hefty compensation check.

"We really should get it checked out before it goes altogether."

"I know, but it'll have to wait. You know how things are."

She didn't reply, for the downpour came suddenly, as it often did in this country. Sheets of rain fell in furious torrents so that we were flying into an angry wall of swirling water. The wipers struggled to cope, and I rechecked our heading and distance to run. Our destination, Tan Son Nhat International Airport, lay only fifty miles in front of us, but in the worsening storm I had doubts we'd be able to make a safe landing. I began working out alternatives even though it would cause problems to our schedule, and may cost us the next cargo that was waiting for us in Ho Chi Minh City. There was nothing suitable, so I contacted Tan Son Nhat.

"This is Helene Air Twin Otter en route for Tan Son Nhat. We're fifty miles out and caught in a rainstorm. Can you suggest an alternative?"

There was a brief silence. Then, "Rainstorm? What rainstorm?"

The voice was shrill, scathing. As if I was mad. Then again, maybe anyone who flew into this godforsaken country was mad.

"We are fifty miles west of Ho Chi Minh City, flying through a heavy rainstorm."

"Rainstorm? There no rainstorm here, Mister. You blind?"

English is the universal language of air traffic control the world over, but the English that they spoke at Tan Son Nhat ATC was unlike any I'd heard before. Even so, it was obvious the storm hadn't reached our destination, so we could stay on course. I touched the transmit key.

"Understood, Tan Son Nhat. We are approaching the airfield, ETA approximately ten minutes. Will call when we're on final approach."

"Sure, you do that, Mister. Rainstorm!" he snorted as he signed off.

We continued on through the heavy rain and sure enough, five miles out of the airport it eased, and we finished the journey in brilliant sunshine. We touched down and taxied to the freight terminal, where there were loaders from a local mineral exploitation company waiting outside the company hangar to unload our cargo of drilling equipment and tools. As the last of the

wooden crates were hauled though the aircraft doors, they started to drag our return load, mineral samples, into the cargo bay. Rachel and I relaxed, munching our way through sandwiches and drinking cans of soda while we sat watching the process of loading from a couple of wooden boxes outside the hangar.

"It must have been something in its day," she murmured. It was obvious she was reminiscing about her Air Force days. "I can imagine the F4s taking off, Hueys shuttling troops to the battlefields, and Cobra gunships setting out to give them fire support."

"It would sure have been busier," I replied. "But I doubt a few passenger jets and the occasional Boeing 747 annoy the locals like the constant military traffic used to."

"We were fighting for their freedom. They should have been more grateful," she snapped, a tinge of bitterness in her voice.

I looked at her, surprised at her vehemence, but before I could respond a Vietnamese official stalked up to us; he'd been out of sight, coming from round back of the hangar. A small squad of soldiers, a sergeant and four troopers followed him. All of them were armed with AK-47s, the iconic Soviet assault rifle. With their banana shaped magazine, they were the most recognizable weapons in the world, and their solid rate of fire and 7.62mm bullets made them both lethal and effective.

"Don't move. Let's see what they want," I whispered to Rachel.

She nodded.

"Why you no show passport when arrive?" he snarled.

His face was pockmarked with childhood acne, and his teeth, like most Vietnamese, were either crooked, black or non-existent. Afghanistan was little different, another poverty stricken flyspeck of a country, and another American foreign war. Some of the older Vietnamese had been fortunate enough to benefit from American medicine during the war, but not this one. He was bow legged, legacy of a poor diet, and a paunch betrayed the amount of time he spent behind a desk. I held out my hand.

"Hi, my name's Max Hoffman. Pleased to meet you."

He looked at my hand, surprised at the unusual courtesy. His expression deepened into a sneer as he ignored it. "Why you no show passport?"

I sighed. He was one of those. "You know we have an arrangement. When we land and don't have to leave the airport, you don't need to see our passports."

“You show passport.”

“Very well. Rachel, would you pass down my briefcase from the cockpit.”

“Sure.”

She limped to the ladder, climbed up into the fuselage, and went forward to locate the case where I kept all of our papers. I didn’t want to let this awkward official out of my sight; something about him spelled ‘trouble’. The cargo handlers watched him carefully as they continued to unload, but I could see something more in their expressions. Fear, yes, but fear of what? She brought down the case, and I showed him our two passports, hers American and mine French. He scrutinized the documents, and then checked our licenses.

“You airline was in Vietnam?”

“That’s correct. Saigon.”

I could have bitten off my tongue as I said it, but that’s what it said on my passport. He looked up sharply.

“Ho Chi Minh City.”

“Of course,” I replied smoothly. “The city had a different name when the airline was here, that’s all. It says Saigon on the original licenses.”

He glared at me, then handed the passport and licenses back. He picked up Rachel’s passport and stared at it.

“American.”

It was a statement, and one word that dripped with contempt. For him, maybe, the war wasn’t over. Perhaps he’d lost relatives to the American bombing. It wasn’t unusual. Or maybe he was just an arrogant, ill-mannered pig, like many of these petty bureaucrats in communist dictatorships.

“Yeah, that’s right, buster, I’m American. Any problems with that?” Rachel’s voice was hard as flint, and he glared at her. Then he relaxed and smiled.

“No problems now. Americans we have problems, we kill.”

I could see Rachel start to limp towards him, so I took her in my arms, putting my lips close to her ear.

“Not now, Rachel. We’re not out of here yet. Just cool down and forget him.”

She tried to shake me off. “Motherfucking sonofabitch, these people couldn’t hold a candle to Americans. I hope they all rot in their pissant slave state.”

“What? What she say?”

I smiled at him. “Nothing, my fiancée is not feeling well, that’s all. Women!”

I raised my eyebrows and grinned. He gave me a suspicious frown. It was a moment when things could have gone either way, but at last he nodded. Like most Asian men, he was a raving macho misogynist, and women were of course weak. Then he lost interest in Rachel and swung back to the soldiers.

“Sergeant, order your men to search the aircraft, the cargo, everything!”

“Why do you want to search the aircraft?”

He swung back and stared at me. “You mind own business.”

I felt Rachel pulling at me and realized I was still holding on to her. I released her, and she gave me an angry glare. “Why did you do that, Max? I could have dealt with him.”

“I’m sure you could, Rachel, but his soldiers could have caused you a few problems.”

She grunted but made no reply, and we watched them pull wooden crates off the load waiting to be taken on board then jimmy open the lids. Two soldiers boarded the aircraft and started to hunt through the cabin and cockpit, but I knew there was nothing for them to find.

“What the hell are they looking for? They don’t do this normally, do they? Christ, I thought Afghanistan was bad, but at least they leave you alone there.”

I shook my head. “It’s the first time they’ve done this. I’ve no idea. I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

She looked doubtful. “Maybe. And what’s this fiancée business all about?”

I gave her a weak grin. “Rachel, I was trying to defuse the situation. These people have a certain respect for couples, so it made a difference that he thought you were my fiancée. That gave me the right to explain things on your behalf. I just want to load up and get out of here.”

“I copy that, it’s a god-awful place.”

“It’s actually a wonderful place, so my grandmother told me. It’s just these people who made it into a living hell.”

She nodded. I was about to speak again when there was a sudden commotion. One of the soldiers had ripped the lid from a huge wooden crate to inspect the contents when a man jumped out of the box. The soldier froze

in surprise, and the man took the opportunity to sprint away. The sergeant looked around and barked orders; his troopers ratcheted rounds into their rifles and lifted them to take aim. The man was running towards us. I started to shout at the troopers to hold their fire, but two shots cracked out in quick succession. A bullet whistled between us, and I dragged Rachel to the ground as the man rushed past us. More shots cracked out, and there was a cry of agony. I looked around and saw the runner was down. The Vietnamese soldiers ran across to him and looked down. I could see he was badly wounded, squirming in agony. To my horror, the sergeant took out his pistol, a Soviet Makarov automatic. He pointed it at the wounded man's head and pulled the trigger. The explosion sounded loud. The airfield was in that second in the middle of a lull, nothing landed or took off. There was only the loud report from the pistol, the meaty 'smack' as the bullet hit him in the back of the head, and then he was still. We climbed to our feet, and I heard Rachel muttering some obscene insult to the sergeant, but she wisely kept well away from him, and he didn't hear it. He barked an order, and two of his men dragged the body away. The customs officer stared at us and pointed at the pool of blood on the ground where the man had fallen.

"American." He smiled. I shook my head. The victim wasn't American, of course, but his meaning was clear. He grinned at us.

"Now you in Afghanistan. Like Vietnam. More Americans. All dead." His smile became a belly laugh, and he almost choked. I found myself willing him to keel over, gasping for breath, but he recovered. I could hear Rachel murmuring, "Motherfucker." We both turned to look as a truck drove around the corner and approached our aircraft. A man climbed out, and he was unmistakably American, and unmistakably Ivy League. He walked over to me and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Ed Walker. This is my cargo you're taking to Peshawar."

I took his hand. "Max Jurgen. I'm the pilot and owner of Helene Air."

He stared at me, and I stared back at him. He was tall. I was six feet, and he loomed over me, maybe three inches taller. Good looking too, ramrod erect, confident, as he would have been taught since prep school. Blonde hair and blue eyes, I could imagine the girls falling over themselves to catch his eye. I was dark haired and Mediterranean, Rachel told me I was a good-looking six-footer that women would find attractive, but I almost felt like a peasant against his patrician features. Almost. Unlike him, I wasn't a slime ball.

He could have been an American corporate executive. The kind that worked on Wall Street, and the kind that almost singlehandedly destroyed the American economy. Masters of the Universe, I believe they were called; pale, WASP face, button down Ralph Lauren, tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and polished leather Oxford brogues. This guy would have taken me for a bellhop if he'd seen me on the street. CIA, he had to be. They were still very much in evidence all over South East Asia, especially Afghanistan, but even here in Vietnam.

"What's the cargo we'll be carrying, Mr. Walker?"

"Cargo? Oh, this and that, nothing special. One moment, there's something I need to finalize."

He strode over to the sergeant and spoke quietly to him in Vietnamese. I spoke some of the language, enough to get by, and enough to know that Ed Walker was fluent, and as one would expect of a CIA officer working in this neck of the woods. I watched the American hand the sergeant an envelope. There was an exchange of smiles, a warm handshake, and then the soldiers left. Walker came back to Rachel and me.

"Those guys won't be back. They were looking for defectors."

Rachel stared at him. "If I lived in this lousy place, I'd sure defect as fast as my legs would carry me."

He nodded. "I hear you, and I couldn't agree more. It's no pleasure park. Tell me, how soon can we leave? I have a connection to make, and I don't want to be late."

"Where are you headed?" I asked him.

He pulled a face. "After Peshawar? Afghanistan."

"Right. You wouldn't want to be late arriving in that Asian paradise," I said deadpanned.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Duty calls, so that's where I have to go."

"What line of business are you in, Mr. Walker?"

He glanced at me briefly. "Nothing special, this and that."

I gave him a smile.

He went away to check the cargo, barking orders at the cargo handlers who had returned as soon as the soldiers disappeared. I showed him to the row of jump seats in the cabin, just behind the cockpit bulkhead, and made sure he knew to buckle in before take-off. Then I forgot about him. When I sat down in the left hand seat, Rachel started the engines, and I called the

tower for clearance. I got the same wise guy as before.

"You clear to take-off, Helene Air. No rain, you safe."

Before his microphone clicked off, I could hear him laughing. I was tempted to suggest a course in etiquette and manners for the bastard, but I left it at that. Maybe one day he'd be flying through a tropical rainstorm and be so scared he'd shit his pants. I hoped so. Rachel took control of the aircraft, and we took off, starting the long haul back to Peshawar, in Pakistan. Close to the border with Afghanistan, it had become a vital hub for drugs and arms trading. Even the Taliban had an office there, or so it was rumored. When I went aft to check the cargo, Ed Walker was in the middle of a call on what had to be a satellite phone. He was crouched near a window to get a signal, but when he saw me coming, he said a couple of words and hung up. I nodded a greeting.

"Handy gadgets, the satphones. Everything ok back here?"

"Sure, I'm good. How long before we reach Peshawar?"

"We're on course, Mr. Walker, but it'll be a few hours yet."

"Good, good. They're waiting for me on the tarmac. As soon as I land, they'll transfer the cargo, and I can get on my way to Kabul."

"Nice place."

He smiled. "Yeah."

"Tell me, Mr. Walker, what kind of cargo would you carry from Vietnam to Peshawar? It's got me beat."

He eyed me for a few moments. I thought I saw a little curl to his lips, a small sneer. He saw me as little more than a chauffeur, a guy to drive his aircraft and carry his bags.

"You saw me pay off that customs guy back in Tan Son Nhat?" he replied at last.

I nodded. "I saw."

"Right. It's that kind of a cargo."

I went back to the cockpit. If he wanted to be Mr. Mysterious, that was up to him. He was beginning to irritate me, anyway. Maybe he thought he was James Bond. That was fine by me, as long as he paid up promptly and kept out of my hair. We landed twice to refuel, and then we took off on the final leg to Peshawar. I contacted Air Traffic Control, and Rachel settled into final approach. I let her take the de Havilland in; she just loved to fly, flying anything and everything. I was convinced she'd pay me to let her work for the airline if I insisted. In fact she almost did. We landed on the long runway

and taxied to the commercial hangars. The cockpit door opened, and Walker came through into the cockpit.

"You're looking for a Cessna Caravan. It should be parked behind the main cargo hangars. If you'd taxi over there, we can make the transfer."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Rachel, can you take it?"

She nodded. "Sure, I'm on it. I can't see a Cessna yet." She stared out of the windshield. "Wait, yeah, it's over there. Ok, I'll get as near as I can."

I was surprised that Walker was using such a small aircraft, but it was his choice. We came up to it. There were half a dozen armed men lounging on the ground nearby. When we stopped, and I opened the cargo door, they were waiting and climbed up to start unloading the crates, carrying them across to the Cessna. It was the larger version, the Grand Caravan, and I noted the thick, balloon tires and toughened suspension legs. So that's why they were using her, it was the perfect aircraft for Special Forces or mercenary operations. She would land on rough ground and only needed a crew of one, the pilot. The Caravan would take a cargo of soldiers and equipment virtually anywhere, including the rough strips in the interior of Afghanistan. I wondered what Walker was up to, what kind of horrors he was planning to visit on the folk of that beleaguered country. It was always the civilians who suffered, especially when these Ivy League 'Masters of War' set out to make their mark on the battlefield. They would consider any innocent village in Afghanistan to be their personal battlefield, and they'd stop at nothing to forge their reputation before returning to Langley for a high-level management position. These people had virtually invented the phrase 'collateral damage' all on their own.

Walker glanced at me. "What do you think of her? I'm told the Cessna's a good aircraft, but we only just acquired it, so I guess we'll have to see."

I nodded. "I've seen them around. They're ideal for rough field landings with those big tires fitted. You've got auxiliary tanks?"

He shrugged. "Search me. I've got a driver to take care of those things."

Yes, he would have. I was surprised he didn't use the word 'chauffeur'. I gave him a polite nod and started back to take care of the Twin Otter. They finished the unloading, and Rachel taxied over to our hangar we used in Peshawar, which was our secondary base of operations. I was glad we wouldn't be ferrying Walker into Afghanistan for some murky operation. Helene Air may be struggling to keep afloat, but we refused to carry drug shipments, weapons or mercenaries, at least, knowingly. I was well aware

that some of the cargos we carried would probably be considered illicit, but I couldn't police our customers if they hid their true intentions. It kept our hands clean, and nobody died as a result of the way we earned our living, or failed to earn a living, anyway. Two men came across the tarmac and intercepted me as I was walking back to our aircraft. They both wore suits, shirts and ties, and shoes that were at least half clean. I knew at once it couldn't be anything good, not when someone dressed in a suit, collar and tie approached you in Peshawar.

"Mr. Hoffman? Max Hoffman?"

"Yes, I'm Hoffman."

"We are from the bank's head office in Kabul. We heard you were landing here and came out to meet you. This is for you."

They handed me a document. I opened it and read the writing, in Pashto and English. I couldn't understand the legalese at first.

"What is it, what does this mean?"

One of them gave me a polite smile. "It is a notice of bankruptcy, Mr. Hoffman. Your business is in liquidation. The bank will sell the assets and notify you if there is any surplus money due to you. I'm sorry, but from what I've seen, I doubt you even have enough to cover your debts."

I felt as if he'd punched me in the stomach. "But, I have contracts. How can I go on flying?"

His smile left him, and his expression now was hard. "Oh, you won't be doing any more flying. You're finished. The business no longer belongs to you. Please, do not go near the aircraft, any of them. They are no longer your property. You may remove your personal effects from your offices, but it must be done right away. The liquidators will be here at any moment. Good day, Mr. Hoffman."

I walked back to our hangar. Each step felt like lead. I was walking through a thick soup, so that my legs moved only with difficulty, every step slow and forced. Rachel saw me approach and came up to me.

"What's up, Max? Are you ill?"

"The airline, we're finished. It's gone."

"What? What the hell do you mean? How can we be finished?"

"The bank, they've seized it to pay off the debts. It's bankrupt, and we're not even allowed near the aircraft. We have to get our possessions and that's it, the end."

"Jesus Christ, I don't believe it. The bastards, how could they do that?"

I didn’t answer her at first. I felt the same way, yet of course they could do it. The banks owned our souls these days, and they could do anything they wanted. I looked around at the hangar, the Twin Otter, our pride and joy, then back at Rachel.

“I think we should sort out our possessions. The liquidators are due any moment.”

“What do we do then, Max?”

“I don’t know. Look for a job, I guess.”

I noticed Ed Walker looking across at me. He’d seen the two suits hand me the document. He must have seen my expression, so he knew exactly what was going on. Damn him, of all people, I wished he hadn’t just witnessed my downfall. He nodded politely enough, then walked to the Cessna Caravan and climbed aboard. The engine was already ticking over, and it slowly taxied out to the main runway to wait for clearance to take-off. I had a battered Jeep Wrangler parked near to our hangar. It seemed crazy to keep a facility in Peshawar when we had a hangar in Kandahar, but the bureaucracies of both Afghanistan and Pakistan meant that it actually cost less than the need for separate paperwork when we flew between the two countries. I offered Rachel a lift into town, and she accepted. When we were driving towards Peshawar town center, I asked her where she wanted to be taken. She looked into my eyes.

“I want to find a bar, Max. Then I want to get drunk. You gonna join me?”

“Sure. I’ve nothing else to do. Let’s go.”

But two hours later, and after almost an entire bottle of Bourbon, it still didn’t feel any better.

* * *

Dwight Rains slapped the dust from his uniform. If anyone ever asked him about his first impression of Afghanistan, what it was like, that one word was what he’d use by way of a reply. Dust. It got everywhere, covered everything, and it was like a living, breathing organism. He stepped into the brigade office and saluted the officer who sat behind the desk. Major Evan Fairchild glanced up, and Rains noticed the chest full of medal ribbons. He wondered what this man had done to deserve them. No doubt he’d find out soon enough.

“Second Lieutenant Rains, Sir, I’m reporting in for assignment as per

instructions."

Fairchild flipped a casual acknowledgement. "What's your strength, Rains?"

"Thirty-two men, including the platoon sergeant, Sir."

"Where are the rest of them?"

"That's all I came out with, Sir. The platoon is under strength at present."

"I see. I was told they were sending forty men in four squads. You'll have to make do, but if you take any casualties, it could cause you problems. Let's hope it won't come to that. Your men are settling into their quarters?"

"They are, Sir, yes."

"That's a pity. As soon as they're ready, I want a convoy escort. We're sending some heavy equipment out to Kandahar, and you'll be taking care of them. You're up to scratch on the Strykers?"

Rains nodded. The IAV Stryker was an eight-wheeled armored fighting vehicle, produced by General Dynamics Land Systems, and in use by the United States Army. The vehicle was named for two American servicemen, both named Stryker, who posthumously received the Medal of Honor during both World War Two and the Vietnam War. They were becoming essential in the strange kind of war fought in Afghanistan. The hull was constructed from high-hardness steel that offered good protection against heavy incoming fire, especially from the front. In addition to this, Strykers were also equipped with bolt-on ceramic armor that offered further protection from IEDs, Improvised Explosive Devices, and incoming artillery and rockets. Best of all was the remote operation of the turret guns from inside the vehicle. For soldiers who wanted to survive the constant threat from insurgents, the Stryker was without peer in the day-to-day threats ISAF soldiers faced.

"That's good news, Rains. You wouldn't survive for very long here in the old M113s. They're worse than useless against the kind of hardware the Taliban use against us."

"I thought they'd got rid of them, the M113s. They're Vietnam era museum pieces," Rains exclaimed, then almost bit off his tongue. This veteran combat soldier didn't need telling about his own equipment, but he just nodded.

"They're not ideal, you're right, but against small arms fire they're ok. We just use them for local transport, and they're good against snipers. Out in the countryside, they're deathtraps, though, so we never use them outside the

city. What do you think of your new home, Phoenix Base?"

He was smiling as he asked the question. It was a shithole, but it wasn't for the new second lieutenant to criticize. Camp Phoenix was an installation located in the capital, Kabul, about six miles from the Kabul International Airport. It was a mess of concrete fortifications, barbed wire and inside, the various buildings that housed the US soldiers. Maybe not the most miserable place on this earth, Rains reflected, but it would certainly be up there with the leaders. And the people! As he'd driven through the teeming streets, he'd been surprised at the angry glances the locals darted at him, at his American military vehicle. He hadn't expected much, but not the outward shows of hatred for all things American.

"It's interesting."

"It is that. Make sure your men attend to their security," Major Fairchild continued. "Last year three suicide bombers were killed by the base defenders during an attack on the camp. Two self-detonated, causing little damage, and we killed the third one, but it could happen at any time."

"I'll tell the men to keep alert, Sir."

"Right. As soon as they're settled, report to the armor park, and I'll make sure your Strykers are ready for you. You'll need to take three, and that's eleven men per vehicle, which is about par for the course. The convoy you're escorting is Afghan National Army regulars, and they're driving ten trucks with equipment that's needed yesterday in Kandahar. Any questions?"

"What time do we leave, Sir?"

"I assume this is your first operational assignment?"

"Yes, Sir," he replied, feeling like he was standing in front of his headmaster.

"As fast as you can get it together, Lieutenant. It's two hundred miles. If you leave right way, you'll be there before dark. Don't leave it any later, the Taliban eat up convoys that travel at night."

"I'll get the men moving, Sir."

"That's what I would do if I were you, Rains. And watch out for the civilians, that means don't go running any jingle trucks off the road."

"Jingle trucks, Sir?"

"The Major nodded. "You'll see plenty of them around. They're painted up like it's Halloween, weird colors, like sixties pop-art. Some of 'em have bells festooned over the bodywork, and they jingle like crazy. Jingle trucks, they call 'em."

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good luck.”

They exchanged salutes. Rains left the building, back out into the camp, and back out into a whirlwind of dust, noise, troops racing back and forth; and the heavy tension in the air that was almost thick enough to bear a load.

# Chapter Three

*We have gone forth from our shores repeatedly over the last hundred years and we've done this as recently as the last year in Afghanistan and put wonderful young men and women at risk, many of whom have lost their lives, and we have asked for nothing except enough ground to bury them in.*
*Colin Powell*

"These figures do you no credit, General," President Hamid Barzai snapped. "You were given this post on the understanding you would deal with these rebels. Yet every day brings some new outrage. People are afraid to walk outside their homes, even close to the Presidential Palace. Why have you failed?"

Lt. Gen. Mohammed Kadim was short, in his late forties and built like a wrestler, bald, with hard muscles and an erect stance. A career soldier, he was of the same tribe as his President, who made him the Army Chief of Staff, the man charged with beating the Taliban scourge in the country of Afghanistan. He met his President's eyes and then looked away. He could see that Barzai was boiling with rage. It was not the time to argue facts and figures with his fellow Pashtun. The President wanted results. Results that Kadim didn't have.

"Sir, we are making good progress against the rebels, yet they are so numerous. I need more resources. Resources that I am constantly denied." He glanced at Abdul Rahim Wardak, the thin, elegantly dressed soldier turned politician. He wanted President Barzai to be in no doubt about where to place the blame. Barzai gazed at the Minister of Defense. "Well?"

"General Kadim had twenty-eight percent more troops on his strength than he had this time last year, but it seems to make little difference. Sometimes I wonder where all of these extra troops are. They seem to be ghosts."

It was a lethal shot at the General. There was a long tradition of claiming pay for non-existent soldiers in the Afghan Army. Kadim reacted angrily.

"Every single soldier on my strength can be accounted for, Sir. They are not ghosts, and the blood they shed in this war is very real."

Barzai grunted. "We shall see. Perhaps it is time I ordered an inspection of your troops to find out what they are doing to stop these attacks getting any worse. But there is some hope, I am happy to inform you."

His advisors looked up with interest. Maybe he had a plan that would take the pressure from their departments. Mullah Rahim Massoud, the fourth man in the meeting, sighed.

"Not the Americans again? I would like to think we could solve some of our problems without their clumsy interference."

"Without their clumsy interference, none of us would be here, and the Taliban would be sitting in this room!" Barzai fired back at him. "Yes, the Americans are extending a helping hand to us again. They are, of course, unwilling to deploy more troops to our country. Their tactic will be to use private security forces to attack the Taliban in their lairs, in their homes and strongholds. Chop of the head of the snake, and the body will die. That's their plan."

"Mercenaries!" Mullah Massoud spat out; not realizing it was an uncanny echo of the American Secretary of State's view of the use of private security forces.

"Perhaps so," Barzai continued. "But whatever you wish to call them, they could strike a blow against our enemies that will bring them to the negotiating table."

"If they are successful," General Kadim added with a morose tone. Inside, he was thinking why the Americans again? But he knew the answer. His own people couldn't be trusted. As many as a quarter of them were Taliban sympathizers, and some of those were sleeper agents, waiting for an order from Mullah Omar to strike a blow against the infidels. This included him, because of his alliance with the Americans.

"Whether they are or not," Barzai said briskly, "they cannot make matters any worse than they are. And every Taliban leader they kill helps our cause."

"What do you want of us?" the Minister of Defense interjected, making certain that his ministry wasn't excluded from any changes of policy. Or increases in funding.

"Nothing, Minister. I just want you to be aware of the operation, so that if you come across it, you will do nothing to hinder it, and perhaps even offer our help if it is needed."

"It would be better if we are not involved in this business," Mullah Massoud offered. "Our people will not take kindly to hearing of the involvement of mercenaries in our struggle."

Barzai turned his piercing gaze on the Mullah, and then he glared at the

others. “I agree. This is why I want to be certain that word of this will not go outside of this room. This matter is between the four of us, and if you wish to continue in your present posts, make certain it remains that way.”

They all nodded their agreement, and they all wondered how they could use the information to their advantage. Or to the disadvantage of their opponents, which meant everyone in this room, apart from themselves.

“One more matter, General Kadim. Make certain you remember your prime assignment.”

Kadim, puzzled, turned back to Barzai. “Sir?”

“You have a simple question to resolve, General. I trust you make it your number one priority. Where is Mullah Omar?”

* * *

When I woke up with a splitting headache, I wondered what had happened the day before, and then I remembered. The telephone was ringing, and I went into the living room of my tiny apartment to answer it. Rachel was sprawled on the couch, fully dressed, starting to come to.

I snatched up the receiver, “Hoffman.”

While I waited for the other party to speak, I looked around my tiny abode. I kept a tiny apartment in the center of Peshawar’s red-light district, which sure made for an interesting life. But rents weren’t cheap, and this was all I could afford. The paint was faded, the furniture needed replacing and the carpets were showing their age, with the occasional bald patch poorly disguised by a small table or a planter. It would have been depressing, except that I spent little time here, and when I did come home, I only had to tumble out of the door to find plenty of entertainment. I had another rat hole of an apartment in Kandahar, which was our main center of operations.

The caller finally spoke. “My name is Walker. You brought me in from Vietnam yesterday.”

I remembered him, the spook from the CIA. “Yes, Mr. Walker. I thought you were flying into Afghanistan.”

“So did I, but we hit problems, and I’m still in Peshawar. I wondered if you would consider a short term contract to help me out.”

I laughed out loud. Rachel sat up and groaned, then looked at me, her eyebrows raised. “The question is academic, Mr. Walker. My airline has gone bust. You’ll have to find someone else. Good day to you.”

“Wait a moment. I may be able to do something about that,” he said

quickly, just as I was about to hang up. I laughed again.

"I doubt it. The debt is pretty heavy. For your information, Mr. Walker, it's more than half a million dollars. No short term contract would cover that amount of money."

"This one would."

Rachel was on her feet now, wincing as the weight came on her injured leg. She'd caught the gist of the conversation. I was about to get rid of the man when she grabbed the receiver from me. She held me off with one arm while she spoke to Walker.

"Ok, buddy, what's on offer?"

I pushed the button for speakerphone so that I could hear.

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Rachel Beckett, I'm the co-pilot who flew you back from Vietnam yesterday."

I was listening now, holding my ear close to the receiver. Our heads touched, and I smelled the delicious odor of her, a combination of last night's fragrance and the succulent aroma of musk. I fought down my desire for her and tried to hear what was being said.

"Are you empowered to discuss business on behalf of Helene Air?"

"I am," she replied firmly. "Fire away, buddy. What are you offering?"

"The company I work for may be prepared to pick up your mortgage. We would then lease back the assets to you, and you can repay us by way of agreed monthly installments which would be covered by work you carry out for us."

I could see her calculating percentages in her brain. "That's very generous of you, Mr. Walker."

"Yes, it is. So what do you say? Do you want your airline back?"

I was shaking my head. I wanted no part of it, no part of their vicious and mostly illegal operations. I'd sooner sell drinks in a bar. In fact, that's probably what I would be doing, for there was precious little work in Pakistan, outside of the arms and drugs trade. And the sex trade, of course, despite their Muslim pretensions.

"Who would we be working for, what's the name of your organization?"

"Double Eagle Security, Miz Beckett."

"An American company?"

"As apple pie, yes."

"Ok, we're interested. Let's meet and talk it through. The Fez Bar, in

one hour, will that suit you?"

There was a short silence on the phone, and then I heard him say, "I'll be there."

The Fez Bar was only a short distance away, but we rarely went in there. The drink prices were outrageous, which did at least keep out the riff raff. Except for the drug dealers and brothel owners, who could afford to drink there? Ed Walker was already sat at a table, and we joined him. It did give me a little satisfaction that after witnessing our downfall at the hands of our creditors, he had to ask for their help.

"So what went wrong?" I asked him by way of a hello.

He flushed. "The fucking pilot we hired, he'd been drinking. He swerved off the runway during take-off and put one of the wheels in a drainage ditch. The aircraft is out of action for several weeks until they can fly in replacement parts from the States."

"That's unfortunate," I said drily. "But look on the bright side. He could have messed up in the air, in which case you wouldn't be here to tell the tale."

"Yeah, I guess," he muttered. "But my bosses are not too happy about it. This brings me to you guys. I noticed you had a problem yesterday, so I made enquiries. It seems you ran into some financial difficulties, so I came up with this idea. We can help keep your company afloat if you're prepared to help us."

"You mean fly you and your bunch of mercenaries into Afghanistan?"

"They're not mercenaries, my friend. Every one of them is a licensed security operative."

"Give me a break, Walker. We've been here a while, and we know the score. When you say 'help you', what are you saying?"

"As I said on the phone, we'd pick up your mortgage, and you'd sign a contract to fly our cargos exclusively. You pay us monthly installments out of the fees we pay you for your services."

"How long would this contract last?"

"We'll pay you regular cargo charter rates, so it would last until the debt is paid. We'll allow enough for your expenses, fuel and so on."

I didn't want it, not for any price. Before she died, my grandmother, Helene, had warned me about the CIA. 'For every problem we had with the Vietcong, we had twice as many with the American military, and five times as many with the CIA. Keep away from them, Max. They're poison. Their

business is lying, and they're very good at it.'

I glanced aside at Rachel. "What do you think?"

"It's your company, Max. I just work for you."

Walker interrupted. "I gather you're US Air Force, invalided out?"

She nodded. "So what?"

He shrugged. "It's just that if you can't fly for them, I wondered how you could keep going anywhere else."

Her face flushed red. "If you think the US Air Force is so fucking hot, get them to do the job for you. And even if they would do it, which I doubt, I can outfly any ten of those macho fighter jocks."

"Ok, sorry. I just had to ask. What do you think about the deal on the table?"

"It's up to Max, I told you."

"I thought you two were, like, engaged."

So he'd talked to the customs official in Tan Son Nhat about us. These people had a long reach, a very long reach. "No, we're not," she snapped.

Walker turned back to me. "What do you say, Mr. Hoffman?"

I knew I was cornered. He knew it, and Rachel knew it. But I would only go so far. I nodded.

"Very well, here's the deal. We'll go with what you're offering, Mr. Walker. But this is a strictly commercial deal. We want nothing to do with any black operations, no spy missions. Nothing like that, we fly in and out of commercial airfields, period. No midnight landings on isolated fields or country roads. We're not part of the Air Force or CIA. We'll do what we've always done, that's it. We're not about to become a subsidiary of Air America, or whatever you call it these days."

He smiled and held out his hand. "I wouldn't dream of it, Mr. Hoffman. We'll keep it strictly legit, so it's a deal. Miz Beckett."

He shook our hands, and we toasted our agreement with another round of drinks the waiter brought for us in response to Walker's wave. That was it. I realized we were back in business. Even if we had been forced to make a contract with the devil. I recalled that those contracts were always signed in blood, but he didn't ask for it on this occasion. As we parted, Walker told us to report to Peshawar airfield tomorrow afternoon, by which time his lawyers and bankers would have ironed out the contracts. We were to fly out to Kabul in the afternoon. It was a short trip with no stops to refuel, which suited me. Our tanks were less than half full, and we would need to discuss a line of

credit to buy aviation gas.

"Our schedule had been put back a day or so, but it's not a serious problem. Just be there tomorrow afternoon. We'll go through the formalities, and we're in business."

"One thing before we go. We have two smaller aircraft in our Kandahar base and three employees. What do we do about them?"

He looked puzzled. "Do? I couldn't give a damn what you do. That's your affair, between you and the bankers. Just make sure you're ready to fly out tomorrow."

I realized with a sinking heart that I'd have to contact our three part-timers in Kandahar and tell them they were unemployed. In Afghanistan, that often meant the difference between eating and starving. I got through to them eventually and promised to take them back on as soon as we were out of trouble. They knew how things were, as the liquidators had already seized the two aircraft towards the debt. They didn't sound very happy about it all.

But at least we had something to work with. Rachel and I went out to dinner to celebrate. We got a little drunk, and despite my determination to keep romance out of our working lives, we slept together that night. Rachel started it, pulling me to her and kissing me with a passion that was breathtaking. It was wonderful. She was one of the most agile women I'd ever slept with, and I'd been with a few. Asian women were supposed to be amongst the most skilled in the world at the arts of love, Muslim countries excepting, but Rachel could teach them all a thing or two. We kept at it for almost two hours, and by the time we pulled apart to grab some sleep, I was a hollowed out shell, totally spent. But it was worth it. When I awoke in the morning, she was next to me, still asleep and breathing evenly. I studied her face; she was truly beautiful. I wondered which of her eyes the false one was. They looked identical when she was awake, although now the lids were closed.

"It's the left one."

Her eyes flicked open, and she smiled a long, lazy, satisfied smile. Like a big cat that'd just devoured its prey. I thought about that, was it a reasonable comparison?

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

She grinned. "Men! We always know what you're thinking, so just watch yourself. What time do we have to leave?"

I checked my watch. "It's just after nine. We could go and grab some

coffee and breakfast, make it a leisurely morning, see some of the sights. I've got some food here. I'll fix us lunch, and we can leave for the airfield afterwards to sign up with Mr. Ed Walker and his friends. Then I guess we take off for Kabul."

She turned her face towards mine. "Max, do you think he's on the level, Ed Walker?"

I laughed. "Not in a million years. I expect we'll have to fight him every step of the way to get him to honor the contract, but it's our only hope. Don't worry, Rachel, we'll manage."

She nodded uncertainly, then wiped the expression off her face and grinned. "I'm not really hungry yet, Max. Can't we take a late breakfast, there's no need to rush, is there?"

She reached for me, and I couldn't think of a single reason not to stay in bed for a while longer.

When we reached the airport, Walker was waiting for us, checking his watch.

"If you're all set, we need to finalize the details and get moving," Walker grunted at me.

This time, he'd abandoned the Ralph Lauren and wore a set of beautifully cut combats, trousers and jacket. He had a camo scarf wrapped around his neck and sported a canvas shoulder holster over his jacket, the Ivy League at war. Eight men lounged a short distance away, and they made no effort to conceal their weapons. All of them had assault rifles within easy reach and a variety of handguns strapped to their belts. The Pakistani bankers were waiting for us too. They both looked uneasy in the presence of the small mercenary force. My own banker, Mr. Khan, had a half smile on his face. He was obviously glad that someone was buying the bank's mortgage to save him the trouble of disposing of the assets at an inevitable loss. We signed the documents, and the moneymen disappeared. I now had control of the airline back from the bank, provided that I kept the agreement with the devil; and that they kept their agreement with me.

"We're overdue in Kabul. Can you get the show on the road, Hoffman?"

Walker stared at me, not even trying to disguise his impatience. I noted the lack of a 'Mister' now that we'd signed the documents. Now he was the American overlord, and I was just the bellhop.

"Sure. Do you want me to carry your bags, Sir? Any golf clubs this trip?"

Rachel grinned. Walker gave me a nasty glare. “Just get the fucking plane into the air, Hoffman.”

We flew towards the Khyber Pass, the scene of so many battles when this part of the world was ruled by Great Britain. During the journey, I went to check on our passengers. They were huddled in a group talking quietly. When they saw me enter the cabin, they went quiet. Walker stared at me.

“What is it, Hoffman? We’re busy.”

“I just came to ask if there was anything you wanted. Are you all ok?”

“We’re fine. All we need is some peace and quiet.”

One of his men grinned broadly at that.

“Very well, but if there is anything, just let me know.”

He’d already looked away, and as I entered the cockpit, they started talking between themselves. We left the Khyber Pass behind us, and we were in Afghanistan. We touched down shortly afterwards at Kabul International Airport.

Despite half the country still having failed to crawl out of the middle ages, the airport was modern and busy. The architecture left something to be desired, but that was to be expected. It had been designed and built by the Soviets during their occupation, and the buildings bore the Communist stamp, bland, functional, and depressing. If it hadn’t been for the presence of hundreds of heavily armed soldiers everywhere, it may even have looked normal; as much as any Soviet era airport could look. Walker directed us to taxi to a hangar that was signed ‘Double Eagle Security’.

“This will be your operating base while you’re in country.”

I glanced at him. ‘In country’ was a phrase used by American soldiers when they served in Vietnam. He ignored my look.

“When you’ve parked the aircraft, or whatever you do with it, instruct my people to get it refueled and checked out. I want you to be ready to fly out tomorrow. We leave at first light.”

“What’s the destination and load, we’ll need…”

“You’ll know all that tomorrow,” he cut me off. “It’s need to know out here, Hoffman. Anything else, don’t ask.”

I nodded at him and glanced at Rachel. So that’s the way it was to be. We were flying truck drivers, no more, no less. She gave me a small, uncertain smile and tried to reassure me.

“At least we’ll be flying out of mainstream airfields, Max. No cloak and dagger stuff, that’s the agreement. Isn’t it?”

I stared at her. “Yes, of course it is. That’s what he said. You’re right.”

But how good was Ed Walker at keeping his agreements? As I watched his security men walk away, carrying their assault rifles, and the cargo handlers unloading the wooden crates, I felt a lightning bolt slash into my guts. I didn’t know why, but something was wrong, very wrong.

* * *

The Kabul-Kandahar Highway was a three hundred mile long road linking Afghanistan's two largest cities, Kabul and Kandahar. The highway was a key portion of Afghanistan's national road system, and more than a third of Afghanistan's population lived within thirty miles of the Kabul to Kandahar road. Rains led the column, conscious that on every yard of road they could encounter the enemy. Who the hell was the enemy? They all looked the same. Some of the men wore that strange hat, the pakul, which looked like a kind of odd-shaped meat pie. It was made famous by Massoud, the charismatic Mujahedeen leader who led his guerrillas against the Soviets so effectively during the eighties; and was later murdered by the Taliban when he led the Northern Alliance against them. Others wore turbans, some black, some were white, and others too filthy to pick out the color. They all wore tribal robes and carried weapons, many of them assault rifles. Most women wore blue burqas, the voluminous robe that made them all but invisible. I’d heard the men call them bluebottles. But who were the terrorists? He’d asked his sergeant, Mason, how to tell them apart.

“Yeah, that’s the trick LT, how to tell them apart. It beats me.”

So great, he was here to fight an enemy that was indistinguishable from the friendlies. Shit! At any moment, a mine could explode underneath their hull, or a rocket could strike the sides of the vehicle. They were well protected, with steel grilles to intercept a missile before it struck the hull, as well as massive armor protection that were proof against most things the enemy could throw at them. But most things weren’t all things, and every man flinched when they struck a bump, or there was an unexpected loud noise. It was unnerving. At one point, Rains opened up the hatch and observed the countryside they were passing through, but after the fifth false alarm, when they’d sighted possible insurgents, he stayed inside, battened down. If they needed to fight, the Protector M151 Remote Weapon Station mounted a .50-cal M2 machine gun, and an Mk-19 automatic grenade launcher. There was no need to expose the crew; all of the weapons could be

operated and rearmed from inside the armored hull. Not so the Afghan Army regulars who manned the soft skinned trucks. To a man, they were sullen and defeated, with eyes that were unfocussed, dark pits. They counted themselves already dead, no doubt. Rains had done his best to instill some confidence in them. He'd spoken to the Lieutenant in charge of the M35 two and a half ton cargo trucks. The US military had used them in Iraq, with additional armor to protect them against mines. The Afghan National Army vehicles did not carry such protection, and a fact the Afghans were very conscious of.

"We'll be watching every step of the way," he'd tried to reassure the Lieutenant. Don't worry, my friend, we'll take good care of you."

The Afghan officer was expressionless as he replied. "From inside your armored vehicles, that's easy to say. The insurgents are not fools. They are quite aware of the strength of your new Strykers. That means they'll attack the unarmored vehicles. Do you see my men manning the trucks? There are twenty of us, two for each vehicle, yes."

Rains nodded. "I see them."

"Last year this was a company of more than two hundred men. Most were wiped out in a succession of attacks and ambushes. This is all I have left."

He'd walked away without replying. What was there to say to him? Christ, ninety percent of his outfit, killed! Poor bastards. But he'd do his best to make sure they were protected this time out.

Rains peered out through the periscope. There was no sign of any problem, but that could mean nothing. He leaned across to his weapons specialist, Corporal Delgado.

"Any sign of the enemy?"

They all noticed the nervous edge to his voice.

"Nothing, LT." Delgado's voice was flat, expressionless. But they all knew what he was thinking about the rookie officer. And they all wondered how he'd cope when the shit did hit the fan.

"Ok, keep your eyes skinned, Corporal. I don't want those trucks to get hit if we can avoid it."

Sergeant Vince Mason interrupted. "Ruben Delgado is one of the best, Lieutenant. If there's anything on the screen, he'll see it. Believe me. There's no need to worry about him."

Was that a criticism? Rains was acutely conscious that Mason was a veteran of countless firefights. He was also conscious that if any action

started, Mason would be the one the men looked for to lead them.

"Aircraft, five miles, they're coming in low." Delgado's voice was still flat and unemotional.

"Are they ours, Corporal?"

"Sir, LT, the Taliban ain't got any air force, last I heard."

The Lieutenant ignored the quiet sniggers. It wasn't what he'd meant, he was new here, ok, and everyone had to start somewhere. He just wanted information, not constant jibes. He called up the Afghan Lieutenant on the radio. "All ok back there?"

"We're alive, yes. So far."

He decided to keep quiet. Listen and learn. That's what they'd told him at West Point. He just wished they'd told him how to deal with sullen, dispirited native troops and sardonic comments from hard-edged veterans. And he hadn't even tasted combat yet.

# Chapter Four

*The US will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed the attacks and those who harbor them.*

*George W Bush*

They waited and watched while the man they had come to hear seemed lost in contemplation. He sat on the rug, cross-legged, his back straight and black-turbaned head held erect. His eye was open, staring into some distant place to which they were not privy. The other eye socket was empty; the eye lost to a Russian shell splinter when the last infidel invaders had dared to set foot on the God-gifted land of Afghanistan. His name was Mullah Mohammed Omar, and he was the highest authority in the Taliban organization. Just the name, Mullah Omar, was enough to inspire respect amongst the legions of fighters who owed him allegiance. And inspire fear and fury amongst the enemies of the faithful who fought to free their country, in the name of the Prophet. Blessed be his name. His gaze focused on the two men who faced him.

"I have word from Kabul, from a friend in the traitor Barzai's government. The Americans have a new plan."

They looked at him intently, waiting to hear the details. Omar continued to pause for a few seconds and then continued. "You have all heard of their

Phoenix program in Vietnam?"

Abdul Qadir, the local commander, looked puzzled. "I know nothing of this."

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar glanced at him. "It is the name of the tactic the Americans used when they sent assassination teams to murder the leaders of the people's revolution."

Abdul Qadir nodded. "I see. Are they planning to try something similar here? They lost the Vietnam War, so I doubt it will be any more successful in our country."

Mullah Omar looked at him intently. "Do not confuse their tactics with the outcome of the war? They are not fools, and you should remember that in military terms they were successful. As was the Phoenix program. It did a great deal of damage to the North Vietnamese leadership, and they lost a great number of valuable people. And yes, it seems they are planning a similar operation here."

Qadir sneered. "In that case, we will do as we have always done, and slaughter them as soon as they try to attack us."

Baradar glared at him. "You underestimate them, Commander Qadir. These men will be highly skilled, and trained to attack undetected and melt away afterwards. All you will see is the bodies of their victims the next morning. Perhaps one of them will be yours."

Qadir stared back. His hard gaze meeting the Mullah's. Neither man looked away. "I am not afraid to die, if that's what you think."

"Like a woman, in your bed during the night?" Mullah Omar snapped at him. "Is that the way for a fighter to die?"

Qadir looked down, embarrassed. He shook his head. "It is no way to die. You are right. What do we do to stop them?"

"We use their tactics against them. We shall double our watchers and try to catch them before they are able to mount their attacks. If we are careful, we should be able to stop them. Even better, we can turn the tables and kill these infidel assassins before they get a chance to strike. That is the way we will beat them, to watch and wait and strike them down as soon as they come near our bases."

The other two men nodded. "It shall be as you say, Mullah Omar," Qadir intoned.

"They will regret the day they thought of this unholy plan," Baradar added.

Omar inclined his head. “Make sure it is done. We watch and we wait. They will come to us, and we will kill them. That will teach them a lesson that their war here is a waste of time and lives. The sooner they leave our country the better.”

He went silent again and slipped into contemplation. The others took it as a sign that the meeting was over, and they got up and left. They walked away side by side.

“Perhaps we could use something similar,” Baradar muttered to Qadir. “If we sent assassination teams to kill them in their beds, it would send a tidal wave of fear through their hearts. They would soon learn to leave us alone.”

Qadir stopped and turned to look at him. “You just said it was an unholy tactic, Mullah. Have you changed your mind so quickly?”

Baradar flushed red with anger. “We do God’s work here. How can anything that is the will of Allah be unholy?”

The other man turned away to make his way back to his men, who waited a few hundred yards away. It was what they always said, God’s work. But didn’t the Americans say the same thing? How could they all be right?

* * *

The Double Eagle Security hangar was more spacious and luxurious than we’d been used to. Doubtless funded by the American taxpayer, and no expense had been spared. The building was constructed of reinforced concrete, with huge doors that would allow most transport aircraft to taxi straight in for maintenance, or for loading and unloading operations; at least those operations where it was best not to let the locals know what you were doing. We’d stopped the Twin Otter outside on a concrete stand. I hadn’t needed to instruct anyone to refuel. The bowser was already drawn up, and the connecting hose was pumping the tanks full of aviation fuel. The last of the wooden crates was unloaded and stowed inside the hangar, and soon we were left alone. We watched the bowser finish the refueling and stow the long hose. Then it drove away and there was only silence. I checked my watch. It was three in the afternoon, and I was starving hungry. Rachel read my mind.

“We need to get a cab into the city and find a restaurant. I guess we’ll need a hotel. God only knows how long we’ll be here.”

“Let’s find a bar first, somewhere that has a dinner menu. We can eat and drink at the same time, and ask the barkeeper where we can find a decent

hotel. If there is such a thing in Kabul."

"As long as it has a room with a double bed for me and my fiancé, that's fine by me," she grinned.

So it was like that; it seemed I had a regular girlfriend, but I wasn't complaining. She was an attractive girl and a great lover. But I wished I hadn't started the fiancé thing while we were in Vietnam. Women could get the wrong idea, so very easily. Rachel was using her cellphone to call a cab, and we didn't have to wait more than five minutes before a Mercedes Sedan purred across the tarmac and stopped right by us. It was an International airport, so of course there would be taxis waiting to ply their trade. We got in and instructed the driver to take us into the city center.

Halfway there, he asked for an address.

"We're looking for a bar, can you suggest something? Plenty of good food, a few friendly faces, something like that."

"American bar?"

Rachel nodded eagerly. "That would be good, yeah. I could do with hearing some real American voices again."

"Thanks, Rachel," I murmured drily. She grimaced. "Damn, you know I didn't mean you, Max. It's just that I get a little homesick now and again."

I let it go. I didn't have that problem. I was a bastard child of mixed ancestry, part French, part German, and part American. My name was German, and my grandfather was German, yet I didn't think of myself as anything other than Thai, where I was born. It was the cause of a few strange looks; there weren't many Thai nationals of pure European ancestry. Many saw me as almost a stateless person. I carried a Thai passport, yet didn't fit in, and the French refused on principle to issue any documents to someone related to Jurgen Hoffman. As for the Germans, they were still trying to ignore the fact that people like my grandfather, Waffen-SS Sturmbannführer Jurgen Hoffman, ever existed. I was told he'd been a severe embarrassment to them during the Indochina colonial war. Yet I wasn't Thai, not in looks or parentage. In short, I'd learned to be a kind of chameleon, able to fit in wherever I went. And I spoke English, though with a skewed accent, part French, and part German.

"It's ok, an American bar is fine with me."

We drove through the outskirts of Kabul. The city was depressing. It still bore the scars of the Soviet war, and the constant conflict since had done nothing to improve things. And there was the dust; it was as if the whole of

the country was one gigantic dustbowl. We passed building after building that was totally or part destroyed. Guards were everywhere, and most carrying assault rifles; a few carried rocket launchers.

"Jesus Christ, those are Soviet RPGs. I thought only the Taliban carried them!" Rachel exclaimed.

The driver looked over his shoulder and grinned. "They're very common and very cheap in this city. Some of the security men carry them instead of a rifle. They can kill a whole group of fighters in one shot. Bang!" he shouted gleefully. "Very good."

"Great," Rachel muttered.

The first surprise was the bar we stopped outside. It was in a long street that seemed to have more than its fair share of bars, brothels and hourly rate hotels. It was called Abe's. That was it, not 'Abe's bar', just Abe's. Like it could have been a Mom and Pop store, or a shop selling auto parts. The exterior was pre-Soviet occupation, the kind of Afghan style that had a faded grandeur all of its own. We paid the driver and went in. The bar was small inside, maybe twenty tables, and only five were occupied, so we were able to find a quiet table at the rear. I'd been brought up on tales of street bombings, and if the glass started flying, I wanted us to be as far away from it as possible. The front windows were covered in crossed tape stuck to them, to prevent broken glass flying everywhere if a bomb went off. There were no locals in the bar. Outwardly, the Muslim government had a dual approach to booze. It was ok for foreigners, but off limits to the natives; except in their own private homes, where anything went. But the native booze was often cheap, Uzbek vodka or phony Scotch that tasted like gasoline. In fact, it probably was, at least in part. But Abe's was anything but native, so we were reasonably safe. An old guy came out from behind the bar and brought over a menu. I looked at it and discovered the limited choice, steak and French Fries with salad, ice cream for seconds.

"We'll take the steak and French Fries," I said to the guy. He looked American, and when he spoke it was obvious that he was a long way from home.

"A good choice, buddy. It'll take about fifteen minutes, you in any hurry?"

"That'll be fine. Could we have a couple of beers?"

"Sure. This is your first time here, so welcome to Abe's. I'm the owner, Abe Woltz."

He held out his hand and I shook it. “Max Hoffman, this is my colleague, Rachel Beckett.”

He studied me for a few moments.

“Where’re you from?”

“We’re based in Kandahar, occasionally Peshawar.”

“No, I mean originally. I knew a guy called Hoffman, a long time ago. In Vietnam.” As if that explained everything. And in a way it did.

“My grandfather, Jurgen Hoffman, was in Vietnam.”

He nodded. “Jurgen Hoffman, yeah, that was him. Jesus Christ, if that don’t beat everything, at least, if it’s the same guy, I fought with him back in ‘Nam.”

I was puzzled at his comment. “I think you must have the wrong man. My grandfather fought in the French Foreign Legion when Vietnam was Indochina, in the late forties and early fifties. He was a pilot when the Americans were there, in the sixties. He ran an airline. In fact, the same airline that we’re trying to keep afloat right now, Helene Air.”

He grinned. “We’re talking about the same guy. Yeah, I guess he did run that crazy airline. But it’s not the whole picture. So you’re German?”

I shook my head. “Not really. My passport says I’m Thai. But I’m part German, part French, even part American, I guess.”

His stare was intense, and I felt uncomfortable. When he spoke, I was astonished.

“Your mother must have been Sophie, Jurgen and Helene’s daughter.”

My eyes must have telegraphed my surprise that this stranger knew so much about my mother. “That’s right,” I replied. “So how did you know her, and my grandparents?”

“I was with Jurgen in Vietnam, as well as running an airline he helped bring a Special Forces team out of the north, a rescue mission. I was the unit sniper. He was a great soldier, knew the Vietnamese jungles better than any man alive. He was shot down in seventy five, if I recall, a North Vietnamese Mig?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I saw your mother when she was just a child in Thailand,” he continued. “Before your grandmother died. Helene was a great lady. What about your mother, Sophie? Where did she wind up?”

“Paris.”

He understood the terse reply. “You don’t talk to her much, eh?”

“No. She wanted me to leave South East Asia, and I wanted to stay. So we don’t see eye to eye on that.”

“No, I guess not. Let me get you your food. Would you mind if I join you later? I have to know how things went with Helene and Sophie after I lost touch with them.”

“Sure, and I’d like to know more about my grandfather, if that’s ok with you.”

“It sure is, Max. He was quite a guy.”

When the steaks arrived, they were perfect. We sat in silence, devouring the delicious food and swilling down an endless stream of beers that seemed to keep coming over to our table. Afterwards, Abe joined us. He had with him a woman who looked a little older than me, I guessed about forty. I afterwards found out she was in her fifties. There was also a young man, a Eurasian in his early twenties. They were his wife and son, Cam Woltz and Luk. Cam was Afghan, the daughter of the Afghan ambassador to Thailand, which is where she and Abe had met when he was on furlough after the withdrawal from Vietnam.

“You’re not based here in Kabul?” Luk asked. Despite his Asian appearance, he had the typical American way of asking a direct question. I didn’t mind at all, sometimes the Asian way was a pain. This was the twenty-first century, after all.

“No, we operate out of Kandahar, with a small presence in Peshawar,” I replied.

Rachel leaned forward. “We came here with a cargo from Pakistan, a group of security men and some supplies, bound for Double Eagle Security,” she continued on my behalf.

He looked at her, then me. “You’re CIA?”

I shook my head emphatically. “No way. I own a small airline, and it ran into trouble. These guys at Double Eagle bailed me out so that we could release the aircraft and work off the debt flying contracts here in Afghanistan.”

“You know that Double Eagle is a CIA funded company?” Abe put in. “But I guess you had no choice. Who’s your contact?”

“Ed Walker.”

There was a silence for a few moments.

“What’s up?” Rachel asked.

The three Woltz’s exchanged glances. It was his wife, Cam Woltz who

replied.

"In that case, you're working directly for the Agency. Ed Walker III is the deputy CIA Head of Station here in Kabul," she said. Her voice was soft and seductive. With her looks I could see why Woltz had fallen for her.

I tried to keep the shock out of my face. I knew we'd gone in over our heads, but not quite how deep we'd sunk. "We didn't have much choice. The airline was broke, and it was accepting this work with Walker or nothing."

Abe excused himself and walked over to a group of men who occupied three of the tables. I heard him speaking to them, and they all got up and came over to our table.

"Max, if you don't mind, these guys want to meet you. They won't have met your grandfather, but his name is kind of a legend to all of them."

We shook hands, and I looked them all over. They were all fit, hard and tough looking. Their faces wore that cold, calculating stare that soldiers the world over displayed to the world. When they came over, they moved with a fluid grace that betrayed their high level of physical readiness. They could only have been Special Forces, or something very similar.

"You're all security people?" I asked.

They burst out laughing. "Hell, no," Abe responded. "That name's a crock of shit to hide the truth. These guys call it as it is. They're mercenaries, every one of them. All of them are American, and most saw service in Iraq."

After we'd been introduced, we chatted for a short while and swapped stories, and then the mercs drifted back to their tables. As Abe had said, my father's name was well known in their circles, and his behind the lines exploits for the French Foreign Legion would have filled a book, even if only half of what they said about him was true. The name of Ed Walker III was just as well known, only it in the opposite sense to my grandfather.

"Let me tell you something about your boss," Abe said to us. "He's CIA royalty, make no mistake. The guy is on his way up to the top floor office, and no one's going to stop him. He'll crawl over a mountain of bodies to get there if it suits him, so watch out for him. His father was CIA, and his grandfather before him. The other guy you need to watch out for is Joe Ashford; he's the CIA Head of Station here. He's even more ruthless than Ed Walker, as treacherous as a wounded rattlesnake.

"Is Ashford headed for the top floor office too?" Rachel enquired.

"No, not at all. Ed was born rich. Ivy League college, no shortage of money, he had it all laid out for him on a plate. Joe had to fight his way up.

He has one interest in this world, and that's money. He's making a mountain of cash from this war, make no mistake."

"How does he make money out of the war?" I asked fascinated.

"He trades anything. Drugs, information, weapons, you name it. And he'll use you to get richer if he can."

Rachel and I both nodded. It was a timely warning. "We'll be careful, don't worry."

We chatted for a while longer. It turned out that Cam had run a business in Thailand after the end of the Vietnam War. She was in fact twenty years older than I'd calculated, one of those women who retain their beauty. Something to do with the genes, I expect. When the war in Afghanistan hotted up, Abe brought Cam back to her home country with Luk, to start again. It was also where the Americans were, so it satisfied some of the homesickness he still felt; the need to hear a friendly, American voice. So they wound up back here in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, where she had so many relations and contacts, and Abe could chew the fat about the military with the customers who frequented his bar.

"Do you ever regret coming back here?" I asked them. "I mean, it must be difficult for Cam, seeing how bad things are in the country."

Cam answered. "Once, this was a country to be proud of. We had a civilization, a culture, and a history. Now, all we have is barbarism and cruelty, starvation and war. It is my home, true, but if we did not have this business, we would go elsewhere."

It was a sobering reply. I asked Abe for the name of a decent hotel, and he wrote down the address of one nearby. The mercenaries got up and left shortly after we'd spoken to them. I asked Abe about them. I was that curious.

"What exactly do they do, those guys? I mean, I know roughly, but who do they work for? Who employs those kinds of people?"

"The mercs? They work for the highest bidder, same as it's always been, as long as it's someone friendly to the US, of course. Your own father worked several missions in Vietnam, when the Americans were there."

"He was a mercenary? That's not right, during the American war, he ran a civilian airline."

"That's not the whole truth, Max. Did you know his outfit was known as the 'Devil's Guard' during the French Indochina war? At least, that's what the Viet Minh called it."

I shook my head. It was news to me.

"Yeah, the Viet Minh changed their name to the Vietcong afterwards, and they sure as hell didn't like Jurgen's outfit. His Foreign Legion guys, they were tough fighters, maybe the only soldiers the Viet Minh ever really respected. In the early days, they were ordinary serving legionnaires, but Jurgen trained them to use tactics that were not what you'd call conventional. They were not unlike those guys that just left the bar. I guess you'd call them the modern Devil's Guard. Those men served in a variety of outfits, mostly Special Forces in Iraq, and one or two other foreign wars the Americans prefer to forget. The insurgents hate them when they go into action. They're not bound by politicians and rules of engagement, and just like in Jurgen's day, they fight to win, by any means necessary." He grinned. "So I guess you could say that Jurgen almost invented that kind of behind-the-lines warfare. Shock and awe, they call it these days, except that his battles took place behind their lines. It frightened the shit out off them, then and now. But enough of that, tell me about this job you've taken for Ed Walker?"

I told him we were due to fly out at dawn with a mixed cargo of security men and cargo.

"You don't know where you're going?"

I shook my head. "He wouldn't tell us, something about need to know. But we've an agreement. We only fly in and out of established airfields, so we'll avoid any rough field, Special Ops type stuff. We just want to finish the job, pay off the mortgage and carry on running a business."

Abe chuckled. "And you believed that he'd keep to that agreement?"

"Well, yes, I did. We've got it on paper."

"Well I wish you luck if it doesn't turn out the way you planned."

We all looked to the front of the bar just then. There was a loud explosion outside, like a grenade going off; then gunfire, shouts and screams. Abe turned to Luk.

"Time to put up the shutters, son. It looks like we're in for another riot."

"You get many riots around here?"

Luk had run outside and was pulling the heavy wooden shutters across the windows. Abe looked grim. "I don't know how things are in Kandahar, but they hate us, the Afghans. Some of them do, anyway. These Pashtuns, they go crazy for the slightest insult. So when out soldiers hit their people in a friendly fire accident, it's a reason for a permanent vendetta. There've been too many accidents, and too many of them hate us as a result. Riots are a fact

of life, I'm afraid. There's always some crazy mullah to wind up these people as well, and they're deeply religious. Then there's the suicide bombers, that's a trick they picked up from the Iraqis. Most of them are not Afghans, though. There are a lot of foreign fighters who've come in to join the Jihad, and they're the ones most likely to carry out the suicide bombings. Iraqis, Chechens, Saudis, even a few Brits. The Afghans don't see that as productive. They'd sooner live to fight rather than die to fight. We've learned to be pretty careful."

I walked to the door and looked out. Luk had finished fastening the shutters, and we stood watching the nearby crowd, about forty people waving their arms and shouting at a bar that was blazing along the street. I felt Rachel come up behind me and touch my arm.

"What are they doing?" I asked Luk.

He shrugged. "I've no idea. It could be the mullahs getting upset about an Afghan bar selling liquor to Muslims. That's the usual grouse, something crazy like that. Maybe women taking a walk outside without their heads covered too. They go crazy for this Islamic stuff."

Then we ducked because there was another explosion, even bigger. The crowd seemed to split apart like dust in a sandstorm. Luk pushed us both down and led us back on all fours inside the bar. He locked the door securely, and when he turned to us, his face was grim.

"Another bombing, and could be a suicide. The poor devils that got caught in the blast never stood a chance. You need to be careful when you leave, they sometimes have a second bomber to wait for the police and emergency services, that's assuming they turn up. Often they don't even bother to come. I can't blame them. Too many have been killed trying to help the wounded."

We waited for a half hour. There were no more explosions, and a couple of ambulances arrived to carry away the dead and wounded. But the ground was still littered with the debris of the second blast, broken bodies, men, women and children. There were fragments of glass, odd possessions, women's purses, hats, and shoes. Pieces of wood and metal, the flotsam and jetsam of a war that gave no quarter to civilians or soldiers alike. Abe came and joined us.

"If you think this is bad, you wait until you get out into the boonies. They shoot first, and ask questions afterwards there."

I looked at Rachel. "How would you feel about employing some kind of

protection? I feel we could be getting in over our heads. I'm not too happy about us being thrown in at the deep end with Ed Walker and his buddies. We know nothing of their kinds of operation they undertake."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean, their kinds of operation?"

"Exactly."

She nodded. "Yeah, I get the point. Maybe that would be a good idea. We'll get caught out like babes in the wood. We know nothing about the CIA, and the games they play. I've heard stories of what they got up to in Vietnam in the old days. Here, who knows?"

I turned to Abe. "Can you suggest anyone that could help us out?"

"My son here, Luk." He looked at the young man. "How about it?"

His son looked enthusiastic. He also looked solid enough, and he had a soft, almost feminine face. He was quite short, so he'd taken after his mother more than his father. But he had the eyes of a marksman, a level, intense stare that never wavered. And he carried himself with a fluid grace that demonstrated a high level of fitness and strength.

"Sure, I'm looking to find work outside of the bar."

Abe looked back at me. "What do you think?"

"Is he any good?" I asked him. "I mean, with weapons, stuff like that."

"He was a champion marksman in the Afghan Army, did military service and joined me in the bar when he'd finished his time. Yeah, he's real good, and I know that the ANA doesn't have a great reputation. And even more important, he knows the country and knows the people. In Afghanistan, that can be the difference between life and death."

Rachel indicated her agreement. I turned back to Luk.

"Ok, then, you're hired. But it would be better if we called you the engineer. I don't want to upset Ed Walker by taking a mercenary with us."

"That's fine by me, Mr. Hoffman."

"It's Max, and Rachel. We're not American Airlines, not yet, anyway."

"We do share one thing with them," Rachel smiled. "I believe they're as broke as we are."

We said our goodbyes and agreed to collect Luk on the way to Kabul International in the morning. In the meantime, Abe directed us to the hotel. He also gave us a card with his contact details.

"I'll give Luk my satphone. He carried it when he was on his military service. It'll mean you can get through to me at any time if you have problems."

“Thanks, Abe, I appreciate it. But I don’t think we’ll have any problems, I’m sure Luk won’t be called upon for anything drastic.”

“Maybe not, but hear this. Jurgen, your grandfather, saved my life on more than one occasion. That’s a debt that is still outstanding, and I always pay my debts. Any trouble, you get Luk to call me. Hear?”

“I copy that. And thanks.”

We left the bar and found the hotel nearby. It wasn’t too bad, by Afghan standards. Which meant it was a shithole by any normal standards.

“What do you think?” Rachel asked me.

“Of the hotel?”

“No, of this new deal we’ve got for ourselves. The whole shebang.”

I thought about her words for a few moments. But there was only one honest answer I could give her. “I think it stinks, and I think that Ed Walker will be trouble, and I think I’d like to screw you, right now. You’re the only sane thing about this place.”

“We’re going to share a long and satisfied relationship, Max,” she smiled. “We operate along the same lines.”

Afterwards, we lay on our backs on the bed, still naked.

“We need to finish this contract as fast as possible and get out of here,” Rachel said suddenly. “I smell trouble, and when I say trouble, I mean big trouble. I’m glad we’ve got Luk coming with us.”

I couldn’t have agreed with her more.

It was still dark the next morning when we awoke, showered and dressed. We went out to find a taxi and pick up Luk. Abe had one last surprise. He handed each of us a pistol, a military Colt .45 in a canvas shoulder rig. Each of the guns had three pouches with spare clips that were already loaded with bullets. I protested, but he’d have none of it.

“Take them. Without a gun in this place you’re not dressed, and you may as well walk around without your pants.”

I protested hard. I’d never forget the nightmare of the guy I’d killed. Never be certain whether he was about to shoot or not. Never be sure if I’d be able to kill an enemy if I was faced with one again. But Abe was insistent, and I gave in. We thanked him and strapped on the weapons. They felt heavy and uncomfortable, but it did give me a certain reassurance. If it ever came to it, maybe the threat of being armed would be enough. Helene, my grandmother, had insisted I learn how to shoot a pistol from a young age in case it was ever needed. After that, I’d had very little weapons training in the

Royal Thai Army, until that fateful day. Rachel had learned in the Air Force, of course, so we both had no problem about knowing which end the bullet came out. When we reached Kabul International, the Twin Otter was fueled, loaded and ready to go. The security men were already aboard and Ed Walker looked impatient. This time he was wearing camouflage combat clothes, canvas boots and carried an assault rifle. A man we hadn't seen before accompanied him. I could see Rachel's nose twitching.

"Where've you been, Hoffman? It's late."

"It's the time we agreed, Mr. Walker," I replied.

He grunted. I was looking at the other man, and Walker caught my gaze.

"This is Joe Ashford. He heads up the Afghan operation for Double Eagle Security. Kind of the regional manager," he chuckled.

So this was the Head of Station, the CIA's chief spook. We shook hands, and his grip was cold and hard. He was an immensely strong man, which was obvious from the start. Ashford had the physique of a college footballer. He was both tall and heavy with broad, strong shoulders, but none of it was fat. His huge, hard muscles told of a man who was very strong. He didn't talk, he growled. "Pleased to meet you, Hoffman. Don't let me delay you, the boys are waiting to go."

There was no warmth in his handshake, or his hard, cold tones, and the message was clear. The master had spoken, and the help had better get his shit together and jump to it. His voice was pitched deep, a low thunder, like the sound of an earthquake miles below the surface. He had a broken nose, and his face bore the obvious scars of bruising encounters during his football career. Or perhaps from his career since then, which had clearly been colorful. I noticed his expensive and complicated Swiss watch, no doubt sequestered from an enemy in some previous CIA operation. Both men eyed our pistols, Rachel's and mine. They didn't like them, which pleased me for some crazy reason. Then they looked at Luk.

"Who's this?"

"Oh, yes, this is Luk Woltz. I took him on as our engineer. The facilities can be primitive in some of these places, and it's advisable to carry an engineer in case of any emergencies."

Walker grunted. Joe Ashford stared at him for a few moments, and I could see he didn't believe a word of it. But neither was he pilot-in-command. I was, and he had no choice but to demur to my wishes where aircraft operational safety was concerned. He stared at me.

“It’s late, you should get moving.”

“Mr. Ashford, I haven’t even filed a flight plan yet. Where are we going?”

“It’s all taken care of. Ed’s coming with you, and he’ll let you know when you’re in the air. Just take off and fly north west.”

It wasn’t enough, not nearly enough. It was crazy to take off from a war torn country to an unknown destination with an aircraft crowded with armed mercenaries and a cargo of dark secrets. I wanted to protest, and saw Ashford smiling, waiting for me to ask. He knew he held all the cards, so I didn’t give him the satisfaction. I turned to Rachel and Luk.

“Let’s get aboard, we’ll take off now.”

The three of us climbed aboard the Twin Otter. The cargo area was crammed with armed men. They were talking quietly between themselves, and two of them were checking their assault rifles. There was a stack of wooden crates at the rear of the aircraft, and their lack of markings suggested that questions about them would not meet with any kind of an answer.

“Where do I sit?” Luk asked. He was carrying a long, thin, canvas case. As a former champion sniper, I didn’t need to ask him what was inside it. It wasn’t the most convincing appearance for our new flight engineer. I corrected his ignorance about where an engineer would be stationed.

“In the cockpit, Luk. You’re flight crew, remember?” I whispered.

“Oh yeah, right.”

Rachel smiled and took his arm to lead him forward to the jump seat in the cockpit, just behind her right hand co-pilot’s seat. I was pleased to see that he ignored her limp. She started the engines, and I checked with the tower. We were cleared for immediate taxi and take-off, which was no surprise. Five minutes later, we were climbing to the north west, with the rising sun behind us. It lit up the sky in a kaleidoscope of vivid colors, and Rachel smiled at me.

“We’re really back in business, Max. How does it feel?”

“Ask me when it’s all over,” I called back.

She pulled a face. In truth, I was convinced we were totally screwed. Screwed if we went ahead, screwed if we didn’t.

* * *

They’d waited a short while after dawn; time enough for the reconnaissance drones to sweep the Kabul-Kandahar Highway, and for the

data to be analyzed. The intelligence guys gave the road a clean bill of health, so they set out for the return journey. The convoy was a reverse of the inbound leg. Rains led the way in his Stryker, with the Afghan M35 trucks strung out behind. Another Stryker was positioned in the center of the column, and the rear was brought up by the third APC. For some reason, the Lieutenant felt more confident. After all, the road had been cleared. Corporal Delgado issued a stream of reports about air activity, and Rains was able to identify several drones that passed overhead. Reconnaissance drones, he assumed. Or maybe they were MQ-9 Reapers, the fearsome attack drones. Rains knew they were controlled remotely by operators stationed at bases such as Creech Air Force Base, near Las Vegas. Thousands of miles away, the operator could control the hunt for targets and observe terrain using a number of sensors, including a thermal imaging camera. The operator's commands only took a fraction over a second to reach the drone via a satellite link. The MQ-9 was fitted with six pylons for ordnance and extra fuel tanks. An MQ-9 with two one thousand pound external fuel tanks and a thousand pounds of munitions had an endurance of forty-two hours; an awful long time to hunt down the bad guys. The weapons load included GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided bombs, AGM-114 Hellfire II air-to-ground missiles, and the AIM-9 Sidewinder. It all added up to a good feeling of security, and just knowing they were there was quite a comfort.

It was so easy. It was a breeze! Maybe the reports of Taliban activity were macho exaggerations, he considered. They completed the long, uncomfortable journey to Kabul without meeting a single enemy fighter. Every man breathed a sigh of relief, especially when they climbed out of the vehicles to exercise their aching muscles. Traveling on Afghan roads was like being beaten in the ass by baseball bats. At least, it was on the main highway. The secondary roads were worse. Rains decided it was time to relax and get to know his crew.

“You men, if any of you are interested, I’ll buy you all a drink when we’ve checked into Phoenix. I reckon we’ve earned it.”

There were grunts of appreciation. Sergeant Mason nodded at him. “Good idea, LT. That’ll give the boys a chance to get to know you. We’ve hardly had time to get acquainted since the unit was assembled in country.”

“They’re good troops, and I’m looking forward to relaxing over a few beers,” Rains replied, feeling that at last he’d said the right thing. “I’m gonna take a look up top, let some air inside now that we’ve made the city.”

“I’d be careful if I were you, Lieutenant,” Sergeant Mason cautioned.

“No worries, Sarge. I need to see the beautiful blue sky again. That was a long trip.”

He opened up the hatch and poked his head out. The city of Kabul was bustling. The sidewalks thronged with men in turbans and pakuls, and veiled women. Women in the city wore the traditional blue burqa, just like their counterparts in the countryside. The garment enshrouded them from head to foot, with just a mesh screen in front of their face for them to be able to see out. Christ, how did they manage to swallow a cold drink through that weird contraption! His prevailing impression was dust, rubble and decay. There was little evidence of the billions of dollars that has been spent on infrastructure, at least, not here. He looked casually at a motorcycle that drew alongside the column. The guy steering it wore a turban, and on the pillion seat a blue robed woman sat, her burqa flowing in the slipstream as the bike roared along the road.

“The fucking maniac, he’s much too close to the trucks. He’ll be under the wheels if he gets any nearer.”

“What’s that, Lieutenant?” Mason opened the adjacent hatch and poked his head out. He glanced at the motorcycle then ducked down, shouting at Rains.

“Suicide bomber, get inside and shut that fucking hatch!”

The officer heard the words and reacted with the speed that had been drummed into him during basic training. Both hatches clanged shut almost at the same instant, and a split second later there was a huge explosion that rocked the vehicle on its suspension. The soldiers were flung across the interior, and only their Kevlar helmets saved their heads from being dashed against the steel hull. Rains felt a blow to his head and shook it to clear his brain. The tactical screen had gone white as the software automatically went into reboot mode. The soldiers picked themselves up off the floor and felt their limbs for anything broken. Sergeant Mason was already peering through the optical periscope.

“Those poor bastards,” he said, his voice colored by the anger he felt. “They’ve lost two of the trucks. There’s almost nothing left.”

Rains waited until the Sergeant ceded the periscope to him. The scene was one of utter devastation, and the two trucks were smoking skeletons of metal and rubber. There was no sign of the crews. Their bodies had been shredded in the blast. He felt a terrible sadness, a sense of failure. They were

in his charge, and he'd failed them. Mason looked at him, seeing his despair.

"It's not your fault, Lieutenant. This is normal. Welcome to Afghanistan."

"It happened on my watch, Sergeant. The fuckers, I'd like to make them pay for this."

"I hear you, LT. But they already did. It was a suicide bomb, so they will be a bucket load of little pieces. They've made their payment."

When they returned to Camp Phoenix, it was as if nothing had happened. It didn't make Rains feel any better. Maybe it was normal for this hellhole of a country, but it wasn't normal for him. Next time, he'd make sure he was more alert. Maybe it would make a difference, maybe not. But he'd try. Major Fairchild was sympathetic.

"It's bad luck that it happened on your first mission, Rains. Don't let it worry you. I've got something coming up that you can do for me. They've got an outbreak of disease in Pakistan, some little town over the border. Medecin Sans Frontieres is sending some of their people to go over there and help them out. You can run escort for them. It's a milk run over the Khyber Pass, so you shouldn't hit any problems. I'll let you know when everything's in place for you to go. In the meantime, just take it easy. Relax, have a few beers."

His weapons specialist, Corporal Delgado, was having an equipment malfunction. When he went to check, he found shreds of flesh hanging from his aerial array. The shreds of Afghan Army uniform were still visible, and Delgado took them down.

"Hey, guys, lookee here what I've found."

He proudly showed what he'd found. Rains excused himself and barely made it to the bathroom to throw up.

# Chapter Five

*To America I say I swear by God the great... America will never taste security and safety unless we feel security and safety in our lands and in Palestine.*

*Osama Bin Laden*

The messenger rushed into the inner cave. “They are coming, these infidel Americans. The assassins, they’re on their way!”

Commander Abdul Qadir ignored him for a few moments. Then he turned to him, not reaching for the piece of paper. “Calm down, Mohammed. We already knew this.”

"But, Commander, their plane has already departed. We have no idea where they will strike. They may even be coming here.”

“In which case they will die, my young friend. Our preparations are all ready. Now, give me the message.”

He scanned the paper and frowned. “It seems there are nine of these American killers. The message does not say exactly where they are planning to attack, so we will just have to keep alert and watchful.”

“It will spread our forces very thin, Commander,” one of his squad leaders objected. “Even though they are small in number, they will have unlimited resources, air support, drones, reinforcements and artillery.”

“Perhaps,” Qadir nodded, deep in thought, “but I think not. These killers come alone, so that their government can disown them when they are killed, which they surely will be. Send out word to all of our fighters. They are to be prepared and send word to me here when they see where these infidels land.”

The man inclined his head. “It shall be as you say, Commander. We shall slaughter them as soon as they set foot on our soil.”

“If God wills it, yes, we will slaughter them,” he agreed. But privately, he thought, what if God does not will it? He had no answer for that question.

* * *

We had traveled for almost an hour, and still there was no clue as to our destination. I went back into the cabin to find Ed Walker. He was sat on his own, a few feet from his men, who were stretched out and dozing. I tapped him on the shoulder, and he looked around.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“I need the destination airport, Mr. Walker. Where are we going? You can’t keep it to yourself any longer. I have a plane to fly.”

“Ok, sure.” He handed me a piece of paper. “We’re heading there. It’s a map reference.”

“I can see it’s a map reference, but which airport is it?”

“I’ve no idea, Hoffman. You’re the pilot. Look it up,” he sneered.

I went back to the cockpit without another word. I keyed the coordinates into our navigation system, and there was no airport within a hundred miles. Nothing. I went back to find Walker. He was waiting for me, wearing a challenging look on his face.

“Where’s the airport? I’ve checked, and there’s nothing there.”

He nodded. “Then I guess you’ll just have to wait and see what they’ve got ready for us. It’ll be usable, whatever it is.”

“We had an agreement. I said I would only use regular, mainstream commercial airfields.”

He smiled. “Hell, to these people I guess that’s what it is.”

“I’m going to alter course to the nearest commercial airfield. I told you. I don’t fly into places where I don’t know whether I’ll be able to get down safely, let alone take off again. The deals off, Mr. Walker, so you’ll have to find someone else.”

I heard a click behind me. Two of his men stood there; one had cocked his automatic and pointed it at me. It was my turn to smile.

“I doubt even you would be so stupid as to shoot the pilot.”

“No, I guess you’re right. That’s why we’ll shoot the co-pilot if you don’t cooperate. That would be a pity. She’s a pretty little thing, for a cripple.”

I made to swing at him, but one of his men twisted my arm behind me and screwed the barrel of his pistol into my neck.

“That’d be a stupid thing to try. Just remember whose paying the bills, Hoffman. Now do we fly with one pilot or two? It’s your choice.”

We stared at each other for a few moments, and all of Abe’s words came flooding back to me, along with my Grandmother Helene’s advice about dealing with the CIA. I knew I was beaten, and I backed down.

“Ok, you win. What am I expecting when we land?”

“It’s a field. They cleared last year’s crop and smoothed over the worst of the bumps and rocks. We’ll be fine. If I didn’t think so, I wouldn’t have gone for it.”

I nodded my agreement, and he waved for the guy to release me. I went back into the cockpit and gave them the bad news. Rachel surprised me with her reaction.

"So we're going into action? This could be interesting."

"It could get us all killed. I wouldn't be so keen if I were you. It will be a rough strip landing, and we've no idea how good the field is. And there is the other matter, we've no idea either who will be waiting for us when we get there."

I glanced at the back of the cockpit. Luk hadn't said a word, but he was quietly unpacking his sniper rifle and assembling it ready to go. Rachel saw the direction of my gaze.

"Luk, what are you doing? We're not going into battle quite yet."

He didn't look up. "Can you guarantee that?"

She shook her head. "I guess not, no. So what do we do now?"

"Do? We do our job. Didn't they used to say, 'keep your faith in God and your powder dry'? I think we should check our pistols and make sure they're ready for use. As for God, he can take care of himself."

"He?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, whatever. The important thing is to keep the engines running when they're unloading so that if there's any trouble, we can make a fast take-off. I'll go and have a word with Walker, and let him know what we're doing. Luk, you and I can make sure that no one stumbles into the propellers. Rachel, you stay at the controls."

He nodded. "I'll take my rifle with me."

Walker barely took any notice of me when I spoke to him. He was busy briefing his men. He looked around when I tapped him on the shoulder and told him what we planned.

"Yeah, that's no problem. We'll be jumping off from the landing field, so you'll be coming back without any passengers. There'll be some more crates, and I want you to take them to Joe Ashford. He'll be waiting for you in Peshawar. Don't land in Afghanistan or anywhere else other than Peshawar."

"What's in these crates we'll be carrying?"

"Need to know, buddy," he grinned. "And you don't need to know."

"I assume it's enough to know that it's something that could cause me a problem if I land inside Afghanistan?"

"Don't even think about it. They'd have your balls if they found out

what's in those crates, and if they don't, Joe will. Just follow my instructions, and it'll all be fine."

"Like the pilot of the Cessna Caravan did?"

He grimaced. "Fuck you, Hoffman. The stupid bastard messed up, period. Make sure you do it right."

I left him to his briefing and went back to the cockpit.

"We're twenty minutes out from these coordinates, Max. Do you want me to take her in?"

"You may as well, yes. I'll let the passengers know, and then I'll stay up front."

I went aft again and told them our ETA, but they barely took any notice. Then I went up front and strapped myself into the left hand seat. We had full daylight, and Rachel had already begun the descent. Mountains surrounded us everywhere we looked. As we drew nearer our landing site, I could see it was a narrow valley with a high mountain, capped by snow on each side. It was no wonder these were such a hardy, tough and savage people. It was that kind of a land where the weak would perish, and the strong would struggle to survive by right of superior strength. It was a medieval concept of society, but these were medieval people.

"Three miles to run," Rachel intoned. "Still no sign of the landing field."

"Ok, reduce speed to ninety knots, thirty degrees of flap. Luk, strap in. This could be bumpy."

I took out my binoculars and looked ahead for the landing field. Then I saw it. It looked like a pocket-handkerchief from three miles out. There were tiny dots around it, and people and vehicles came into focus.

"I see it," Rachel called across to me. "I'll increase the rate of descent. We're nearly there."

She was an expert pilot, and I was happy to let her handle the controls while I surveyed the surrounding area. It seemed peaceful enough. The nightmarish vision of hordes of savage, heavily armed tribesmen waiting in ambush didn't look as if it was going to happen today. The field came nearer, and I could make out the people and vehicles with the naked eye. One of the men down there fired a flare into the air, and we were able to determine the wind direction. Rachel grunted as she worked out the options. The wind blew diagonally across the field, and we were landing in the best direction, slightly into the wind. The men who watched our descent were all in Afghan dress,

robes and turbans, and all carried weapons, although they didn't look as if they were about to threaten us. The two vehicles that waited for us were Toyota Land Cruisers, the tough Japanese SUVs that would go to most places closed to ordinary cars. The long wheelbase, crew cab models would be enough to transport the men and equipment that were about to disembark. The field came nearer, nearer. I automatically checked the instruments, speed eighty knots, and altitude one hundred feet above ground level. Rachel dropped down lower and flared on to the field. The Twin Otter could land in three hundred yards at a pinch, and take off in an even shorter distance. I held my breath. If we didn't make it, it was going to be a long walk home. It was a good landing, just a slight bump, and a number of jars as we hit irregularities on the surface, but none were serious enough to cause any problems. She managed to brake the aircraft just before the end of the field. There was enough room to turn around and head back to face the way we'd landed, into the wind. We stopped right at the head of the landing strip, and Rachel applied the brake, keeping the engines running. I went aft with Luk. Walker's men already had the door open and were jumping down. I wondered if scheduled airlines ever had this problem with controlling their passengers. Maybe I was in the wrong part of the business.

I jumped down. Luk came with me, carrying his rifle.

"Take the port engine, and make sure no idiot runs into the propeller," I shouted to him above the noise of the engines. He nodded and ran off. I heard Walker calling my name, and I went over to him.

"We need about an hour on the ground, so you can switch off if you like."

"An hour? What the hell for? You told me this was a straight in and out job. I don't like the idea of waiting."

He sneered. "Scares you, does it?"

I didn't give him the satisfaction of a reply.

He continued. "Our return cargo hasn't arrived yet, so there's no choice, you just have to wait. The cargo is what pays for this mission, so the two are linked together."

I nodded and went inside the aircraft to let Rachel know. She switched off the engines, and we walked out into the cabin and jumped to the ground to stretch our legs. Luk had taken up a position by the nosewheel leg, and he was surveying the ground around us with his telescopic sight. Walker's men had loaded their equipment into the Land Cruisers and were sat on the grass

waiting. All of them had their assault rifles ready for instant action. I wandered over to Walker.

"What's the arrangement for getting your men back to Kabul?"

He considered his answer for a few moments. "This job should only take us two days. I've got a satphone with me. If everything goes to plan, I'll call you to pick us up here. Make sure you keep the coordinates."

"They're programmed into the aircraft's GPS system," I replied.

"Right. I hope to Christ these guys we're waiting for don't take much longer. You can't leave without the shipment. Joe would go crazy."

So that confirmed it. I was about to become a drug runner, as well as carrying armed mercenaries and their guns and equipment. It was the low point in my career, and one that I could do nothing about. These people had a long reach, and I knew that if I failed to do what they wanted, they'd find me and ruin me. Or worse. I returned to Rachel, and we sat together, not talking. It was a fine morning, cold, but not the harsh cold that can make the interior of this country so forbidding.

"Look, Max, this could be them."

She was pointing to the far corner of the field. A line of donkeys had appeared laden with bulging hessian sacks. They were accompanied by four men, and all of them were carrying shoulder launched RPGs. It was pure Afghanistan; the ancient meets the modern. The scene would have been exactly the same a thousand years before, were it not for the RPGs. I saw Walker striding towards me.

"We're running behind schedule, Hoffman. We'll check the load, and then we need to get moving. See that it's properly stowed in the aircraft, then head for Peshawar. Joe will meet you there. He'll see to the unloading and give you your next instructions. Any questions?"

"I don't want to handle drugs, Mr. Walker. That's not part of the deal."

He laughed out loud. "Sure. Well let me tell you, my friend. The deal has changed. Just get it done and don't fuck with me. And you really don't want to fuck with Joe Ashford, no way. I'll see you back here in two days. I'll call you."

Then he was gone, racing away to round up his men and meet the donkey train. Luk and Rachel joined me, and I explained what was expected of us.

"I don't like that guy," Luk murmured. "Whatever he's up to, it's nothing that's going to be good for us."

“I agree. Keep the rifle handy. Perhaps you could climb up onto the wing and keep a lookout.”

The Twin Otter was a high wing aircraft, so it would give him a good observation platform. He climbed up onto the wing, and I felt better with him standing up there, keeping a good watch. The Land Cruisers raced away in a cloud of dust, and we were left in a field in the middle of enemy territory with barely enough room to take off and a donkey train guarded by four Afghan tribesmen, about which I knew nothing. I was watching Luk, but I heard the sound of hoofs behind me and the creak of leather harness. I turned to find the donkey train next to the aircraft. The tribesmen were already unloading the sacks. Rachel pointed up to the cargo door of the Twin Otter. One of the men stared at her and smiled through black and broken teeth. Then he made a rude and filthy gesture. I saw Rachel color, but then she relaxed and came over to me.

“I guess that means we load the stuff ourselves.”

“It sure looks that way.”

We watched them continue to toss the sacks to the ground. Rachel and I started to carry them to the aircraft and throw them on board. They weighed about fifty or sixty pounds each, not a massive weight, but there were forty of them. I calculated it was about two tons, and by the time we’d tossed them all on board, we were exhausted.

“Let’s take a few minutes before we lash them down,” I suggested. “I could do with a soda. I’ll grab one each for you and Luk.”

I climbed aboard and looked out at the donkey train. It was moving away from us, already about two hundred yards distant. I took three sodas out of our cool box, and that’s when I heard the first shot. I tossed the sodas down and ran out.

“What going on?”

Rachel was staring into the distance. The shot sounded as if it had come from about three hundred yards away, in the opposite distance to where the donkeys had disappeared. I heard Luk shouting down from the wing.

“How do we know if it’s Taliban?”

“They wear black turbans. I think that’s the only way.”

“There’s about ten of them, and they’re coming down from the low hill off to the east. I’d guess they’re two hundred yards from us.”

“What are they wearing?”

“Black turbans.”

“Then they’re Taliban. Can you slow them down?”

“Sure. I’ll see what I can do.”

“We’ll tie down the load, and we can get airborne. Give us three or four minutes.”

“I’ve got it.”

His rifle cracked out, shot after shot. I afterwards found he hit a target about one shot in four. His main object was to stop them getting any closer. The steady rate of fire only stopped when he changed magazines, and the incoming fire was fragmented and wild. The moment our attackers put their heads up for an aimed shot, Luk put a bullet into them. I scrambled to pull the heavy sacks into the center of the aircraft where they would not upset our trim. Rachel came and helped, and we lashed them down. Rachel limped forward to start the engines, and I went to call Luk.

“We’re leaving. You need to get inside.”

A fusillade of shots came towards us, and two holes appeared in the fuselage.

“Luk! Hurry up.”

His rifle cracked several more times. There were several cries of agony in the distance, and then he was in the doorway, sliding down from the wing.

“They’ll come now that I’ve stopped shooting, Max. I hit maybe six of them, but the other four have assault rifles.”

“You did well. Time to go.”

The whine of the Pratt and Whitney turboprops filled the cabin as Rachel spooled up. I closed the door and went forward. She grinned at me. Her eyes were dilated with the excess of adrenaline that had flooded her system when the shooting started.

“I guess you won’t be doing a walkaround check?”

“Maybe next time. Get us out of here, Rachel. We haven’t much time before they come closer.”

She put the engines to maximum boost, and the aircraft strained against the brakes. Then she released them, and we hurtled forward.

“Max!”

“I see him.”

A Taliban shooter had come nearer, and he was about two hundred yards ahead of us, eighty yards off to the port side. He had an RPG rocket in his arms, and it was clear he was waiting for us to take off. Our forward speed would be miniscule when we left the ground. The aircraft would be

struggling for height, and we'd be a sitting duck. I turned around and shouted for Luk.

"Your rifle, you need to hit that guy with the rocket. I'll open the port window."

The tiny window next to the left hand seat opened. I slid it aside and let Luk get to it. The aircraft was bumping and jolting on the rough ground as Rachel fought with the controls to keep it in a straight line. Luk fired, but just as he did the aircraft hit a bump, and his shot went wild. I decided that we only had one chance.

"Luk, he won't fire the rocket until we're airborne. These missileers will have done this many times before, so he'll know the best time to fire. As soon as our wheels unstuck, the aircraft will be stable. Hit him then."

He nodded. Rachel looked across at me with her eyebrows raised, but I considered it a risk worth taking. I couldn't take the pilot's seat, so I held onto the seat backs and waited.

Rachel handled the aircraft with her usual aplomb while I watched the instruments.

"V1, fifty-five knots." We needed sixty-five knots to take off, at least with the half load in the cargo area.

"Ok."

"Sixty-five knots, rotate."

She held it steady, accelerating. "Rachel!"

She didn't look at me. "I'm trying to give Luk the best angle for the shot."

She was right. It was difficult to point the rifle out of the window at such a steep angle in the cramped cockpit.

"Try not to leave until we run out of field."

"I'll see what I can do."

I saw her face crease into a smile. We hit seventy knots, and there was a tiny window when Luk had an almost perfect angle on the missileer. It all happened in a fraction of a second. Rachel hauled back on the control column, and the aircraft left the ground, just inches above the rough, stony soil of Afghanistan. Luk fired. I watched the missileer; hit by the heavy rifle bullet that pierced his eye and threw him backwards. He must have had his finger on the firing lever, for the missile hurtled into the sky in a blaze of smoke and sparks. It flew away from us to disappear somewhere in the foothills, a long way away. Its only threat was to a passing goat, perhaps.

Rachel climbed for altitude, refusing to swap height for speed. Two more shots pierced the fuselage.

"Rachel, they're shooting!"

"And I've got a bloody mountain in front of me. I can't avoid both of them, Max."

The distant hills had grown alarmingly close, and as we cleared a low hill, another higher peak appeared in front of us. Two more shots hit. Rachel had both engines straining at maximum power, and slowly we climbed away from the dangers of bullets, missiles and mountains. The danger was over, and Luk moved out of the window. I sat down in my seat and closed it.

"Is everyone ok? Nobody hit?"

"I'm good," Rachel replied.

"No problems," Luk added.

"Good. We need to set a course for Peshawar. I think it's time we had a word with Mr. Joe Ashford."

Halfway through the flight, Luk came into the cockpit. He'd been aft, checking out the cargo to make sure it hadn't moved.

"Max, I think you should come and see this."

I followed him into the cargo space. "What is it?"

"I guess you don't need to know what's inside these sacks."

"No. It's opium, couldn't be anything else."

"That's my feeling too. But they left two of the wooden crates behind, and I don't know why. I checked them out. They were about two feet by two feet square, and about a foot high.

"There's a smaller box over there." Luk had prized off the lid of one of the crates, and there were a number of wrapped parcels inside. I didn't recognize what it was.

"Do you know what it is?"

"It's C4, plastique. Plastic explosive. I came across it in the Afghan Army when I did my training."

"Jesus Christ! Is it dangerous?"

"Not immediately, no. But there is a small crate in the corner of the hold with the detonators inside it. Put the two together, and yes, it's very dangerous."

I tried to think why they'd left such an important consignment on the aircraft. I could only come to one answer. It was a simple oversight. One that I'd prefer people didn't make on my aircraft, not where explosives were

concerned. We went forward, and I warned Rachel what we were carrying. Her eyebrows shot up.

"Fuck! The crazy bastards, what are they playing at?"

"It could be an error, who knows? Let's just wait and see. Luk says it's not dangerous."

"Sure, plastic explosive has that reputation."

We droned on through the day towards Peshawar. It was a journey of two and a half hours, and we flew past the awesome grandeur of the Afghan mountains. I took over the controls and watched the soaring, rocky peaks fall behind us; mountains that swooped down into green, often fertile and verdant valleys. Could this ever truly be a country at peace with itself and with the world? It seemed as if it could, placed astride a number of major trading routes, and with some natural resources of its own. So far, Afghanistan had been a place of misery, drought, famine, poverty and death to its population. The poor devils could do with a decent oil strike, if that was possible; something to put enough money in the treasury to pay for the essential infrastructure they so desperately lacked. But would these people spend that kind of sudden wealth wisely, or would it just go to equip the warlords with more weapons to continue their endless fighting between each other; fighting that only ended when they joined forces to attack foreign invaders. Then it was back to their internal squabbles. I'd thought Rachel was dozing.

"They're in the crapper for all time, these people."

I looked at her. She'd been thinking along similar lines.

"You're right. Poverty, disease, war, you name it. Tribal feuds, foreign invasions, and if you're a woman, God help you."

She shuddered. "These women spend their lives in abject poverty and misery. They're cooped up in their houses, and when they go out, they wear those awful blue burqas. It's no wonder so many of them commit suicide. I sure would."

"You'd get out, Rachel. You wouldn't put up with it."

She shook her head. "They're brought up into a culture of no hope. No money, no passports, nothing. No, better to end it all before it becomes unbearable."

"It's a good reason to beat the Taliban. And we're on the side of the good guys, so at least we can take comfort in that when we're bitching about being stuck with this crazy agreement."

"I'm not so sure about that, Max, the CIA, the good guys? I hope so, but

that'll be a first."

I thought about that for a while. Did the Agency ever do anyone any good, apart from themselves, that is? They'd missed the fall of the Soviet Union. Then I remembered something else. It was thinking about the Soviet Union while we were flying over Afghanistan. They'd trained and equipped the Taliban with the latest weaponry. I nodded slowly. "I hope you're wrong, but I have a nasty feeling you could be right."

We made final approach to Peshawar. I took her in to land this time. The Pakistani air traffic controller was crisp and professional, with none of the sarcasm of his Vietnamese counterpart. I was not surprised that they were expecting us. Where Joe Ashford and Ed Walker were concerned, there seemed to be no difficulty in smoothing over red tape. By one means or another. I made a comfortable landing and taxied over to the stand we'd been assigned at the far end of the cargo area. A car was parked there, a Chevrolet Suburban, so beloved of the FBI in the USA and obviously other government agencies elsewhere in the world. I switched off the engines and began to shut down the aircraft systems. Rachel and Luk went aft to open the cargo doors, and when I followed them, Ashford was waiting on the tarmac. He wore a lightweight tropical suit in cream linen, well cut to fit over his huge, muscular frame. Obvious bodyguards, almost laughable in their dark glasses and plain khaki baggy combat suits, flanked him. They each carried a stubby Ingram submachine gun and wore shoulder rigs for their pistols, straight out of central casting in Hollywood, USA. I could have told them they were nearer Bollywood than Hollywood, and that something a little more ethnic and colorful may have been more appropriate.

"You're late."

"We were held up on the ground waiting for the cargo you wanted brought back."

"You got it all?"

"We've got what they gave us. Ed Walker was there, so I assume it's all ok."

He didn't acknowledge my words.

"Unload it into the SUV."

"Look, Mr. Ashford, I want a word with you before we go any further. Maybe you could get your men to unload while we talk."

I noticed a fuel bowser heading towards us that he'd clearly organized for us to make a fast turnaround. He looked in our direction at last.

“Fuel up and get back to Kabul. Unload the cargo yourselves. I don’t pay my men to fetch and carry. I’ve got you to do that. I’ll catch up with you in Kabul. I’ll see you there tomorrow.”

“But, we need to talk.” I took a step nearer to him, but his bodyguards automatically moved to intercept me before I reached him. He came up to me and stood six inches away, huge and threatening.

“No, we don’t need to talk. I need to give the orders. You need to follow them. That’s all. Now get unloaded.”

“Ed Walker said he’ll contact us to pick him up in two days,” I finished, trying to keep him talking.

He waved my remark away, as if it was of no consequence. We were left with no choice. We unloaded the sacks into the Suburban and watched as he drove away. I had a sudden thought.

“The explosives, they’re still in the aircraft. Should we have unloaded them too?”

It was Luk who answered. “Max, people like that, if they were missing the plastique, they’d be on to us in a second. They clean forgot it, that’s all.”

Rachel stared, shaking her head in disbelief. “So what the hell do we do with it?”

“If it was me,” Luk continued. “I’d save it for a rainy day. You never know, we might have a use for it one day. We could sell it, trade it, whatever, or even blow something up with it.”

“Like Joe Ashford and Ed Walker, you mean,” I smiled.

He nodded. “There you go, so it could come in mighty handy.”

“You’re mad, both of you,” Rachel exclaimed. “If we get searched in Kabul airport and they find that, we’re in deep shit.”

“We’re flying a plane that effectively is owned by the CIA, flying on CIA business. Who’s going to search us?” I pointed out.

“Christ, I don’t believe this,” she countered, her voice ringing with anger. “It could finish us.”

“So what do you want to do, Rachel? Drop it off at the local recycling facility. Tell them we’ve got some unwanted plastique if they’d care to dispose of it safely?”

“We could drop if over the Afghan mountains,” she suggested.

“Great. You’re talking about carpet-bombing Afghanistan.”

She chuckled then. “Hey, maybe that’s not such a bad idea.”

We left the plastique where it was. The bowser finished refueling, and

we got clearance and took off for the return leg to Kabul.

* * *

Lieutenant Dwight Rains popped his head over the parapet and immediately put it down again as a hail of bullets chipped pieces of stone that whizzed around his position.

“Sergeant Mason, what’s the situation back there, are they holding them?”

Vince Mason crawled over to speak to his officer. Mason was a ten-year veteran. He’d been through Iraq, and this was his second tour in Afghanistan. He had respect for Rains. The officer commanding the third platoon, C Company, 2nd of the 45th, US Infantry, meant well enough, but the guy was just too inexperienced for a situation like this one. They’d set out to travel from Kabul via Jalalabad to a town in Pakistan, outside Islamabad. Theirs was a humanitarian mission to collect a cargo of medical supplies with a group of medics and escort them to the stricken area. There’d been an outbreak of disease that was as yet unidentified, but it needed to be treated and contained as a matter of urgency. It should have been easy; collect the men and supplies, women too, there were two female nurses in the medical squad, and take them to the stricken town. They’d reached Jalalabad, loaded up their vehicles and helped the medics to board their APCs. Their transport should have been using the latest Strykers, heavily armored APCs, fast and effective against most IEDs and incoming rifle fire. There’d been a change of plans. The Allied force was under heavy attack, and instead, they’d been issued with M113s. The vehicles had been good, once up on a time. But they were Vietnam era, and fighting against the Vietcong they’d been very effective. But here in Afghanistan, they were only used for local transport. They were, in effect, a light transport truck. Out in the countryside, in the badlands, they were deathtraps.

The Major had had a serious expression on his face, so why did Lieutenant Rains feel the man was sneering at him?

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant, but every single one of our Strykers is being readied to roll out to search and destroy the fuckers who attacked us. It’s like fucking Tet out there, and I guess you know what happened back in Vietnam. I can’t spare a single one, so it’s the M113 or nothing, I’m afraid. They should function perfectly well as ambulances, and it’s not as if you’re going

into combat, is it?"

He left the 'like real soldiers' bit out, but Rains knew what he meant. He also knew there was no choice but to carry out his orders. They'd loaded up and moved out with the medics huddled in the lightly armored hulls, grateful for the comforting feeling of the steel that surrounded them. And the infantrymen, who knew better, tensed their bodies, waiting for the roar of the explosion that would rip into them or the heavy machine gun rounds that would perforate the hull, turning their vehicle into a blazing, corpse-filled coffin. And they muttered the infantryman's prayer, 'please, let it not be me'. The explosion, on the lower approaches to the Khyber Pass, had ripped apart the last vehicle in the column. They'd leapt out of their APCs, herding the medics to the relative safety of a nearby stone building, apparently a long abandoned police checkpoint. They'd left behind the bodies of eight of their comrades. The rest of them, thirty-one infantrymen, two doctors and six nurses were pinned down. Their transports were all smoking wrecks out on the road, destroyed by the withering fire the Afghans poured into them. Worst of all, the radios were in the vehicles, or had been before they were destroyed. So they kept the Taliban at bay, but for how long was anybody's guess. And Mason could see that his officer hadn't a clue about how to handle the situation. They were pinned down from both sides with no means of escape.

"There's no immediate threat, Lieutenant, but they could come at any time, who knows?"

"In that case we'll have to hold them," the officer snapped at his sergeant. "Make sure that everyone is ready for the next attack."

"Oh, they're ready, LT, they're ready all right. And if the ragheads don't attack, what then?"

He waited for a reply. That was the problem. If they just sat and waited, sooner or later the Americans would have to come out. They'd be short of food and water; the Taliban were not fools. And when they came out, they'd be waiting to fall on them like a pack of dogs. "So what do you want us to do, Lieutenant?"

Rains shook his head in misery. "I don't know, Sergeant. I haven't a fucking clue."

A soldier shouted suddenly. "Hey, Sarge, look, up there! A drone."

Every man in earshot looked up. Sure enough, a drone was slowly crossing the sky from south to north. It flew at a height of about five

thousand feet, and low enough to have seen them if the operator was sharp and observant.

"Do you think he saw us?" another man shouted.

Rains and Mason glanced at each other, and both shared the same thought. "I sure as fuck hope so," Rains muttered.

"Amen to that," his sergeant added.

* * *

Eight thousand miles away Master Sergeant Carol Wendelski sat down in front of her screen to start her shift. She was a wannabe fighter pilot, and when they'd turned her down for the flight crew, she'd volunteered for this assignment instead. At least it meant she had free time at home, to pursue her hobbies of writing a history of the gambling industry in Las Vegas, and even occasionally going to Sin City itself to play the tables. She grinned. What was the point of writing the book if you couldn't sample some of what you were writing about at the same time? The operator she was relieving stood up and relinquished the chair. Corporal Vernon Munch gave her a nod of welcome. "It's all yours, Carol. Try not to crash it."

"Yeah, yeah," she acknowledged. She'd heard it all before, the cracks about women drivers. And pilots. "Anything doing?"

"There could be, yeah. A group of our people is under attack up near the Pakistan frontier. I saw the action when the drone flew over. They know about it in Kabul, so I guess they'll take care of it in good time, but they've got their own problems. The Taliban are attacking the major cities. It's a major battle over there."

"Ok, what's the state of our ordnance?"

"We're unarmed, sadly. In their wisdom, they decided to send her out with maximum fuel, which means no missiles. All we can do is to watch the fun. I guess you'll see the coordinates in the nav computer when she flies past on the next leg."

"Ok, I'll keep an eye on it," she told him. Munch left the Ground Control Station, and she settled down to the long, monotonous task of looking down on a barren country eight thousand miles away.

# Chapter Six

*The revival of certain industries, the revival of agriculture, schools and hospitals... there is really no area in which Afghanistan does not require assistance.*

*Hamid Karzai*

The President had pulled out of the meeting at the last moment, citing an emergency meeting with Treasury. General Mann wondered sometimes if they shouldn't link the Treasury Department with FEMA these days. The economy was perpetually in crisis, and it seemed that never a day went by without total panic gripping the nation. He stood up as the Secretary of State walked into the room.

"Ma'am," he inclined his head.

She gave him a frosty glance. "General, I'm getting reports from Afghanistan, and I don't like what I'm hearing."

And good day to you, Ma'am, he thought. So there aren't going to be any niceties today.

"Which reports would they be?"

"First off, your new policy of taking out the leaders. How's it going? So far, I have no indications that there's been any progress. None whatsoever."

"It's early days yet. Give it time, Madame Secretary."

"Time we don't have. You know that the President, indeed the whole country, wants out of that manure pile by the end of next year."

"We're doing our best, Ma'am. We have to tread carefully. Lives are in danger here."

"General, every day you delay, lives are being lost, not merely in danger. You pressed for this action, so I suggest you see it through. No more delays."

He nodded. "I'll get onto it as soon as I get back to the Pentagon, and I'll tell them to accelerate the program."

"You do that. Keep me informed. The President is anxious to be certain that we don't have another total fuckup on our hands."

"Ma'am, the political and military realities don't always come together, we…"

"In the President's case, General, they do. He is also your Commander in Chief. Now, the next piece of bad news coming out of Afghanistan. My

State Department tells me there are stories of drugs being shipped from Afghanistan to other parts of Asia and even to the US, coming in on military flights. What do you know?"

He shrugged. "It's the first I've heard. Drugs are always a problem. You know that. We can't search every returning soldier to pat him down for drugs."

"General, I'm not talking about a couple of joints. This is a wholesale, multi-million dollar operation."

"Christ!" He was shaken. It was the stuff of nightmares, and the kind of story you often heard about the Vietnam War but assumed was a thing of the past. It was the kind of story that could destroy a soldier's career, and he wasn't without enemies in Washington, he knew that. "I know nothing of that, but believe me, I'll get an investigation mounted right away. Do you have any ideas who's behind it?"

"I'm told our friends in Langley know more than they care to admit."

"CIA?"

She nodded. "The CIA. I've no idea how true it is, but I want you to find out. Whoever is responsible, the President will want them hung out to dry for this. No exceptions. There's a cell waiting for them in a Federal prison in some isolated part of the US."

Mann whistled. "It could be someone high level, and someone who could throw a lot of dirt."

"Not from twenty years in solitary confinement."

"So he means business."

"He does, yes. Find the bastard and bring him in, General."

"I don't have full authority over the CIA, Ma'am," he objected.

"You do now, General. The President has issued a special order, giving you full powers to resolve this matter. The documents will go straight to your office."

He nodded. "I'll do my best."

"You'll do better than that, General. You'll find out who is responsible and bring them to justice. The war on drugs is every bit as big as the war on terror. The President sees the distinct possibility of losing both of them."

"We're not losing the war in Afghanistan. We've made some major gains," he objected.

She gave him a tired smile. "Yeah, I've looked at the military bulletins out of Vietnam during the late sixties, and they said exactly the same thing. I

don’t know about the Taliban, but you can win this problem with the drugs shipments. See that you do. The President would even go as far as to find someone who could do the job if you fail.”

He glared at her. “You don’t need to threaten me. I’ll get the job done.”

She smiled a sweet, friendly smile. “I never doubted you, General. Now, the military situation, I’m getting reports of a Taliban build up. Some intelligence analysts predict a big Taliban push against some of our areas, particularly the main cities. What do you know?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s news to me. But I’ll check on it.”

“Let me know what you find, General,” was her parting shot as she got up and left. “And let me know when you locate Mullah Omar.”

He winced. “Yeah, you want me to carry your bags, Ma’am,” he muttered to her retreating back.

* * *

This time we were directed to the military terminal after we landed. The stands were crowded with aircraft, helicopters, transports, light armored APCs, troops doubling across the tarmac, Afghan civilians and military mingling with the chaos. A ground controller waved us to a stand next to a hangar. It was painted khaki like the others, but there were no unit designations, and nothing to indicate its purpose or who it belonged to. It didn’t take much imagination to work it out. We shut down the aircraft and made it secure, then dropped down the ladder. Luk carried his rifle. It was still assembled ready for use, and we all carried pistols in holsters. Somehow, it didn’t seem out of place here. In fact, there were no Europeans or Americans who didn’t carry a weapon of some sort. A tired looking guy came out of the hangar and approached. He held out his hand.

“Hi, I’m Roy Waverley. I’m the manager of this operation. Welcome to Loonytown.”

I grinned and held out my hand. He shook hands with all three of us, and I gave him our names.

“So you work for Joe Ashford?”

He grimaced. “Yeah, that about sums it up. Joe called earlier. You’re to fly a cargo out to Islamabad in the morning, so I guess you guys may as well get some shut-eye in the meantime. I gather you’ve been pretty busy.”

“We’ve run around the place, yeah. So what is this, another dawn departure?”

He looked slightly embarrassed. “Actually, I’d like you to get underway before then. Kind of get into the air before the place starts to wake up. Can you be here for four in the morning and wheels up by five?”

I hesitated. Why did he look so strange? “Sure, we can do that, but I’d like to know the reason why. What’s so important about leaving in the dark?”

He fiddled with some change in his pocket, kicked up some dust and looked around. He finally came to a decision. “Look, Joe sends these cargoes all over the place, and he has a kind of understanding. We earn three times the pay of anyone else doing similar work. In return, we don’t ask any questions. I’m not saying there’s anything illegal going on, of course.”

We all smiled. “Of course not,” Rachel replied. “But we need to have an idea what we’re carrying. It’s our asses after all. Is it drugs, locally grown opium?”

His embarrassment turned to fear. “For Christ’s sake, don’t say stuff like that, not if you want to get out of here in one piece. Just let it go.”

I glanced at Luk and Rachel. They both nodded.

“Ok, Roy, we’ll be here at four.”

“I’ll put the coffee on.” He grinned, trying to ease the tension that we all felt. Running drugs was a passport to hell, and something I’d avoided up till now. The involvement of the CIA should have made me feel easier about it, but it didn’t. It made me feel worse. We were about to leave to make out way to the hotel when all hell broke loose.

The explosions were the first surprise. Roy Waverley was just going back inside the hangar. He turned and shouted to us, “Mortars! Get yourselves under cover!”

We looked across the airfield. A mortar shell had scored a direct hit on a helicopter, and there was just a blazing ruin where seconds before there had been a functional flying machine. I couldn’t see what kind of shelter we could head for that would keep us safe from the incoming mortars. Another shell landed, and this time if just missed a huge C5 Lockheed Galaxy transport aircraft. Already, a pall of smoke was spreading across the airfield, but I could still see the crew huddling behind an aircraft tractor. For some reason, I thought how useless and pointless their action was, when their vast, multi-million dollar aircraft lay at the mercy of the Taliban attack. There was the sound of keening in the air, shouts and warlike screams, and I focused on an area about half a mile away. The perimeter fence had been breached, and a horde of black-turbaned men was pouring through it, firing as they ran. The

Galaxy crew saw them and started to run, but one of them fell, brought down by a burst of fire from an enemy assault rifle. I swiveled around to see how the Americans were responding. It looked patchy, and a group of MPs were hurtling towards the enemy. Their jeep-mounted machine gun was already blazing away, scything through the attackers. But they were too few, and too late. The Taliban attackers were growing numbers, and they started to fan out across the airfield for what looked like an intended head-on attack. It struck me that I was stood immobile, doing nothing while the battle built up in momentum. Already, US private security men, infantry and Afghan National Army sentries were starting to rush out and take up defensive positions. The air was filled with the whine of helicopter engines starting to spool up, and it occurred to me that our precious Twin Otter was in a position of maximum danger. I turned to Rachel and Luk.

"The aircraft, we're getting out of here. Get aboard!"

I was already running and almost vaulted up into the cabin. Rachel followed, and Luk came last, pulling up the ladder. Rachel helped him close the cargo door while I ran forward and began the engine start procedure. The port engine started to spool up, caught and idled. I started the starboard engine and saw Rachel slide into the seat beside me.

"You'd better tell them what we're planning," I shouted at her above the noise of the engines warming up. "We don't want them to think the insurgents have taken control of the aircraft."

She called up the tower.

"Can any of them fly, do you think, these people?"

"They managed it on 911."

She nodded grimly. The tower had replied and gave us emergency clearance. The controller sounded frantic. I guessed he was undecided about evacuating the control tower, a prime target, or staying on duty to help some of the aircraft escape.

"Keep your eyes open, Helene Air. There's a lot of unauthorized aircraft movement out there today."

Rachel and I exchanged smiles, but I thanked him for the warning. Half a dozen helicopters floated into the air about a quarter of a mile in front of us, and one of them was immediately brought down by a missile or rocket. The others screamed away into the distance, out of immediate danger. Luk watched them, wide eyed.

"The cowards, they should stop and fight."

“They may be unarmed, Luk,” I pointed out. “They could be here for maintenance and repairs.”

He nodded. “I guess so.”

Rachel was taxiing out to the main runway, and I was scanning the instruments to assess our ability to take off. Everything looked ok, so I shouted at Luk to strap in, then made a final check. We were as ready as we could be. I turned to Rachel.

“Take her straight out, and try to steer clear of the fighting.”

“No worries, I had the exact same thought,” she said grimly.

She hit the throttles forward, and the aircraft leapt ahead. We were unladen and only needed three hundred yards, maybe less, to get off the ground. Except that the wind was in the wrong direction.

“Max, we need to turn at the end of the runway and take off into wind!” she shouted.

I glanced at the windsock. Sure enough, the wind had changed. We could take off with the wind, but we’d need a much longer take-off roll, and maybe more than could be accommodated, especially, as we’d be under fire for every yard of the way. The aircraft was rushing towards the end of the runway, and I made the decision.

“Make the turn, we have to do this properly, otherwise we’ll be a target for every Taliban shooter within half a mile.”

She started to slow as we neared the downwind end of the runway. A pair of Stryker APCs rushed past us, heading straight for the enemy. No troops were visible as they were all tucked safely inside the hull. But the top mounted M2 .50 caliber machine gun was traversing, seeking its target.

“They’re remote controlled, those things,” Luk pointed out. “The crew are safe inside the vehicle, and they’re controlling the .50 cal from inside there. They’re almost unstoppable, those things.”

Almost, but not quite, and two missiles slammed into the lead Stryker in quick succession. The remarkable armor prevented any damage to the crew, but obviously some of the drive components were damaged when the missiles hit. Smoke was rising from the hull. The door slammed open, and the crew burst out. The other Stryker had stopped, and its own door opened to admit the men from the first damaged vehicle. Then it accelerated away again towards the source of the missileer who had just hit them. Now the gunner inside the armored hull had located the nearest insurgents, and he locked the .50 caliber heavy machine gun onto its target.

The stream of bullets smashed into a group of about fifty Taliban who were racing forwards. It was like a First World War battle; a line of screaming and heavily armed men running into the attack, only to be cut down by machine gun fire. They were decimated by the unremitting gunfire that tore them to pieces. A few survivors ran for cover or flung themselves down, but for most of them their most pressing need was a decent burial. The Stryker bumped over several bodies that lay on the ground as it pressed forward, searching for the next target. The invisible gunner found it; a second group that had smashed through the perimeter fence and were circling around to the south side of the airfield. The .50 opened up, and bodies were tossed into the air and thrown to the ground like wheat before a farmer's thresher. But they didn't have it all their own way. Another missileer, a survivor from the first group of fifty, had hidden in a shallow fold in the ground. Abruptly, he stood up and took aim. The gunner saw him at once, and the .50 caliber barrel began to traverse. They both locked on at the same moment. A stream of heavy shells flew towards the missile shooter, and he disappeared in a ragged mess of shredded flesh, but he'd done his work well. His missile flew away directly towards the Stryker. It struck just forward of the center of the vehicle, low on the port side. Two of the vehicle's eight wheels flew high into the air, but incredibly the APC kept going. But only just, the steering gear had obviously been damaged, and the driver was forced to stop, and the crew began to abandon.

"Max!"

I turned to see what the problem was. Rachel had spotted two fighters on the runway, four hundred yards ahead of us. They were lying prone, firing at the defenders as the private security men, infantry and Afghan regulars tried to regroup and deploy for an assault that would sweep the attackers back the way they'd come.

"Keep going. We don't have a choice."

"But they'll see us in a few seconds, and they'll start shooting up the aircraft."

"Ignore them, just get us off the ground."

I heard her mutter something about, 'at this rate we'll never get off the fucking ground', but I ignored it. We were in an exposed place, stationary at the end of the runway ready to depart. Sooner or later someone was going to start shooting at us, and I calculated our only option was to go straight ahead. Maybe we'd strike lucky and run the two fighters down with our landing

wheels. Or they'd get lucky and shatter the cockpit with salvos of bullets fired from their rifles.

"Luk, is there any way you can get a shot at them?"

"No way, that side window is the wrong angle entirely. I'm sorry, Max."

"Get the rifle ready to fire, and poke the barrel out of the side window. I'll try and get you an angle on them."

"Er, Max, you're in the way."

"Then lean across me," I shouted. "Just do it, Luk. Rachel, I'm taking over the controls."

"It's all yours," she replied, glancing over to make sure I had my hands on the control column. Her expression changed to one of horror.

"Max, you can't take off with Luk draped across you! What the hell are you doing?"

"I can do it, just leave me alone," I snapped with irritation. I looked forward again, working out the angles. Rachel automatically took up the role of co-pilot.

"Ground speed fifty knots, instruments are all good. Ten degrees of flap."

"Roger. How far until we hit the shooters?"

"About a hundred and fifty yards."

"Ok. Flaps up, we'll manage without them."

There was a brief silence. Then, "Flaps going up. About a hundred yards to the shooters."

The air in front of us was like a Fourth of July fireworks display. The dark night was lit by thousands of flashes from small arms fire, punctuated by explosions from heavier ordnance fired by both sides. The thick fog of war already covered the airfield, and smoke and debris swirled everywhere making it difficult to see who was fighting where. Then I kicked on the rudder and swerved the aircraft over to starboard, exposing the shooters to the port window where Luk waited. I didn't need to tell him. He fired, once, twice, and then the whole clip was emptied. But he'd only knocked down one of them, and the other leveled his assault rifle and began to shoot at our cockpit.

Three shots struck the side of the nose of the aircraft, and one hit the sliding window, punching a hole clean through. Rachel screamed. I shouted at Luk.

"For Christ's sake, hit the bastard! I have to turn back onto the runway

in a couple of seconds."

There was no reply. I realized that his body was resting on me, but it was a dead weight, and not that of a man who was active and moving. I didn't have time to speculate. I peered over his lifeless form and looked out of the windshield. We were running out of room. I kicked the rudder again the opposite side, and the aircraft lurched back towards the runway. When the wheels were stable on the tarmac, I corrected our heading and continued on our take-off roll. Two more shots hit the nose, but fortunately none damaged the windshield. I couldn't worry about Luk or the shooter, or anything other than getting airborne.

"Call it, Rachel!"

A fraction of a second's hesitation, then, "Fifty-five knots, V1."

Where was the shooter? I had a brief glimpse of a turbaned man frantically loading a fresh clip into his assault rifle, but then he disappeared, and there was a 'bump' as our wheels went over him.

"Sixty-five knots, rotate!"

I hauled back on the column and felt the Twin Otter straining to get into the sky. I'd not used flaps, so it meant that we'd have a fast, shallow ascent, rather than a slow, steep ascent that would leave us at the mercy of the shooters on the ground. We screamed over the airfield, narrowly scraping over the roof of the control tower, the highest point, and then we were airborne and away. A few rounds followed us as the attackers tried to prevent our leaving, but no more shots hit us, at least, none that we felt or could see.

We climbed to three thousand feet, at which height I felt reasonably safe and circled the airfield. The battle was at its peak. Broken aircraft burned, and they sent plumes of smoke high into the sky. A few hundred yards away a squadron of Apache Longbow helicopters had formed up and was swooping down to attack. The Boeing AH-64Ds were equipped with a chain gun mounted under the chin, and I knew that within seconds their targets would be shredded to little more than matchsticks, if they could identify them. Their opponents weren't fools, and they wasted no time in infiltrating the Allied positions. It was going to be difficult for the brutal helicopters to wreak their terror on the attackers below. In which case, they would need to be eliminated one by one on the ground. It was going to be a slow, bloody and painful process. A pair of Apache Longbows loomed in front of us, and I threw the control column over sharply to keep out of their way. They were concentrating on the ground, not the sky. But a collision would be as deadly

as a Taliban rocket. I turned to speak to Rachel and felt the heavy weight that pressed down on me. Luk!

"Rachel, get Luk off me and see how he is."

"What happened to him?" she cried in alarm.

"He was hit by that shooter on the runway."

She was already pulling him off me. "He looks bad, Max. I don't even know if he's breathing."

I felt my guts churning. I was already working out what to say to his father, Abe Woltz, the man who'd been with my grandfather during the dark days of Vietnam. And now this, no!

"Rachel, do whatever's necessary. You have to keep him alive. I'll find somewhere to land near a hospital."

"I think that would be a good idea, Max. I can feel a faint pulse now, but he needs a medic, and fast. An army medic might be best in this country."

"You can forget Kabul. They've got their hands full, and I doubt they'd even let us land."

"Jalalabad?"

"Sounds good," she replied. "I'd call them up on the radio."

The reply was prompt. "Don't even think about coming here. We've got our hands full sending out reinforcements to Kabul International. The airport is shut down for non-military operations. Try Kandahar."

I punched in the coordinates. It was two hundred miles away.

"I have a casualty, and he won't live that long. I must land at Jalalabad."

"That a negative, Helene Air. You come here, and you'll circle the city until you run out of fuel. Your best bet is Kandahar. Try and keep him alive, good luck, buddy."

"Yeah."

I told Rachel.

"You're not serious? How long will it take us to reach Kandahar?"

"About an hour and a half."

"Fuck it. You'll have to go for it, Max. I'll try and keep him alive."

That was when the next blow hit us, in a message that came over the radio.

"Helene Air, this is Walker. We're ready for the pickup."

I hit the transmit button. "That's a negative, Walker. We have a casualty on board. He needs urgent medical treatment, and we're heading for Kandahar."

The radio went silent for half a minute. Then Walker came back on.

"Hoffman, I don't think you understand whose paying the bills. Your job is to get your ass here fast and pick us up. We've just finished a successful fire mission, and we don't want to wait around for the ragheads to get their shit together and come after us with all guns blazing. We blew those fuckers apart, and they never knew what hit them." He sounded exultant, as if he was on some kind of a drug high. Or perhaps it was the way men behave when they'd just bathed in their enemy's blood. He cleared his throat and continued. "You can forget Kandahar. A group of our people is overdue on the border near Tora Bora. They're a mixed group, a military escort with civilian medics who were making the crossing through the Khyber into Pakistan, some kind of aid mission. We've been tasked to locate them and get them out of trouble. It's not going to wait. They're pinned down under fire, so your guy will have to hang in there."

I felt my anger begin to boil over. "Look, we're taking our guy to Kandahar for treatment. We'll come and…"

That was as far as I got.

"Hear this, Hoffman. I'm about to relay an order for Kandahar airfield to be closed to your aircraft. You try it, and they'll shoot you out of the sky. Now get that fucking plane here and pick us up. I won't tell you again!"

The radio went dead. The conversation was over, and I knew we had no choice. I turned to look at Rachel. She was kneeling over Luk, applying a pressure bandage to stop the blood loss. "You heard?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I heard. The bastard."

"Can he hold out for long enough to make the pick up?"

"He'll have to," she growled, her voice bitter and angry.

"Anything I can do, Rachel?"

"No, you fly the aircraft. I've had elementary battlefield first aid training in the Air Force. I'll do my best for him. I've found Luk's satphone. I'm going to find a signal and call his father, Abe Woltz. How long before we pick up Walker's team?"

I made a rough calculation in my head. "About an hour, maybe a bit more. I'll punch in the coordinates and get a better idea. Walker's people may have a medic that could help Luk."

"Only a battlefield medic, and they won't be any more effective than me. But didn't he say something about going on to pick up civilian medics? That could mean a doctor, which would give Luk a much better chance."

“Ok, I’ll be more cooperative with Walker.”

She laughed. “I wouldn’t bother. The only way he’ll ever help anyone is at gunpoint.”

“I guess so.”

I hit the coordinates for the landing field into the navigational computer. The aircraft swung onto the new heading, and we settled down for the flight across the bleak, harsh grandeur of the Afghan landscape. The flight seemed long, very long. And all the time I thought of Rachel, working to keep Luk alive as he lay on the cockpit floor; his bed a pool of drying blood. At one point she shouted to me over the roar of the engines.

“I got through to Abe Woltz. He knows some people in Peshawar. He said he’d get them standing by to help if they’re needed.”

“Help? What can they do? Are they doctors or medics of some kind?”

“I’ve no idea. He just said they’d be there to help us if necessary.”

I dismissed it from my mind. I couldn’t see any kind of a scenario where Abe Woltz’s contacts could help out. I flew on, willing the time to pass quicker.

* * *

Vince Mason crawled back across the hard packed earth to where Lieutenant Rains was huddled behind a low stone wall. They’d suffered two more casualties, a private and a corporal, and the medics were working on them. He glanced up at the soaring heights of the pass. They should have been over the other side by now. Surely someone would realize they were overdue and send a chopper or a reconnaissance aircraft to check them out. If Rains had held out for Strykers, it would only have cost them an extra day or two, and they wouldn’t be in this position. Neither would they have lost eight dead and two wounded. Let alone be faced with losing the whole platoon. Rains stared at him as he crawled behind the wall.

“What’s the situation, Sergeant?”

“The two casualties are out of danger, LT. Those medics are doing a good job of patching them up, but we can’t stay here much longer. They’ll pick us off one by one until we’re all dead. There’s been no sign of that reconnaissance drone coming back, so we may be on our own.”

“So you’ve worked that one out? In case you hadn’t noticed, Sergeant, we’ve lost our vehicles. How do you suggest we get out of here?”

“We’ve got a tradition in the infantry, as I recall. We walk.”

Rains reddened. “Cut the sarcasm, Sergeant Mason! I’ve considered getting of here on foot. The problem is we’ll be under fire for every step of the way.”

“Not if they can’t see us. We’ve a couple of mortars, the boys brought with them when we bailed out. They’ve got eight smoke bombs amongst the ordnance. If we lay down a pattern of smoke, we should be able to break out and get up into the hills.”

Both men looked up at the distant Khyber Pass. It soared three and a half thousand feet above them, winding through a cut in the mountains. They could clearly see the snaking road that was the only way of getting through from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

“It’s a long way to go on foot and a hard climb,” Rains mused. “I’m not sure we can get our wounded up there. What about the road back to Jalalabad?”

Mason shook his head. “No chance. The Taliban main force is set up across that road, and they’re expecting us to try it. The road through the Khyber Pass has only a few defenders. They’re not expecting us there.”

“Because it’s crazy?”

“I guess, yeah, it’s crazy. It’s also the only way. Either that or wait for help to arrive. And with the Taliban attacking all over, everything is buttoned down, and nothing’s moving. We may be spotted by a passing aircraft or drone, but it’s a maybe.”

Rains sighed. Whatever he decided, it was going to be bad. He nodded at Mason.

“Get them together, Sergeant. We’ll go forward, through the Khyber Pass. And God help us all.”

“I hear you, LT. I kind of assumed you’d go for it. The mortar crews are set up ready. The medics have the casualties strapped to the gurneys, and they’ll carry them while the platoon keeps everyone covered.”

“Good, I guess you’ve got it all worked out. I appreciate it, Sergeant.”

“I’m just trying to live a bit longer, Sir. I guess we all are.”

“Yeah, let’s do it. Start the smoke barrage.”

* * *

In Creech Air Force Base, Master Sergeant Carol Wendelski checked her gauges and discovered they were running low on fuel. She’d have like to have taken another pass over the position of those troops who were under

fire, but it was impossible without landing for more fuel. She expertly guided the Predator back to Kabul; a long, slow flight, during which she had to keep flexing her muscles to stop them going numb. Finally, the video display and nav computer showed her the airfield dead ahead. She called up the tower.

"This is Creech Control Center. I need urgent clearance to land a Predator. The bird's low on fuel."

Less than two seconds later, the reply came in. "Clearance to go straight in, Creech. Be careful when you taxi. They're prepping some new birds that just arrived from the States. Do you want me to alert your ground crew?"

"Nah, I'll call them, thanks Kabul."

"You're welcome."

Carol called up her ground crew on the secure communications system.

"We're all ready for you, Master Sergeant. Just bring her in, nice and easy."

"Roger that." She dropped the tiny aircraft onto the runway and taxied over to where a group of USAF personnel waited. Using her comm. link, she spoke to the Sergeant in charge.

"Sarge, some of our people are in trouble, and I need to get the bird back in the air as fast as possible. Can you fuel her up straight away and get her aloft?"

"Sure thing, we're ready and waiting. Give us a half hour, and we'll have you flying again. Have you located him yet?"

She was already thinking of her next task. She turned her attention back to the voice from eight thousand miles away.

"What?"

"Mullah Omar, did you locate him?"

"Maybe this time," she chuckled. She thanked them and checked the clock. It was time for her lunch, so she went to the canteen and ate a salad. It was vital to watch your weight in her job. There was no physical activity, and the excess of adrenalin that the tense operations generated meant that it would be easy to become obese. She'd avoided it so far, and intended to keep her slim figure. She checked the clock again. She'd give herself twenty minutes and then start preparing flight operations again.

# Chapter Seven

*We told our community that we are not afraid of Bush's and America's threats. We are continuing jihad against America and all the invaders. We reassure Muslims everywhere that we are abiding by the pledge, and that victory is coming.*

*Mullah Mohammad Omar*

Mullah Omar came out of his trance and gazed at Abdul Qadir. "Commander, perhaps you would tell us what happened. You had sufficient warning, yet still you managed to lose at least ten of your men, including six of your local commanders. You were lucky to escape with your life."

Qadir stared at him. "Mullah Omar, my men fought like lions, but the Americans attacked us from behind. They seemed to come out of nowhere. I've no doubt we were betrayed."

"Perhaps you should have taken that into account when you made your preparations, Commander," Mullah Baradar said quietly. "Your failure has cost our movement dear."

"My failure?" Qadir swiveled to fix the man with a hard gaze. "The area the Americans came from was under your control, Mullah. Are you suggesting that I should take the time to watch over your responsibilities as well as mine?"

Baradar's expression darkened, and he was about to spit and angry reply, but Omar's voice cut through them like a scalpel, sharp and precise.

"This is not a time to argue about whose failure allowed these Americans to kill our commanders. I have already decided how we will go forward."

They leaned towards him, waiting to hear their fate.

"One of our units has pinned down a small American formation, a group of infantry escorting doctors and nurses on a relief mission to a town in Pakistan stricken with plague. They were attempting the journey on the road through the Khyber Pass. It is unfortunate for them that they departed just as our major attacks had begun. The road through the pass is undefended as a consequence, and we were able to make our attack without hindrance from the normal road and air patrols. However, our forces are not strong enough to finish them off. I want you to take your men and join the attack, Commander Qadir. The next phase of our operation is about to begin, a series of suicide attacks on targets in the cities of Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar. I want that American group wiped out to add to our victories. I believe it will be enough

to persuade the Americans that there is no advantage to them in staying here."

Mullah Baradar bared his teeth in a ferocious smile. "This truly will be a blow from which the Americans will never recover. An entire contingent of their people wiped out, against a backdrop of our attacks and suicide bombers, how can they possibly resist? I have read of the Tet offensive during their Vietnam War, when the American's enemies came out in a similar series of coordinated attacks. It was a glorious time for the Vietnamese people, and a dark time for the Americans."

Omar nodded. "Quite so. Now you understand how important this is. We have to encourage our forces to press their attacks hard and our suicide bombers to make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause. This could be the beginning of the end for the Americans, and we will be able to cleanse our country of the infidels, and once more have control of our destinies."

"Allah be praised!" Baradar and Qadir both exclaimed with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Qadir was concerned that his leaders could be so blind. Did they not know that Tet was a major defeat for the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars who took part in the battle? The military losses were so terrible that the attacks had to be called off early. Yes, politically it had helped the Vietcong; there was no doubt. But militarily, whole units were obliterated. What was more, his men were well aware of that famous military engagement. If they found that their leaders planned on a repeat, how much enthusiasm could he expect from his troops, knowing they were going to their deaths?

There was another problem. Could there be any honor in making deliberate attacks on medical personnel, doctors and nurses? Some said that these people were a legitimate target for the Taliban. But he didn't agree, and neither did many others. It was all very well for Mullah Baradar to show enthusiasm, but he wouldn't be in the front line, leading men to their deaths and slaughtering unarmed doctors and nurses. Perhaps there was no option. He could understand that. But it was not a time for joyous celebration.

"Commander Qadir, you do not seem to be enthusiastic, is something wrong?"

He looked at Mullah Omar, seeing the cold, dark depths of the single eye staring at him. "Nothing at all, Mullah. I was merely contemplating my good fortune in being on the front line of this glorious battle."

“I am pleased you feel so. Tell me, Commander, you have sons. Have you considered putting them forward for martyrdom?”

Qadir shivered inwardly. But outwardly he was calm, as he’d trained himself to be when facing the maximum danger.

“I have not, Mullah. They are training to be fighters and leaders, like their father.”

“Good, good. Do you have any daughters?”

He thanked God he did not. “I have no daughters, no.”

“So be it. I wish you success in your venture.”

“Thank you, Mullah.” But for a long time he struggled to keep the image of his sons wearing the canvas suicide belts out of his mind.

* * *

When I was on final approach for the landing ground with Ed Walker, I called him up.

“This is Helene Air, ETA in about ten minutes, Mr. Walker. Are you ready to leave?”

“Just get your ass down here, Hoffman. There’s a group of Americans waiting for us to haul their asses out of the fire, so hurry it up. Out.”

He sounded drunk, and I couldn’t work it out. Surely they weren’t drinking booze out in the field. But it wasn’t the normal voice of a drunk. No, it was different. I couldn’t be sure why.

“We’ll be landing in a few minutes, is Luk ok?”

“Make it as gentle as possible, Max. He’s pretty weak.”

“Roger. Stand by.”

They saw me coming in and popped a smoke flare. The wind was blowing towards us, perfect for a landing. It was very light, and I estimated ten knots. I lined up the nose and began to descend through the last few hundred feet. It was an easy landing, and yet the hardest I’d ever made. It had to be gentle, so light, that the wounded man lying a few feet beside me didn’t even feel the jolt as our wheels touched down. I thought I’d made it, but the first jolt was when the port wheel went into a pothole that was outside of my control. I braked before I overshot the field and ran into a heap of rocks, spun the aircraft around and taxied back. I turned through one hundred and eighty degrees and put the brakes on; we were ready to leave. I got up to attend to the cargo door, but Walker’s men were already opening it. He was first up, charging through the fuselage and into the cockpit, almost dragging me

behind him.

"Fuck!" he shouted. Exulted would be more accurate. "Jesus H Christ, we rammed it down their fucking throats. We must have killed twenty of them, Hoffman, and leaders, all of them. Fuck!"

So that was the way it was. It wasn't war. It was blood lust. He rammed a cigar into his mouth and dug into his pocket for a lighter. When his hand came out, something dropped onto the floor. He bent down and picked it up. It looked to me like a bloody rag, and he saw the direction of my gaze.

"It's a souvenir, Hoffman. Something to show the boys when I get back home."

"What is it?"

"What is it? It's a scalp, of course. Shit, you should see those bodies when we'd finished with them. Like a fucking butcher's shop."

My mind went numb for a few moments, but I managed to recover a degree of calm.

"We're going straight out, Mr. Walker, would you make sure your men know."

His smile was manic, like a schizophrenic who hadn't taken his medication. The eyes were glazed, and the skin had that bone-white quality, like stained porcelain.

"Too violent for you, eh? I didn't peg you for a squeamish type. I'll warn the men. I wouldn't want to put you off your food."

He left the cabin with a braying laugh. He hadn't even noticed Rachel, still trying to keep Luk alive on the cockpit floor. They were lying in a heap of bloodied blankets.

"As soon as we're set on course, I'll put her on autopilot. I'm going aft to see if any of Walker's men have experience with battlefield injuries."

She smiled, a tired, frightened smile. Frightened for the man she was trying to save. "It won't put you off your dinner if they're playing with their trophies?"

"It's not the trophies that puts me off, Rachel. It's the kind of men that would take them."

I pushed the throttles all the way forward and let off the brakes. We picked up speed and bumped our way back along the field. Every time we hit a pothole or small mound the aircraft jarred, and Luk groaned. Finally, I reached take-off speed, and I pulled back. We lifted off; immediately the bumping stopped, and Luk went quiet. I throttled back when we'd gained

some height, turning to Rachel now that the engine noise was quieter.

"That sounded bad, I'm sorry. I couldn't do anything about the bumping. How is he?"

She didn't reply at first. When she did speak, I could hear the desperation in her voice.

"The take-off opened his wound, Max. He's bleeding again. I'm afraid he's dying."

"Keep him going, Rachel. His father was vital to my grandfather's survival in Indochina. We can't let him die."

The aircraft settled on course for the coordinates Walker had given me, the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. I locked in the autopilot and went back to speak to Walker. He was dozing on a canvas jump seat and looked up at me as I approached. The manic expression had largely faded, and he looked tired, perhaps even depressed.

"What's up, Hoffman. Don't tell me you have a problem."

"One of our people, Luk, he was shot when took off from Kabul. He's pretty bad. Are any of your men experience with battlefield injuries?"

He shook his head. "No, not that I'm aware of. Their job's to kill the enemy, that's all. I'm sorry I can't help you. These people we're hoping to bring back, they're medics. They should be able to help."

"Right. What kind of a landing field are we talking about here? Is it flat, or a proper airfield, perhaps?"

"We haven't got an airfield. This is a scratch operation, so we just have to make do."

I guess he knew what effect his words would have on me. I gaped at him, and he smiled back.

"How do you expect me to land an aircraft like this without an airfield?"

He shrugged. "You'll find a way, Hoffman. They do it all the time in these backwoods countries. Just find a nice tarmac road and put her down."

"Is there a tarmac road where we're going?"

"It's possible, yes. But one way or the other, you get her down on the ground."

"How many people are down there?"

About forty is my best guess."

I couldn't help it, but I could feel my mouth gape open again. "You know that the capacity of this aircraft is twenty passengers maximum? How the hell do you expect to get them all out?"

“Who said anything about getting them out? We’re going in to nail the suckers who’ve got them surrounded. We’re going to kick ass, Hoffman.” He stared at me, and I could see that his adrenalin was running high again. I wondered what he was on. “And don’t forget, there’re medics down there, so if you want to save your guy…”

He paused and stared at me. “GET US THE FUCK DOWN THERE! YOU HEAR!”

I remember saying coldly, “I’ll get you down, don’t worry,” before I returned to the cockpit. Rachel was holding Luk gently, talking to him softly. He’d regained consciousness, and he looked up at me as I crouched down.

“How are you feeling?”

I was trying to put a brave face on it. He looked ghastly, chalk-white, and his skin stretched tight over the bones as he fought to control his agony.

“I’ve felt better,” he whispered. He tried to grin, failed, and then lapsed into unconsciousness again.

“Rachel, I need his satphone.”

“What for, who are you planning to call?”

“Abe Woltz. He said to call if we needed anything. I figure that time is now.”

“What do we need?”

“A miracle.”

I punched in the fast dial, and within seconds the satphone had connected direct to a satellite in low earth orbit, then down to Abe Woltz. It was like talking to a guy across town. The line was that clear.

“Woltz.”

“It’s Max. You said to call if we had problems. I believe that time has come.”

I outlined our difficulties. Luk badly injured; and a group of mercenaries in the cargo space led by a crazed career CIA officer who seemed to have learned his ideas from a Boy’s Own comic book.

“I don’t know if you can help, Abe, but we need something. If we’re lucky enough to make the landing, Luk is seriously wounded. Believe me, it’s touch and go. Yet all Walker wants is to start a new war with a large group of insurgents down there. We need to get Luk away from here and take him to a hospital, but I don’t know how to get away from Walker before he kills us all.”

He was silent for a few moments. Then he fired off a series of questions.

He wanted coordinates, strengths of friend and foe as much as I knew, armaments, fuel situation, radio frequencies and a load more. It was like being interrogated by an expert, which I assumed was indeed the case. Then something occurred to me. “Abe, have you ever encountered the CIA before, I mean, have you ever had problems with them?”

“Yes.”

“So you know what kind of situation we’re in here. I tell you, the guy’s crazy.”

“I doubt he’s that crazy, Max. People like him. They play the odds. One thing you can be sure of, when the dead bodies have all stacked up, the Ed Walkers of this world always seem to walk away.”

I could believe that. “Can you help at all, Abe?”

“Sure, I’ll see what I can put together. Call me back and tell me how things are going.”

I ended the call and went to check our heading. I estimated we had just over half an hour to run. I left the aircraft on autopilot and went back to Luk. He was still unconscious. I looked at Rachel.

“Any change?”

She shook her head. “He’s no different, but I’d guess he won’t last much longer. We have to pray that we can get those medics to help him.”

“Rachel, it’s not that simple,” I reminded her gently. “They’re pinned down under enemy fire, and so far there’s no sign of a place to land.”

“You’ll manage it, Max. I know you will.”

“Thanks for your faith in me, but there’s a lot depending on chance. Too much.”

“You’ll get us down, if anyone can, I know you will.”

I nodded and went back to the pilot’s seat. We had a few hours of daylight left, which was the only factor we had on our side. The mountains of the Pakistan border appeared in the distance, and I went to call Abe.

“We’re not far away now, I’d estimate fifteen minutes or so.”

“Right. I’ve been pretty busy, and with any luck I’ll have someone come out there to help you. As far as I can gather, those coordinates put you at the foot of the Khyber Pass.”

“That’s my assessment too,” I agreed.

“Ok, the problem is that all hell is breaking loose in Afghanistan. It’s like the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War. What it means is that the military has its hands full fighting off the insurgents. My people tell me there

are some heavy pitched battles being fought right now. There's no help available for these people trapped at the bottom of the Khyber until they've contained the situation, and that could be several days. I guess that's why they sent that maniac Walker to take care of it."

"That all makes sense, Abe, but what you can do?"

"Right. You know anything about Peshawar?"

"No, Yes, it's a city in Pakistan, close to the border."

"Yeah, that's true, but it's a center for weaponry and mercenaries, has been for centuries. I've been in touch with my contacts there. There's nothing's moving inside Afghanistan, so you need help from outside the country. I'm sending in the Devil's Guard."

I felt a shiver down my spine as I remembered the stories and legends I'd been brought up with. My immediate thought was that the ghost of my grandfather was about to materialize. "Mercenaries, Abe?"

"They're tough fighters, every single man," he corrected me. "They've seen their share of the world's trouble spots, I can assure you. They've been in and out of more firefights than you could imagine. They're heading up to the Pass right now from Peshawar, and they'll move down to meet up with you as fast as they can. Do you think you can land that plane?"

I heard the anxiety in his voice. His son was dying a few feet back from the cockpit, and we had no designated landing field even if we could link up with the besieged medics. But that was my job. "I'll land the aircraft, Abe. That's a promise."

I signed off and started looking through the charts to see if there was anything that resembled a flat strip close to where we were headed.

* * *

Master Sergeant Carol Wendelski approached her console to start the next shift. As usual, Vernon Munch ran his eyes over her figure and made a macho remark, but this time it was different.

"There ain't much going on over there. The stupid bastard's screwed up the electronics package on the bird. When they went to pick up a spare board from the QM, they found they'd forgotten to order them in. Our baby is sat in the hangar doing nothing, just waiting for the next supply flight to come from Stateside."

"Christ, Vernon, there're people down there in trouble. The whole place is going up like a torch, and we're blind."

Munch shrugged. “There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“What about a spare bird, don’t they have anything else that can fly?”

He sniggered. “Oh yeah, they can put a Reaper up in the air, but I’m not cleared on that particular drone, so I had to say no.”

A thrill went through her as she thought about the fearsome Reaper. Operators here at Creech Air Force Base could hunt for targets using a number of advanced sensors, including a thermal camera. But best of all was the extensive weaponry the drone carried, Hellfire II air-to-ground missiles, the Sidewinders and the latest the GBU-38. So when those fuckers tried to mess with her people, she could take direct action and blast their asses. She smiled at Corporal Munch. “I’ll get back to them and tell them.  I’m cleared for the Reaper.”

* * *

“What the fuck’s going on, Roy?”

The cargo operations manager looked up from the manifest he’d been examining as Joe Ashford stormed into his office. He sighed. When Joe was in that kind of a mood, everyone got his ass kicked, and the atmosphere in the CIA’s Kabul International cargo hangar would be soured for days.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got a cargo waiting for shipment. Yet both the aircraft and my people are somewhere else. I want them back here, now!”

“But Joe, we had orders from ISAF, routed through Langley, to bail out those medics who were ambushed near the Khyber Pass. I passed on the orders to Ed Walker. I had no choice.”

“Fuck Langley and fuck ISAF. How am I supposed to get the cargo out if my transport disappears on some wild rescue mission? There must be someone else can do it.”

“There’s no one else, Joe. You know the whole country is going up in flames. They were caught on the back foot. Until they’ve straightened this out, they don’t have any spare people.”

Ashford sighed heavily. “What’s their current status?”

“They’re still on the way. Once they get there, they’ve got to join up with the medics and fight their way out. There isn’t room in the aircraft for all of them, so I guess they’ll take the civilians on to their destination in Pakistan, and then return for Ed Walker and his people.”

“No!” Ashford’s huge fist crashed down on the desk. “I want them back

here. I've got customers waiting for product, and if they don't get it, they'll be mighty unhappy. As soon as they've pulled them out of the ambush, they're to get back in that plane and get straight back here to Kabul. You hear?"

"How will the civilian medics get out of there without support?"

"I don't give a shit, Roy. They can walk out on their own for all I care," he laughed. "That should do it. Just get my plane back here on the ground and get it loaded."

"And if Langley call up wanting to know what's going on?"

"Tell 'em the plane's got engine trouble or something like that. Maybe the pilot's got the flu. I don't care. I need that plane!"

"Why is it so important? We've got regular transport aircraft we can use."

"Because it's off the books. I organized it so that it doesn't appear on any paperwork. You don't need to know any more."

"Ok, Joe, I'll tell them."

"Yeah, be sure you do."

Ashford stormed out of the office. Once outside, he tried to assemble his thoughts. He needed a way to get through his current problems. Running drug cargos made money, lots of money, bucket loads of money, but it had to go somewhere. He'd made massive investments in real estate back in the States, millions of dollars to buy prime land in Florida for leisure development. It still hadn't been enough, so he'd borrowed millions more. It was easy enough to pay back, and just a matter of time before a few more drug shipments raked in the money, and his new golf course and leisure park was completed. The sale of the condos alone would bring in twice as much as he'd laid out. At least, that was the plan. Then came the property crash. Half the apartments weren't finished, and most of the ones that were stood empty, their values falling like water down a drain. And if that wasn't bad enough, his creditors wanted their money back. The debt currently stood at over two hundred million dollars and rising, and the interest calculated at loan shark rates. They could do that, these people. After all, who was going to argue with them? It was only after borrowing the money that he'd discovered who the lender was; one of the Mexican drug cartels using him as a conduit to launder their money. That would have been funny, his development to put his drug money to use, part funded my laundered drug money. Yeah, it would have been funny if it hadn't been for the threats; either make the overdue loan payments

that were increasing at a crazy rate every day, or wait for the shot in the back of the head. He remembered the spic that had flown out to Afghanistan to speak to him.

"It's just business, Mr. Ashford. The Jefe insists on his money. You do understand that he can't have people failing to pay?" The guy had laughed. "That's a bad way to do business, no? If people don't pay their bills, the Jefe has a simple solution, a permanent solution."

"If he kills me, he won't get any of his money back," Ashford had snarled.

But the man smiled even wider. "That is true, but you see, it encourages the others to make their payments. It's simple mathematics, a long-term business strategy. You must see that."

"Yeah, maybe. Where did you learn business?"

"Princeton, Senor. A fine American university."

He had to have that fucking aircraft. His superiors were starting to look at his operations with a critical eye. The only way he had to fulfill his part of the deal was to use that plane so that no one was any the wiser. Otherwise he was dead.

* * *

I dropped down to five hundred feet and searched for a flat strip for a landing. On the ground I could see the extent of the ambush. It was some kind of a ruined village, probably abandoned. The American troops were sheltering behind the broken stone walls, while two hundred yards in front of them a large force of Taliban had them pinned down. As I looked down, several of the turbaned heads looked up, and I saw their rifles point towards the aircraft. Puffs of smoke showed where they tried shooting at the Twin Otter, but none of their shots struck the aircraft. Between the village and the Taliban position, the wreckage of the American vehicles lay, still smoking. There was only one possible landing strip, the road. I couldn't leave the controls to alert the passengers in the back, so I forgot about them and circled while I assessed the size of the road. It was going to be close, too close, but I didn't have a whole lot of choices. I banked slightly and went round again to put the aircraft on final approach.

"Rachel, we're about to land, how is Luk?"

"The same."

She sounded tired, dulled, resigned, perhaps, to the inevitable. To losing

the man she'd nursed for so many hours.

"We're going to make it, hang in there. Tell Luk we'll have medical help, just a few minutes more."

"He's unconscious."

I didn't reply. There was nothing to add. I banked again and completed the turn, ahead of me the long, ribbon of road. It wasn't long enough, not wide enough, but I was determined that we'd get down. I brushed over a low mound, and the startled face of a Taliban scout, or sniper, glanced up at me. Then I was leveling out to put down on the road. The ground came up to meet us, and the wheels touched. I flared slightly, then pushed the column forward and slammed her down hard. It was the only way. There just wasn't enough road to make a normal landing. Immediately, I felt all three wheels on the ground, and I slammed on the brakes and chopped the throttles. We were bouncing and swerving towards a low stone wall, some kind of a boundary marker, and I applied maximum brakes. The aircraft slowed. It was a near thing as the wall rushed towards us, but ten feet before the port wing tip was about to ram into it, we stopped. There were a pair of grain stores just off the road, or I assumed that's what they were. I taxied off the road and across the ground, parked the aircraft in the space between them and cut the engines. It was the best I could do, and at least the plane was partially hidden from direct view of the road. The door to the rear opened, and Ed Walker barged into the cockpit.

"That was a bumpy landing, couldn't you have warned us?"

I ignored him and turned to Rachel. "How's Luk?"

"Same."

I looked out of the cockpit window. The stone buildings shielded us from the besiegers. It meant that we could get Luk out and across to the medics that were sheltering in the village. I turned to Walker.

"We need someone to help carry Luk out to the medics. Can you ask a couple of your men to lend a hand?"

He sneered at me. "Fuck that, Hoffman, we're not here to offer first aid. As soon as we climb out of this aircraft, we're going to rip through those ragheads and send them back to Tora Bora. Can't you get one of the docs to come here?"

"Mr. Walker, I'm no soldier, but I would have thought the aircraft will be a target for every rocket and mortar crew within five miles."

"Yeah, you could be right. Except that we have to have this plane."

“In that case, you’d better get out there and deal with them. Now if you’ll excuse me, Rachel and I need to carry Luk across to the medics.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. Tell ‘em we’ll be moving in right away to clear out those insurgents. So they can stay out of our way.” He left the cockpit, I heard him shout, “Let’s go get those motherfuckers. I need a few more scalps.”

We carried Luk as gently as we could out of the Twin Otter and managed to get him on the ground. They were watching from the village, and a doctor and two soldiers ran over to us with a gurney. The doc put out his hand, “I’m Doctor Yves St Roulemont, Medecin Sans Frontieres. My nurses are back there, setting up a makeshift treatment room. We saw you unloading a casualty and came out to help.”

We shook hands. “Max Hoffman, this is Rachel Beckett. The guy on the ground is Luk Woltz, gunshot wound, and he’s lost a lot of blood.”

The doctor nodded and bent down to check out Luk. After a few minutes, he shouted to the two soldiers with the gurney.

“We need to get this man under cover right away. He needs urgent attention.”

They lifted him onto the canvas gurney, and we each took a corner. The doctor walked alongside Luk and continued the diagnosis. When we reached the village, they led us to a semi-ruined house. Inside, the roof was still partially intact, and a group of four nurses waited for us. Doctor Roulemont began issuing orders, and Luk disappeared behind a scrum of nurses and doctors. From behind me a man cleared his throat.

“I’m Lieutenant Rains.”

I looked around. An American officer, and he appeared haggard and frightened. I made the introductions and then asked him how things were.

“As bad as you can imagine. We lost our vehicles and means of communication. We’ve been completely cut off and unable to escape. The Taliban have a heavy blocking force in place. What happened to those men who just got off your plane?”

“They’ve gone to tangle with the Taliban. Their leader said he would clear them out.”

He looked dumbfounded. “With just twelve men? Their leader must be insane. There are around fifty insurgents just waiting out there for us to try something like that.”

I didn’t think it would help to tell him that he was perfectly correct.

Walker was without doubt an insane, blood-crazed psychopath.

"I don't know, but maybe they've got a plan."

He shook his head. "That'll be some plan. Tell me, can you take off from that road?"

"That's the idea, yes. My first priority is to get Luk out of danger. If Walker's men manage to clear the ambush, I'll try and organize a take-off. But it'll be dangerous if they're still in the area. As soon as we start the engines, they'll try to hit us with everything they've got. The landing surprised them, a take-off won't."

"What's the capacity of your aircraft?" the officer asked. "It doesn't look very big."

When I told him, his face fell. "That won't even take half of us out of here. How do they plan to handle evacuating the rest of us?"

"You'd better ask Ed Walker when he gets back," I replied grimly. "This is his operation."

He looked bewildered. When he saw us land, he would have thought that a rescue was about to happen; instead of the arrival of a gung ho psychopath and a plane that was too small to carry them out.

We walked around and looked at Rains' position. He had a couple of dozen troops and the civilian medics. It was a pity that Walker hadn't waited. If he'd added these men to his own, it would have been a useful force. I shook hands with a tough looking sergeant, Vince Mason. He'd already made the calculations.

"You won't get us all out on that," he glanced across at the Twin Otter.

"No, I'm sorry."

"Do the people in Kabul have some plan for getting us out?"

"I don't know. Look, I'm sorry, Sergeant, but it's Ed Walker's show. He's the guy who's leading the attack against those Taliban."

"Is he regular army? Special Forces?"

"He's CIA, with mercenaries."

He grimaced. "I hope he knows his business."

I nodded. "Me too. If they're still here, the Taliban, they'll hear the moment I start engines and have plenty of warning to start shooting at us."

"I reckon so, yeah. Maybe they'll send an armored column to get us out. We could do with some Strykers here."

"I doubt you'll get them. The whole country is ablaze, and they've got their back to the wall. It'll be several days before they push back the enemy."

“Right, in that case, we won’t make preparations to leave anytime soon.”

I walked around, looking at their positions. It wasn’t good, and if Walker failed to clear the enemy, all they had to do was wait for reinforcements and sweep over us. I had to make a decision if that happened, whether to try for the plane or leave on foot. A fusillade of shots rang out a few hundred yards away, obviously Walker engaging the enemy. Rains was shouting orders at his men to be alert. He was crouched behind a low wall, but I didn’t think they needed any telling. They were all hiding behind cover, and their rifles leveled ready for use. I’d seen enough, so I walked back to the building where they were treating Luk. Rachel came out to meet me.

“They think he’ll survive, and they’re giving him massive blood transfusions. Thank God they were able to do that.”

“That’s good. Listen, I we need to make an alternative plan to get out of here.”

“So you think the aircraft won’t get out?”

“I’m not sure, but help won’t be coming anytime soon. It’s all up to us.”

In fact, we weren’t going anywhere. The light started to fade, and we had little choice but to settle in for the night. We could still hear desultory fire coming from the nearby hills. We had no idea how the firefight was going, until just after nightfall, Ed Walker stumbled into the village with two of his men. One of them was wounded in the upper arm, and all three of them looked all in. I was outside the stone hut where Luk was being treated, talking to Rachel. He loomed up out of the darkness, muttering curses.

“Motherfuckers, they were lying in wait for us. Jesus Christ, we were lucky to get away!”

“Where are the rest of your men?” I asked him.

“The others? Fuck knows. Dead, I guess. One thing’s for sure, they ain’t coming back. If they’re prisoners of the Taliban, they’ll wish they were dead before long.”

I was aghast. “So you abandoned them?”

“Too right, useless bastards. They walked slap bang into an ambush, and they were shot to pieces.”

“I thought you were leading them, so doesn’t that make you responsible?”

I shouldn’t have said it, but it was too late. He glared at me, and I could see the fear in his face.

“Not for fools like that, no. We all have to take out own chances. You’d better get the aircraft ready, we’re leaving.”

I felt my anger glowing red hot. This callous fool was planning on abandoning these people. “The hell we are. I’m waiting until Luc has been treated, and we have a proper evacuation plan for the rest of them.”

“I call the shots, Hoffman. If I say we’re leaving, we’re leaving.”

“You’re wrong. I call the shots around here.”

We all whirled. Lieutenant Rains had appeared silently from behind the building. He was with Sergeant Mason and two of his infantrymen who both carried M-16s.

“Who the fuck are you?” Walker snapped.

“Lieutenant Rains, US Infantry. And I decide when and if we leave.”

“That’s my aircraft, Rains, and this is a CIA operation, so you’d better not interfere.”

They squared off against each other, Walker’s men with stubby M4A1 carbines, Rains’ men with their assault rifles, and us waiting to the side, forgotten. Rachel looked at me and raised her eyebrows. It was a pissing contest, which was for sure, one between heavily armed men, and outside the hut where Luk lay desperately ill, fighting for his life. I felt it was time to do something positive before these macho idiots started shooting.

“You’re both wrong,” I interjected, moving to stand close to them, but not in their line of fire. They stared at me. I’d broken the spell, but now I needed to concoct another.

“As pilot in command of the Twin Otter, technically, that leaves me in command of the decision as to when and if it leaves. And that decision will be taken by me, and not by either of you.”

“Bullshit!” Walker snarled. But before he could say anymore, Rains cut in.

“That sounds fair to me. You’ve got to fly it, and so you call the shots.”

It struck me that he was relieved to have someone to take over the responsibility of command for him. Some officer, and even his sergeant looked surprised.

“That’s crap!” Walker continued.

“Mr. Hoffman, any trouble with these people, and I’ll have them restrained. What do you want us to do?”

“Sir, is this the correct…?” his sergeant murmured.

“This is the way we’ll handle it, Sergeant Mason. Now, Mr. Hoffman,

what's the plan?"

* * *

Master Sergeant Wendelski flexed her fingers and put them on the control stick for the MQ-9 Reaper attack drone. She felt excited. At last she would get the chance to kick some ass. Except that it was nightfall in Afghanistan. She'd called up her commander and offer to fly a night operation.

"Sir, those birds are equipped with thermal imaging. There's plenty to see even at night."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right. Isn't this your first time out with one of these birds?"

"Well, yes, but I've had dozens of hours on the simulator."

"That's what I thought. Go home and get some sleep, Master Sergeant. Report here in ten hours time, and get yourself ready for daylight operations. You know that you'll need clearance before you can launch any of those missiles, at least until you've got some flying hours under your belt."

"Yes, Sir, but there are people out there that…"

"Go home, Master Sergeant. That's an order."

"Yes, Sir."

She hung up the phone. Maybe he was right, and at least in daylight she'd be able to see everything. And with any luck, she'd be able to file an after mission report with a list of her kills. Now that was really something!"

# Chapter Eight

*The Taliban are not demoralized. Despair is a sin. The Taliban are united. We are giving the US and the coalition forces a tough time. We are hunting them down like pigs.*

*Mullah Omar*

Marine General Daniel Westwood, the ISAF commander for Afghanistan, emerged from his bathroom, his face still dripping with cold water while he dried it with a hand towel. Both officers noticed the tiredness in his eyes, but it didn't show anywhere else in his face. All three officers were wearing

Universal Camouflage Pattern fatigues, but there was no doubt about who was in charge. General Westwood, shorter than the other two men and slight in build, crackled with a ferocious energy that seemed to constantly seek for an escape, like high pressure in a steam engine. Westwood was an old school marine, hard as hickory, and he expected his men to display the same qualities of energy and toughness. They'd been up for an hour, and it was still only three in the morning. He glanced at Lieutenant Colonel Brooks, his intelligence officer.

"How are we looking Charlie, are we holding them?"

"We are, General, but we're stretched to the limit. We need a few more days before the emergency is over, and we can start taking the offensive again."

"General, my men are ready to go now," Lieutenant Colonel Vance Everard protested. "These tribesmen will just fade away into the mountains if we don't hit them hard. They did the same when the Russians were here."

"I'm with you there, Vance, but we don't have the men to protect our people, look after our Afghan allies, and go after the bad guys. Not yet, anyway. Give it a few more days."

Everard grimaced. "It'll be too late, as usual. They'll get clean away."

Westwood glanced at him and smiled. "Maybe, but if we go off half cocked, we could lose a lot of the advantages we've won so far. Our allies need help, Vance, and they need our protection. If we charge out with our battle flags fluttering in the breeze, and the Taliban come in behind us and murder the people we left behind, how much good will that do us?"

Everard said nothing. General Westwood seemed satisfied that he'd made his point and shifted his gaze to his intelligence officer.

"Charlie, what about those infantrymen who were escorting the French medics?"

"Medecin Sans Frontieres," Brooks reminded him. "We lost touch with them. One of our drones from Creech had a sighting yesterday, and we're hoping to regain contact today. They had some technical trouble with a Predator, but they're putting up a Reaper instead."

Westwood grunted. "That should be helpful if they're in any kind of trouble."

"The first drone sighting showed their vehicles destroyed, and the group is sheltering in a village near the border."

"Are they in trouble?"

Brooks nodded. “Big trouble, a strong force of Taliban was nearby. Maybe it had them pinned down, we’re not sure. Until this emergency is over, there’s not a lot we can do. The morning overflight should tell us more.”

“Ok, now listen. I know that the Rules of Engagement are for those Reaper drivers at Creech. But they are for normal operating conditions. It’s anything but normal at present, so you can advise whoever is flying that bird that they are to make a unilateral decision on any fire missions. Will you pass that on to Creech?”

“Is that wise, General?” Brooks looked anxious. “We’ve had more than our share of friendly fire problems.”

“Wise or not, those are my orders. If that party is in trouble, it’s the least we can do to have someone able to help them without filling in a truckload of forms in triplicate. Is there anything else?”

Both colonels shook their heads.

“Good. Colonel Everard, be ready to move as soon as we’re over the immediate danger. Then you’re cleared to go and find the enemy. Search them out and destroy them wherever you find them. Until then, you wait.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Unless, of course, you uncover our number one target. If that happens, all bets are off.”

Everard nodded. Yeah, that was the big question, the one they all wanted answered. “Where is Mullah Omar?”

* * *

It was a bad night. The enemy constantly fired into the village. Their aim was wild, but it was clear their object was to keep them from getting any sleep. The tactic succeeded, and they were all bleary-eyed and tired. While it was still dark, I enlisted the help of six of Rains’ infantrymen to help unload the aircraft. We had two cases of C4 explosive on board still, and the Twin Otter was a sitting target. If it was hit, I didn’t want to add to the damage by leaving plastic explosive on board. We carried the cases back to the village, together with the satphone and the sniper rifle. I checked my watch. It was four in the morning. To my astonishment, Luk appeared. He was using a stick to support himself.

“What the hell are you doing, Luk? You’re supposed to be at death’s door.”

“They packed me full of fresh blood and stitched up the wounds. Apparently, it wasn’t as bad as they thought. You brought my rifle, I see. That could be useful.”

The doctor appeared in the doorway. “I told him to rest, but he wouldn’t listen. Perhaps you can persuade him?”

“I’ll do my best, Doctor.”

He smiled. “It’s Yves. I don’t think that kind of formality serves any purpose in places like this.”

He was a good looking man, typically French, with that Gallic élan and flair for style that the whole nation seemed to possess. Even in his camouflaged combat trousers and white jacket, with a T-shirt underneath, he managed to look good. He was young, maybe twenty-five or so, and his unruly hair was a rumpled mess. It could have been from all he’d been through lately, or perhaps it was just the style that young people wore these days on the Champs Elysses. It wasn’t difficult to imagine him with a beautiful and chic Parisienne on his arm, strolling through the bistros of the Left Bank.

“Ok, Yves. Thanks for what you’ve done.”

He winked. “I’ll send you a bill when I get home. If I get home.”

“You will, Yves, and that’s a promise.”

He stared at me. “You know, I believe you. Get me home in one piece, and I’ll tear up the bill.”

I chuckled as he walked back into his treatment room. When I looked around, Luk had taken hold of his sniper rifle. I pulled it away from him. “No way, not until Yves pronounces you fit, and that isn’t going to be for a while.”

He looked very tired, and he didn’t put up a fight. “Fair enough. What about the plastique? Can’t we do something with that?”

It hadn’t occurred to me to do anything, other than make it safe so that it didn’t do any more damage. But that was civilian thinking. I was now in command of both civilians and soldiers, which was my understanding.

“I’ll think about it. You go and get some rest.”

Rachel helped him back inside the stone hut. The medics had just noticed he’d gone missing in the darkness and were already looking for him; like a naughty schoolboy. Rachel and I both laughed. Then the mortar barrage started. Apparently, the Taliban had decided they’d waited long enough for us to come out, so now they were piling on the pressure. I ran

around to the stone wall where Rains was crouched down with his sergeant and two soldiers.

"I think we can assume this barrage is the preliminary to an attack, Lieutenant. Is everything ready?"

He looked at Sergeant Mason, who replied. "We're as ready as we can be. We've put machine guns to cover the approaches to the village. That should hold them when they come. There are two mortars ready to use as well, but we need a target for those. The boys are ready, Mr. Hoffman, don't worry."

"It's Max," I reminded him.

He nodded absently, just as one of his men dashed over and slid down beside us.

"They're coming, loads of them. We can hardly make them out in the darkness, but they're there all right."

Mason gave me a cynical glance. I knew what he meant, 'you're supposed to be running this show, you decide'. So I did.

"Are they attacking in a rush or slowly, keeping in cover?"

"They're coming mighty slow, Sir, keeping those turbans well down, so we can't shoot them the hell off."

"Ok, do your best to keep them away. I'll see if I can rig a surprise for them. Sergeant, would you come with me?"

He looked surprised, but Rains nodded, and he followed me to the stack of C4.

"Would you start taking the blocks of explosive out of the crates. I'll go and find someone that knows how to fix the detonators."

"I can do that, Sir."

I noticed the Sir. At least I had one good man on my side.

"Very well, let's do it. I want the explosive stacked against that defensive wall where your officer is hiding. Then we'll get them to pull back. I guess you know the rest."

He grinned. "That's good enough for me."

We started to assemble the charges, and Mason called two of his men over to start carrying them to the stone wall. When Rains discovered I was leading the enemy onto the wall to destroy it, and them with it, he protested.

"This wall offers good cover, Hoffman. The last thing we want is to destroy it."

I laughed at him. "Rains, they'll charge straight over this wall. You need

to pull back into the village and establish a new defensive position."

"I do?" He looked totally lost now, and his men looked worried at his forlorn expression.

"You do, yes. Right now."

"Ok, I'll do it. Corporal Delgado, come with me, and we'll set up a new position."

They left the shelter of the wall. There were several men waiting for orders, and Mason detailed them to bury the explosives under blocks of stone. He made a final check on the wiring, and then we pulled back with the remote detonator. We found a new position almost a hundred yards away, inside some kind of a stonecutter's yard.

"Sergeant, do you think you ought to check how the battle's going?"

"Yeah, I guess so. They've gone a bit quiet."

"Planning a final rush, maybe?"

"Probably. You're all ready, Sir?"

"I am."

He doubled away, and Rachel slipped in beside me.

"How are things going, Max? What's happening?"

I explained as best I could. She looked horrified.

"So you're leading them into the village?"

"The outskirts, yes. Then we blow the charges."

"It's a hell of a risk."

I stared at her. "It's called war, Rachel. You were an Air Force officer, so you should know."

"Yeah."

She waited with me, and Sergeant Mason returned with two of his men.

"We're all set. We just need to wait for the bastards to come nearer."

It didn't take long. The first rays of dawn started to dilute the darkness, and there was a roaring shout as they charged forward. There were at least fifty of them, counting the muzzle flashes as they fired their assault rifles. When they realized we'd pulled back, they came straight over the low wall, and Mason detonated the charges. There was a huge explosion, the ground shook and the wall disappeared in a show of small stone fragments, along with the attackers. A massive sheet of flame lit up the sky, ripping away the darkness. And in that violent light, we saw the second wave of Taliban advancing, another forty or fifty of them, about two hundred yards back.

"Oh, shit," Mason breathed.

“Call up the machine guns. We need to try and hold them off.”

“I reckon we do.”

He rushed back, shouting orders for them to resite the machine guns. They started their monotonous chatter, and the attackers dived for cover, but they crawled forward. It was obvious it would only be a matter of time before they overran us. They reached the wreckage of the stone wall and the devastation that was all that remained of their first attacking wave. They stopped there and started shooting up the village, and then their mortars started again. Rachel tugged at my sleeve. I hadn’t realized she’d been shouting for my attention.

“Max, we could try and get the Twin Otter out of here with the casualties and some of the medics.”

I looked across the wide gap to the road where the aircraft sat waiting and shook my head.

“We’d be a sitting target just getting across the open ground, and they wouldn’t let us take off. As soon as we start the engines, they’d rip us apart with machine gun and rocket fire. I’m afraid we have to forget the plane for the time being. What about Luk?”

“He’s trying to get Yves to allow him to get to his sniper rifle. They’re almost having to hold him down,” she smiled.

“At least that means he’s recovering well. Are you armed?”

She held out her Colt .45. I nodded. “You’d better warn Yves and his people to stay inside the stone hut. It’s the best cover in the village.” She ran off.

They crawled nearer and nearer, and their fire was so intense that it was all we could do to keep our heads down and stay out of the withering gunfire. Sergeant Mason doubled over to us.

“Any suggestions? I don’t think we can hold out much longer. We’re running low on ammunition.”

I shook my head. “None. Except the obvious.”

“Surrender?”

I nodded. “I can’t think of any other options.”

“The Taliban don’t have much of a reputation for looking after their prisoners.”

“At least we’d be alive, Sergeant.”

“At first, yeah.”

I looked around at the battle that was raging around the small village. It

was growing even lighter, but the flashes of gunfire and exploding mortar shells still lit up the sky. There were three times as many flashes from the incoming fire than from our defense, and the conclusion was obvious.

"We'll just have to hope for the best. They're not all animals, and maybe this lot are not so bad."

He gave me a skeptical look.

"If you say so. How are we going to play this? I mean. Do we use a white flag, or something?"

"I think so, that's the universal signal, I believe. Warn the men first."

He nodded and crawled away. I turned to look at Rachel.

"I'm sorry, but I can't think of any way out of this."

"It wasn't you that got us into it, Max. I just hope I live long enough to put a bullet through that psycho Ed Walker's brain."

"I think you'll find there's a queue."

I looked up as the incoming fire intensified even more. It was obvious they were building up for the final assault. I looked around for something white to wave at them.

"Max, there's more firing coming from the east of them."

I looked up, and sure enough, more muzzle flashes lit up the sky. Then I realized that they weren't coming at us, they were aimed at the Taliban. The Devil's Guard had arrived.

The enemy didn't stand a chance. There were fifteen men in the group who fell on the larger force from behind, but it was as if they were being attacked by a pack of wild dogs. The newcomers were armed with a variety of automatic weapons, and it was clear that each man was an expert in the use of those weapons. They moved as one, deadly precision ballet. Like experts, they found the best natural cover the terrain offered, cover that would get them to their objective in the quickest way to wreak the maximum damage. They unerringly found their targets, and the turbaned Afghans didn't even have time to turn and aim before they were torn to piece in a hail of automatic fire. Grenades rained down on their ranks, fired from the assault rifles of the attackers. It was as if some kind of demonic vacuum cleaner had arrived to sweep up every single crumb of the attackers. We kept our heads down, occasionally popping up to choose a fleeing Taliban fighter and send him to his God. Then it was all over. They came cautiously into the village, a band of tough, battle-hardened warriors. It wasn't that they were big men, as such, but they looked huge. They all wore camouflage uniforms, of an unusual

pattern. They were festooned with more weapons, grenades and miscellaneous equipment than I would have thought it possible for one man to carry. Their leader came in first, and I went out to greet him.

"I'm Art Schramm, and I lead these men. A friend said that you were in need of some help, Abe Woltz."

We shook hands, and I introduced Rachel and myself.

"That's the understatement of the year. Thanks for coming, and thanks for what you've done."

I stared at him. He was short and powerfully built. Underneath the weapons and webbing festooned over him, he wore a sweat-soaked camouflage shirt that failed to hide the hard muscles it contained. He had khaki pants in a different camouflage pattern and lightweight, sand colored combat boots coated with dust. His hair was thick and hung to his shoulders, held in place by a thong leather headband. He looked like the kind of warrior he was, wild and unconventional.

He nodded. "You're welcome, but we're not clear yet. As we were descending the Pass, we could see another group of insurgents heading this way. About two hundred of them."

I could see our group looking at me in despair. Their hopes had been raised by the arrival of these tough fighters, only to have them dashed as the enemy brought in reinforcements. Luk was a few yards away, making strange gestures that I recognized as sign language. The girl he communicated with looked to be about twenty years old, a slim, pretty Afghan girl in Western clothes and a headscarf. He saw me watching and limped over. Before he could speak, I looked at him critically and asked how come he was up and about.

"They patched me up, and I feel much better. I want you to meet Najela."

I felt irritated. It wasn't the time or place to meet a new girlfriend, and I pulled a face.

"I'll talk to her later, Luk. Right now, we've got problems. The enemy is bringing up reinforcements."

"That's just it, you see. Najela knows a way out of here."

"I'm sure she does, but there are a few hundred nasties that are waiting to kill us the moment we make a move. I'll talk to you later, but I need to get back to the soldiers and work out a solution to this problem."

"No, you don't understand. There's hidden path that leads away from

here, and it goes through to her home village, where we can hide."

"This Afghan girl, Najela. She told you this?"

He nodded. "Sure. Well, she signed it. She can't speak, so we used sign language."

"I didn't know you could do that?"

"I learned while I was doing my stint in the army. There was a big push on opportunities. They said if I learned sign language, it would help with my promotion."

I smiled at the absurd image of a modern army using sign language to communicate.

"Did it?"

"Did it what?"

"Help with your promotion."

"No."

I nodded. I guessed armies never changed, a sniper with sign language. He saw my expression.

"They had some idea of using sign language for clandestine missions as well. A way of keeping absolute silence in the field for the Afghan Special Forces."

"I didn't think there were any Afghan Special Forces."

"Not now there isn't, no. In the old days things were different, very different."

"You mean when the Soviets were here?"

He grimaced. "Something like that."

"Surely the sign language was a problem at night?"

He grinned. "Maybe that's why I didn't get my promotion."

Using him as an interpreter, I questioned the girl at length. This village was abandoned long ago, during the Soviet occupation. She lived in the village that was about ten miles away, in a straight line, anyway. What was really interesting was that it was on the other side of a mountain, or at least part of one; a massive spur of rock that slanted down from the heights of the Hindu Kush to sweep down into Afghanistan. It was a journey of almost fifty miles to reach the village if you went the long way around, but there was a narrow path the led to a tunnel in the rock, and all the way through to the village. She signed energetically, and I waited for Luk to translate.

"She says it was used during the Soviet times, and the fighters used to shelter inside it. The Russians eventually found it and brought down the roof

with explosives. When they left, some of the men cleared it to make a way through from their village to the road over the Khyber Pass. Otherwise, it is a long journey to reach Pakistan when they wish to go there."

"What's this village called?"

"It is called Yaluk."

I mulled over what she'd said. It sounded hopeful as a way of escape, but even so, there was an old maxim. If something is too good to be true, it usually is.

"Ask her if the Taliban know of this village."

There was another flurry of signing.

"She says yes, they do, but they leave it alone. They do not know the tunnel has been cleared."

"Why do they leave it alone?"

He signed again, and I noticed a hesitation on the part of the girl to reply. Then there was more signing that went on for a long time. Luk looked surprised, but he translated.

"She says because of the magic."

I grimaced. "Luk, she must have said more than that. Tell me the rest."

He explained it all to me then, and the picture became clearer. Not that I believed it. It seemed the village was home to a long tradition of healers. I guess they would be like the old native herbalists who were part of all ancient cultures. But these people had taken their skills to new heights, using the knowledge passed down to them over generations, and a number of unique varieties of plants and herbs that only grew at the very highest levels of the Hindu Kush.

"They have a problem, the Taliban. On the one hand, this kind of practice is supposed to be un-Islamic, because of the suspicions of witchcraft about some of their reported healings. On the other hand, they have wives, parents, children, who all need medical help at some time. They sneak into Yaluk to get what they need and sneak out, and the mullahs turn a blind eye. It's kind of live and let live, so the place is like a neutral zone."

"So she thinks we could hide out there?"

"Yes, for a few days, at least."

"I'll talk to the others. Thank her anyway for coming up with the idea."

He smiled and looked at the girl, and I saw it then in his face. He was totally hooked on her. It was like he'd been struck with a lightning bolt. Of all the places for it to happen, it had to be here. I left them to it. Inside, I

knew that their chances were almost non-existent. We were trapped inside a war zone, an injured man recovering from a bullet wound and a deaf Afghan girl. It could have been worse, but not much. I rejoined the group of soldiers and mercenaries who were sat on the ground. Some of them had lit cigarettes, and I noticed that the new arrivals, the mercenaries, were cleaning their weapons and making preparations for the next fight. They were not men to be taken by surprise.

Their leader, Art Schramm, nodded at me in a friendly enough way, and he was talking to one of his mercenaries, a huge, muscled bull of a man.

"This is my second in command, Max. Trip Wennerstrom, meet Max Hoffman."

We shook hands, and I explained to both men what Najela had told me. They looked skeptical.

"Do you believe her?" Art replied. "More importantly, do you trust her?"

"It sounds on the level, so yes, I trust her. I don't think she'd betray us."

"Why not?" Trip asked.

I pointed over to where Najela was helping Luk to sit on the ground. When she got him comfortable, she sat with him, kissed him on the cheek, and he slipped his arm around her. Both men nodded. "Yeah, understood. It could be interesting, so what are you going to do?"

"Me? I thought you were running things now."

Art pulled a face. "Me? No way, I reckon it's time to see if you're as tough as your grandfather."

"I never knew him, you know."

"Yeah, that was a shame," he replied. "But it's time to put another Hoffman in the saddle, so you can call the shots from here on in, Max. If anything doesn't look right, we'll deal with it. The boys all know what your grandfather stood for."

"But, Art, I don't…"

"Max, listen. I won't be doing this much longer. These men need someone like you to take over."

I briefly wondered what he meant, that he wouldn't be doing it much longer. Was he ill? Or was he prescient? Many soldiers were a complex mass of superstition and dark premonitions. I tried again.

"But I'm not really a soldier, Art. I'm a pilot. My military service was years ago, in the Royal Thai Army."

“Don’t worry about that, you’re doing fine so far. So what’s our next move, Boss?”

I winced. But he was adamant, so I decided to make the best of it.

The first step was to assemble the men and women in a group to explain to them what we had planned. When I told them we were heading away from the Khyber Pass, further into Afghanistan, there was a lot of disquiet. Especially from Ed Walker.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, Hoffman? That plane is bought and paid for, and you are, too. I want you to fly us out of here, right now. We’ll make arrangements to come back for the others.”

I sighed. “I already told you, Walker. The second we start engines they’ll blast that aircraft to pieces. This is our only chance, and we’re heading for Yaluk. I want everyone to get ready to leave before it’s too light.”

“Says who?” he sneered. “I’ve got two armed guards with me that say we’re taking that plane out of here.”

His men looked uncomfortable, and they didn’t meet my gaze. But Art Schramm squared up to Walker. “Says my fifteen armed men, you little shit.”

Before Walker could reply, Rains walked up to stand beside Schramm. “My men are with Max. I reckon you’re badly outnumbered, buddy.”

Walker stared at both men for a few moments, then shook his head and stalked away. Art turned to me.

“Max, it’s your call.”

“Get everyone ready to leave. We’re heading out in fifteen minutes.”

* * *

Carol Wendelski checked in with the guards who allowed authorized personnel to enter the Ground Control Station, and arrested unauthorized personnel who tried to get in. She knew one of them slightly, She’d been on a date with him once, but it hadn’t worked out when she didn’t share his love of baseball, and him not hers for all things technical. But they’d stayed friends.

“Give ‘em hell, Carol,” he winked. He knew she flew reconnaissance drones over Afghanistan, but he didn’t know that today it would be different.

“Yeah, I’ll do that, never fear.”

Corporal Munch handed over the console to her. He’d been running through the training package for the MQ-9, but he was not cleared for flight operations.

"Hi, Carol. There's a message from headquarters. You're to call this number."

He handed her a message slip. She was to call a Colonel Brooks, ISAF Chief of Intelligence in Afghanistan. She raised her eyebrows.

"Jesus, what have I done?"

He shrugged. "No idea, but you're to call him the moment you come in, so I'd do it now if I were you."

It took almost half a minute to route the call through the secure military channels to ISAF HQ Afghanistan. The voice that answered sounded as if he'd just got out of bed.

"Brooks."

"This is Master Sergeant Wendelski, calling as ordered from Creech."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks for calling, Master Sergeant. You're flying the MQ-9 today, I understand."

"That's correct, Sir."

"Right, there's been a change of Rules of Engagement, and this is from the top."

Her spirits plummeted. So they were going to prevent her from any live firing, she could see it coming. They were terrified of friendly fire incidents, but even so, she knew what she was doing. It wasn't fair. She dimly realized the Colonel was speaking again.

"I'm sorry, Sir. What did you say?"

"I said you'll be flying weapons free, Master Sergeant. If you see a target, you are cleared to make your own decision whether to engage or not."

Oh, fuck! Was he for real?

"Yes, Sir. Just so I'm clear, I'm flying the MQ-9 today, weapons free, complete clearance to engage on my own authority."

"Correct. Any questions?"

"No, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

But he'd already hung up. Oh, my God, it was for real!

"What is it?" Munch asked. "Bad news?"

"No. I'm weapons free on the Reaper."

"Jesus Christ!"

# Chapter Nine

*Bush said: 'It is better to fight them on their ground than they fighting us on our ground.' In response to these fallacies, I say: The war in Iraq is raging, and the operations in Afghanistan are on the rise in our favor, praise be to God.*

*Osama Bin Laden*

"You wanted to see me, General?"

"That's correct, Mr. President. I'm happy to report the situation in Afghanistan is being brought back under our control. Another three or four days, and we'll be comfortable again."

"Comfortable?" Barrani looked up. "Is that what we're there for, General, to be comfortable? I thought we were there to win."

"That's true, yes, but the situation is rather complex. It's not as simple as that."

Mrs. Chalmers glared at him. "I don't see what isn't simple, General. Al Qaeda destroyed the World Trade Center, and then they tried to hole up in Afghanistan. In the process of hiding, they allied themselves with the Taliban. Ergo, we need to destroy them. Or are you saying that they shouldn't pay for what they did? The greatest crime of the twenty first century, for God's sake."

Mann felt as if he'd been set upon by a pack of wild dogs. For a moment he had the idea of telling them to stop being so stupid, and then walking out of there. Years of experience and self-control stopped him from destroying his career.

"No, Ma'am, of course not. What I'm saying is the situation over there is highly unstable, both the politics and the military. We're doing our best to…"

"Doing your best?" The President looked up and stared at him. "The last time you were here you persuaded us that so-called Black-ops would make all the difference. Tell me, General, how many operations have you mounted so far?"

Mann hesitated, but he knew the truth would come out. This was Washington. It was no longer the Nixon years, when the truth was so often buried. Or the Kennedy years, when even the President himself could embark on illicit affairs, and the newspapers would keep silent. Things had changed, as Bill Clinton discovered during a very uncomfortable two terms in office.

"One, Sir."

“One! And what was the result of this single operation?”

“We took out more than a dozen of their local leaders.”

“You mean killed?”

“Yes, we killed them, Mr. President.”

“I see. Why have you not sent this team back in to dispose of some more of these bastards that are killing our men? Or was one mission what you had in mind when you proposed this particular course?”

“Mr. President, the team hasn’t reported back yet.” He took a deep breath. “Our intelligence suggests that they were ambushed on the border and lost most of their men. Since then, we’ve lost contact with the team leader. He’s a CIA operative.”

He heard the Secretary of State breathe, “Jesus Christ”, behind him. The President was silent at first. Then he spoke slowly, barely concealing the anger in his voice.

“Would you have us believe that this operation is about to shorten the war?”

The General shook his head. “No, Sir.”

“No. Now listen, General. Your plan was a good one, but the implementation stinks. If you want to take out their leaders, that’s fine. But strike at the top and cut off the head. Not a ragtag bunch of local tribal leaders, and then leave your men exposed to be ambushed and killed. Who’s their top man over there? The Taliban leader.”

“You mean Mullah Omar, Mr. President?”

“Yes, he’s who I mean. If he was captured or killed, that would hit them hard, surely? I doubt they’d recover from that.”

“Well, no, but…”

“Find him, General. No more half-cocked operations. Send in your experts, and either kill or kidnap this guy. Let me know how you get on. I’ll authorize CIA to lend a hand. That’s all, General.”

He got up, and the Chief of Staff was left dazed and astonished. As he left the room, the Secretary of State gave him a sweet smile. “Good luck, General. I’d advise you not to screw up this one.”

He ignored her. How the hell could he get Mullah Omar? It had taken them many years to hunt down and kill Bin-Laden, the Al Qaeda head and architect of 911. Now they wanted him to get Omar in just a few days. Shit! As he left the situation room, he had another thought. What he needed wasn’t Mullah Omar, which was virtually impossible. No, he needed a scapegoat. It

wasn’t in his nature to play the political game, but it was the game he’d been placed in. Now who would fit the bill?

* * *

The journey was not easy, especially for Luk, but Najela helped him limp along. She’d found a wooden stick that he leaned on to make the going a little easier. But still, I asked Yves to stay close to him with one of his nurses, and several times they called a halt to check the state of his wound. I’d sent Rains on ahead with his men, and posted Art Schramm to bring up the rear. When the insurgents found we’d left, it was possible they’d find our trail and pursue us. If they caught up, I wanted the mercenaries to be there to deal with them. I had little doubt that they’d give the Afghans a hard time if they came near. I walked with Rachel, and we had a little time to talk.

“What are we going to do about the aircraft, Max?” she asked me with a worried tone.

“I’ve no idea. What I do know is that it’s the least of our worries. The first priority is to get these people to safety.”

“You’re taking it all seriously, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Leading the group. You know they all look to you to get them back.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I think Art would manage quite well with his own men.”

“Maybe, but Rains wouldn’t. Have you noticed how he’s changed since you took command?”

I thought about it. She was right. He had become more confident, and there was less fear and uncertainty in the way he led his platoon. “Yes, he’s not so timid.”

“That’s because he looks to you to make the decisions so that he can handle his men. He’s ok, but he’s no officer. A good sergeant, maybe, but that’s all.”

“I’ll tell the US Army what you said.”

She laughed. “By all means, but remember this. When we hit trouble, you’re the one they’ll rely on to get them out of it.”

“Rachel, I’m a pilot, not a military commander,” I protested.

“Maybe your ticket says you’re just a pilot, but all the same you’re not flying an aircraft now. You’re leading a group of soldiers and civilians through bandit country. And they’re all looking to you to make the right

choices, remember that."

I didn't reply. We'd covered almost eight miles and were approaching the entrance to a narrow cave, where Rains had halted his men. I stopped and Najela came forward with Luk to interpret. The path ran into the cave and cut all the way through the mountain. In front of us, the sheer cliff face soared a thousand feet into the foothills of the Hindu Kush. It had a bleak grandeur that was perhaps a clue to the Afghan psyche, cold and forbidding. The dark cave entrance was almost invisible, and without Najela, we wouldn't have found it. I understood the tunnel was almost two miles long.

"Would you ask her if there's headroom in there?" I asked Luk.

He signed the question and answered me. "No, Najela says we'll need to crawl through some of the way."

"Can you make it?"

He nodded. "I'll make it, don't worry. It's that or the Taliban. I'll crawl through ten miles of cave if necessary."

They'd gathered in a group, so I told them what was ahead of us. Art Schramm offered to detail a machine gun crew; two men to set up out of sight to guard the entrance until we were through. "I'll set some grenades inside too, and I'll give them long fuses. If the gunners get into trouble, they can start the detonators as they come past, and it'll bring the roof down."

"Right. You'd better not tell Najela that part. I gather they spent an age clearing the last roof fall."

"They won't need to worry about using the tunnel again if they're dead," he said grimly.

"That's true. We need to get moving. Lieutenant Rains, would you lead off into the tunnel."

"Sure. Form up, men. Let's move out."

The first part was easy, and part of the way we were able to walk upright, single file. Then the roof got lower, and we had to crouch down to keep going. The roof lowered again, and we had to get to our knees to keep going forward, pushing and pulling our packs and supplies along with us. It was backbreaking and soul destroying. The bare rock was uneven, and all of us constantly cut our arms and legs as we snagged on the sharper edges of unseen obstacles. We crawled for over an hour until finally the roof started to get higher, and we were able to get to our feet and walk again. Two hours after we entered the tunnel, we emerged the other side into a sunlit morning. Rains and his men had already emerged and were standing and staring into

the distance. When I got out into the sunlight, I realized why. There was a village nestling in the foothills of the mountain range. But incredibly for this country, it was undamaged. Rachel caught her breath.

"It's beautiful, Max."

It wasn't beautiful at all. It was a primitive collection of stone huts. There were two lines of them with a main street running between them. I counted about thirty dwellings, and all of them in good repair. A few of them even had glass in the windows, a minor miracle outside of the main cities. Even there many houses had lost their glass in the unending series of wars that had beset the country in the past three decades.

"Let's go and find out if the natives are friendly," I smiled by way of a reply.

Rains took up the lead, and we walked into the main, and only, street. People came out of their stone huts to gaze at us, but there was no fear. Finally, we stopped, and a man stood in the street ten paces from us. Najela recognized him and ran forward to greet him. The man signed a reply to her and both their arms moved swiftly as they conversed. Then she came to Rachel and me and signed. Luk came up to translate.

"She says this is her father, Ban. He is the village headman."

I shook hands with him. Rachel stood back, as was the custom here.

"Would you ask her to enquire whether we may shelter here for a few days," I said to Luk. "We'll pay, of course."

The signing took a minute or so, but Luk turned to me.

"It's no problem. There are some empty houses and a couple of barns too. You're welcome to any of them. There's no need for payment. Most of their needs are met by trading, a local barter system."

There was a shout from the cave entrance, and Art's machine gun crew emerged. They gave a cheery wave, and it was clear that we weren't being pursued. I waved back and continued the halting conversation.

"Tell him we'll do our best not to get in anyone's way, and thank him for allowing us to stay. We'd like to see our quarters now. We've been without sleep for some time, and we need to catch up."

A guide led us to the houses we'd been allocated. I went into a tiny, two roomed hut with Rachel, Luk and Najela.

"Do they expect the girls to sleep in one room and the men the other?" I asked Luk.

He signed to Najela again. She smiled at me and shook her head. Maybe

Afghanistan wasn't so bad after all. The door opened, and Art came in without knocking.

"I've set up a defensive perimeter. The other machine gun crew can cover the approaches to the village, and a sentry is hidden on the opposite side. No one can come up on us without we know about it."

He stared at me, expressionless. I should have set that up before we came to find out where we'd be sleeping. I nodded to him. "Thanks, Art. I should have done that myself."

"Yeah. Don't sweat it, get some sleep."

He turned to walk back out through the door.

"Art, before you go."

"Yes?"

"We'll be here for a couple of days at least, maybe more. Can you run me through some of this stuff in the morning?"

"Sure."

They all smiled when he left, and even Najela had picked it up. But I didn't see the funny side of it.

"Rachel, if I mess up, people will get killed. It's not a joke."

"Art will look after things, don't worry."

"And when he's gone back, what then? He won't stay here forever."

"You're right, but can we discuss it later. I'm exhausted. What are we going to do about food?"

Damn, I'd forgotten that too! "Get yourself some rest. I'll be back later."

She went to say something, but I was already walking out through the door. I found Ban, and by using a number of universal hand signals conveyed that we were very hungry. He smiled and led me to a stone hut that housed the village ovens. There was also a huge cauldron that was bubbling merrily, issuing a smell so good that I nearly put my hand in and scooped out some of the stew that lay inside. He raised his eyebrows and pointed at me, then pantomimed my people. Did we want the food? Dear God, did we? I nodded enthusiastically. He smiled and pointed at a pile of wooden bowls. I got the message and went out to round everyone up. Sergeant Mason came over to me.

"What's up?"

"Chow's what is up, Sergeant. Would you get everyone here, and we'll get something to eat."

“You betcha! I was thinking about turning cannibal.”

I laughed as he walked away. Then I went to the house we’d borrowed and gave Rachel a call, as well as Luk and Najela. But the two were otherwise occupied. The door to their room was closed, and Rachel gave a small shake of her head.

“They’re busy, Max. I think they’d prefer to be left alone.”

“Right.”

The word had spread, and almost the entire party was crowded around the cooking hut. Rains’ infantrymen, Art Schramm’s mercenaries, Doctor Yves St Roulemont and his nurses, and a little to one side Ed Walker with his two surviving bodyguards. I got into line and helped myself to stew from the cauldron, together with a chunk of bread that we all just ripped from an enormous loaf.

“You did well, getting this organized so quickly,” Rains said to me as he came up, his face covered in stew with breadcrumbs sticking to it. I looked around and saw that we were all the same. Some of them were sat on the ground, others standing and chatting, but the hot food had worked a miracle. What had Najela said about this village, something about magic? If this was it, I’d take it anytime over the Christian church. I just nodded to the Lieutenant. There was no need to tell him that it had little to do with my efforts. He needed a leader. I could see that now. And I needed him, or at least the firepower his troops carried. Art came to join me with his huge sidekick, Trip. Then Yves wandered over with his nurses, and the conversation became animated. They were all grateful to me, and I felt like Jesus feeding the five thousand. I realized Art was speaking to me.

“I’m sorry, Art. What was that?”

“I said what weapons have you had training with?”

“Only the Colt .45 automatic, I’m afraid. My grandmother made sure I knew how to use a pistol if I ever needed to.”

“In that case, I’ll start you off in the morning with an M-16. One of my guys carries an AK47 too, so you can familiarize yourself with that one.”

“Thanks, that’ll be appreciated. What I really need is a fast primer on strategy and tactics.”

“Yep, I’ll get to that. But what it really boils down to is hit the bastards hard when they least expect it.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s won more battles than could fill a library full of books. Keep that

in mind, and you won't go wrong."

But as I finished the food and went back to our stone hut, I thought about the real battle I'd have to fight. With Ed Walker and his boss, Joe Ashford. They thought they'd bought me - lock, stock and barrel. Maybe it was true, but that made no difference. They'd want me to carry out our bargain, one that I'd entered without knowing the consequences. I wondered how I could adapt Art's strategy to that particular fight. How could I hit them hard when their guard was down? That would take some thinking about. Rachel had gone back ahead of me, and the reason became obvious when I walked into the hut. Despite the cold, she'd stripped off naked and was lying beneath a pile of bedding. Actually, it was old sacks and a couple of Russian greatcoats. I wondered what had happened to their owners. Afghanistan was not a forgiving place.

"Come in, Max, it's cold out there."

I started to rip off my clothes. Before I got into bed, I wedged a chair against the door. It wouldn't hold against much of a push, but at least it would tell anyone we wanted some privacy. An Afghan version of the 'do not disturb sign'. Then I climbed in with Rachel and felt the soft, firm, smooth skin of her body. It had an instant effect on me.

"I can see you're feeling randy already, Mr. Hoffman," she chuckled.

"Is that a problem?"

"Quite the opposite. I was hoping you wouldn't be too tired."

"Good. What are Luk and Najela doing?"

"The same as us, I guess. Now shut up and fuck me, Max. I can't wait another second. It must be this country, you never know if it could be your last."

"Last what?"

"Last fuck, of course," she muttered. "Tomorrow we could all be dead."

"We won't be dead. I won't let that happen."

"No, I know you won't. Now be quiet and screw me."

So I did.

I was still in bed the following morning when someone hammered on the door. It was Art Schramm.

"What's up?" I checked my watch. It was almost six o'clock.

"Weapons training. I thought you'd want to make an early start. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

"Sure, I'll be right out."

It took me a few minutes to throw my clothes on, and the temperature outside was barely above freezing. Then we set out to a piece of open ground where he'd set up some targets, pieces of rock stood on end. He handed me an assault rifle.

"This is an M-16, the standard weapon of the US infantry. It means they're very common, and there's no problem finding ammo." He took it back off me. "This is how you strip it."

It took him less than a minute to take the gun apart, and then he re-assembled it.

"Now you try."

Five minutes later, I had a tangled mess of components that looked as if they would never go together to make a rifle. He showed me how it all worked, and I tried again, and again. Until I had it, and the gun was in one piece.

"That's good, Max. All you need now is to know how to use it."

"Point and pull the trigger?"

He nodded. "It's a start. Our M-16s can select semi-automatic, three shot burst or full auto. They're pretty tough and reliable, just don't get carried away and fire off a full clip, unless it's absolutely necessary. This gadget fitted under the barrel is an M203 grenade launcher. It gives the weapon a lot more firepower. Here, you try it."

I spent the next hour destroying the peace of the village, firing clip after clip until Art pronounced himself satisfied.

"That's good, you got it. Let's finish off with the grenade launcher. Give it a try. There's a grenade ready to fire."

I pulled the extra trigger, and the small bomb launched and flew towards the broken rocks I'd been shooting at. Art dragged me down while it was still in the air.

"Get down! That's a grenade you just launched."

I lay flat on the rocky ground and felt it shake as the grenade went off. Fragments zinged off the rocks and rattled around us. I'd have been shredded if I'd been standing. We got up, and Art grinned.

"See what I mean? When you fire one of those babies, you don't stick around to watch."

"I'll bear it in mind," I replied, a little shakily.

"Good, that'll do for now. After lunch, we'll cover strategy and tactics."

When I got back to our hut, Ed Walker was there arguing with Rachel.

They stopped when I arrived.

"What's up?"

"Your fucking bitch is accusing me of theft, that's what's up!"

I hit him then, and just totally lost it. He went flying back to land on the ground. I stood over him, and he looked up at me.

"Christ, you nearly broke my jaw!"

"The next time you insult Rachel, I'll rip you to pieces, Walker. Just watch your mouth. Now what's the problem?"

"Luk's satellite phone, it's been stolen. There's only one person who would have taken it, and that's him."

I stared at Walker. "Did you take it? I can easily get Art Schramm's men to search your gear."

"No, I fucking did not, and I resent that question."

"I don't care what you resent. Now get out of here, Walker. I've got things to do."

He got to his feet. "Don't you forget who's the boss and who pays the bills, when we get out of here, you'll need me."

"I hope not. I sincerely hope not. Now get out of here!"

He stalked away without another word. I grinned at Rachel. "That's seen him off, shall we get some food?"

We walked towards the cooking hut, where people were already starting to gather as the smell of the stew wafted around the village.

"You're going to have trouble with that guy," Rachel warned.

"You're probably right, but we're stuck with him for the time being. It's a pity about the satphone. Do you think he took it?"

"Yes, who else would steal it?"

"It could have been anybody. There're a lot of people here, Rains' infantry, Schramm's men, the Medecin sans Frontieres people, Ed Walker's two bodyguards and of course the villagers."

"It was Walker, I'm sure of it. Or he got one of his men to do it, that's more his style."

"Probably, but I doubt we'll get it back. Does Luk know?"

"He was the one that told me it was missing."

"Ok, there's nothing we can do now. With any luck, we'll be out of here before much longer. I'll ask Art Schramm if he has a satphone. We could at least get a message out."

I kicked myself for not thinking of it before now. Although the military

was stymied until the Taliban had been kicked back to their caves, it would have been useful to let them know where we were and what was our situation. They could, of course, know already, at least where we were, from their drone overflights, but there was no guarantee.

In the event, Art didn't carry a satphone when I asked him after we'd eaten.

"I've got no use for 'em, not in the field, anyway."

"I don't understand, surely it would mean your principals could get in touch with you, in case anything changed."

"Not my way of doing business, Max. Have you heard of the Brit admiral, who deliberately ignored an order?"

I shook my head. "They didn't teach me that one in Thailand, no."

"Horatio Nelson was a famous British Admiral, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when they had Napoleon to contend with. He was a vice admiral when he sailed into the Battle of Copenhagen. His superior, Admiral Hyde Parker, who Nelson didn't think much of, signaled the British fleet to retreat. Nelson, convinced he could win, put his telescope to his blind eye and said, 'I really do not see the signal.' So the expression 'turning a blind eye' entered the English language."

"Did he win, when he ignored that order?" I had to know.

He grinned. "Oh yeah, he won alright, and they made him a viscount, some kind of English aristocrat. No satphone, see. If he'd carried one, they could have called him up and screwed around with him."

I nodded. "I'll bear it in mind, thanks Art."

"You do that. You're worried about letting people know we're here?"

"I think it would be useful, yes. Sooner or later, they'll come and get us."

"No, they won't, because we'll be leaving. Give it a couple more days for that Taliban force to move off, and then we'll head back to the Khyber Pass. Now let's get on with your military training, strategy and tactics."

We spent the rest of the afternoon working on the complexities of moving troops to their best advantage. By the end of the day, he was satisfied with my progress.

"You're a natural, you know. Jurgen, your grandfather, would have been proud of you. We'll work on leadership skills tomorrow, but you're doing fine. Just remember, don't let them know what you're up to, then hit them hard when they're least expecting it. The rest is easy. And don't forget

Nelson. Don't listen to bullshit."

We spent two more days in that village, during which time we saw no sign of the enemy. The real surprise came when we found the French medical team spending a lot of time with the Afghan healers. Yves was ecstatic.

"These people have skills and knowledge that amaze me. Ailments that we have complicated drugs and treatment regimes for, they just issue a simple remedy, and the patient seems to recover. Sometimes, they just sit with them, and they get better. It's uncanny."

"I'd get their recipes if I were you, Yves. You could make a fortune when we get back."

"I already have a fortune," he replied in a severe tone. "I inherited a chateau and a number of farms and vineyards in France. It means I never have to worry about money. The remedies would change people's lives if I could find out more about them, but the villagers are keen to keep them under wraps."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "They flatly refused to tell me anything. It's their tradition to keep it to themselves. Maybe it's something to do with the plants and herbs they use. If they're very rare, and only local to this part of the Hindu Kush, any increase in demand could destroy their resources."

"They could always be synthesized, surely?"

"I'm not sure they could. It could take away that special something that makes them unique. It's a pity, but they said I could take some preparations away with me, so perhaps I can look into it when I get back to France."

"I wish you luck with it, Yves. You never know, you could be the next Pasteur."

"He was one of my ancestors, Louis Pasteur."

I walked away. I had a feeling it would be something like that. I thought about the people who were very rich and very clever. They always seemed to be one step ahead of you. And despite my being one quarter French, they were the worst. The following day I sent scouts out to reconnoiter the route back to the foot of the Khyber Pass. They came back and reported it was clear, so we made preparations to leave. I thanked Ban, the headman. He refused to take anything in return. All he asked was that we looked after Najela. Luk assured him that he would protect her with his life. He was almost recovered now, and able to walk with only a slight trace of a limp. We set off as before, Rains' men took the point, the Devil's Guard the rear, and

the rest of us fell in between them. Walker slunk along near the back with his men, talking to no one. And no one talked to him. Since I'd punched him after the incident with Rachel, he hadn't spoken to me or anyone else. He was morose and sullen, so I had little doubt that he was planning something unpleasant.

We'd had one strange encounter in a remote hut set off to a far corner of the village. I was walking with Rachel late one evening and noticed Najela's father Ban coming out of the hut. The door was fully open as Ban bowed to the man who sat inside on the floor. A shaft of bright moonlight lit up the interior, and we could both see the man as clear as if it was full daylight. He looked old, very old. He wore a black turban, which could have made him Taliban, and a patch dominated his ancient face over one eye. The other eye seemed to shine, like a miniature searchlight, its beam flashing across the distance between us until I felt myself caught in some kind of powerful and invisible force. He stared straight at me for a few moments, and I felt the power of the man reach out to me. He wore the traditional tribal robes of the Afghans, except that they were in better repair than most I'd seen. Their cut was more severe, complimenting the severity of his face. Then two tough looking men looked out, saw me, and one of them glared and pulled the door shut. Ban rushed up to us, and he looked distressed.

"You should not be here. This area is private."

"Who is he?" I asked Ban. "Is he some kind of holy man, your mullah, perhaps?"

"He is holy man, yes. Not be here. You go."

We got the message and left. But for the rest of the evening, I wondered about that mysterious man in the hut. The village of Yaluk was famous all over Afghanistan for its skilled natural healers. Was that guy a kind of master, or was he himself a patient? And that face, the sheer, raw power that I'd glimpsed. He was no ordinary man, which was for sure.

* * *

Master Sergeant Carol Wendelski took over the console from Vernon Munch. He'd been sat doing nothing, as he wasn't cleared for the Reaper. He'd spent his shift playing a multi-million dollar computer game, the Reaper simulator. It was a lot of fun, but after the first few hours as boring as hell.

"I envy you, Sarge, getting your hands on that baby. You gonna launch any of those missiles today?"

She smiled, but she was looking at the console, waiting to sit down and get her hands on the controls. To give the orders to launch, and then look down on her domain like a God of all she surveyed, with the power of life or death over it. Munch finally got up and left, and she sat down and called up her flight crew in Kabul.

"This is Creech calling Kabul. I'm all ready to go here. What's the status of the bird?"

"All ready for the preflight checks, Master Sergeant."

"Ok, let's get this show on the road."

Fifteen minutes later, she was airborne, watching the fearsome landscape roll past from five thousand feet. Now where were those infantry guys, and what happened to them?

# Chapter Ten

*The enemy will have to quit the region with humiliation and disgrace. Afghans have a history of expelling their enemies as no enemy and invader has quit Afghanistan willingly.*

*Mullah Omar*

Joe Ashford put down the telephone and sat thinking for several long minutes. So they were on their way out. How the hell had they managed to get their hands on a satphone? Still, it made no difference. It meant that the game was still in play, if he could put the whole package together. There were still problems. If the Taliban got their hands on that aircraft, they would certainly destroy it. And there was the question of continuing supplies of product. He bought much of his stock direct from the local growers, and once again that meant Taliban. If he was going to pull this off, he needed to ensure that the aircraft stayed intact, and his suppliers were given protection from the constant threats they faced. That meant ISAF forces destroying the poppy fields, Taliban and local militias extorting massive bribes to allow the growers to continue, and Afghan Army and Police units who demanded their share of the cut. It was complicated, especially now that he had no room for maneuver. He needed someone to help him out, and as far as he knew, there was only one man in Afghanistan who could offer the kind of help he needed. He was Taliban, sure, and he would demand a high price for fixing up any

kind of a deal, but it would be worth it. Thank Christ everyone had their price. What would he want? Money, sure, but the big catch of course would be weapons. These people loved nothing more than a shiny new assault rifle, grenade launcher or fragmentation mine. Yeah, he could arrange plenty of that stuff. Here in Kabul International, there were warehouses full of it. All it needed was a few dollars spread around, maybe some faked CIA paperwork, and he could fill a dozen trucks with ordnance. Money, guns and drugs, they were the currency of Afghanistan. Guns were easy. Afghanistan was full of them. Drugs, no problem. The hard part was moving it around so it could be turned into money.

He took a cellphone out of his safe. It was Agency equipment, and secure from interception by any communications satellites that may be nosing around the skies above this part of the world. In the safe there was also a small notebook, written in a code that only he would understand. He found the number he wanted and called. After five seconds, there was an answer.

"Yes?"

"I need to speak to him."

"No one speaks to him, not ever. You know that."

"This is different. It's more valuable than even he could imagine."

"I doubt it. What do you want?"

"We have the product fixed up, as you know. But I need protection. I have to ensure that nothing goes wrong. This is life or death."

"Everything is life or death, here in God's chosen country."

"Yeah. There's an aircraft on the ground. I need it to get my shipments out, including some of the stuff that was bought from your people. I want his people to protect it."

The man laughed. It was an eerie sound, and almost mechanical, like a malfunctioning engine.

"His people have better things to do than protect an infidel aircraft."

"Without it, there'd be nothing to take out your shipments. How much are you losing on the old routes through Iran?"

"There have been losses, that's true. But still, protecting your aircraft, it sounds absurd. Besides, there is already one of our bands on the way to destroy it."

The fuck there was! "You can stop them, surely?"

"Perhaps."

The line was quiet. Both men knew that the price had yet to be

mentioned, and it would be the deciding factor.

"How does three tons of ordnance sound, that's a total price for the product and the protection? I'll give you assault rifles, grenades, handguns. A couple of light machine guns, maybe."

There was another silence. He knew he'd won. There was no grating laugh in reply to his words this time.

"Five tons, perhaps. That might persuade him."

Gotcha! "Four tons, no more. Any more than that, and I'll call in some mercenary pals of mine."

This time the reply was immediate. "There will be no need to involve others. He has agreed. We will attempt to contact our fighters, and tell them to keep away from the vicinity of the aircraft. I will have the crates ready. Be sure you bring the weapons."

So his boss was there, listening to the conversation. Like tens of thousands of others, he wondered exactly where Mullah Omar was in hiding.

* * *

The journey through the tunnel was easier now that we'd had some rest. We didn't meet any opposition and emerged into the Afghan morning, our eyes blinking to accustom to the sunlight. Once again, the vast grandeur of this cruel but spectacular country was opened up to us. The peaks of the mountains that were the border with Pakistan, the distant hills and peaks, connected by patches of rocky ground, covered with sharp rocks to make cross country journeys painful and hard. The only way to travel was to stay on the main tracks; even these were uncomfortable, and we frequently stumbled on the rugged, pot-holed surface. At last we reached the village at the foot of the road that led up to the Khyber Pass. We were all astonished to see the de Havilland Twin Otter sat between the two warehouse-like buildings, apparently untouched.

"Can you get her off the ground?" Walker asked.

"Maybe, but it's not that simple. There are too many of us, and I'm not planning on leaving a score of people on the ground to be butchered by the Taliban."

"I still own the charter papers on her," he persisted.

"Yes, and I'm running this show, Walker. So you can forget any ideas about taking off and leaving people behind."

"Max, that may not be such a bad idea," Art Schramm interrupted.

“These medics need to get out of here and on their journey to Pakistan. There are still people there that need them. I’m sure Lieutenant Rains can take his men out without any problems. Our two groups can team up until we meet some ISAF forces.”

Rains nodded. “That sounds good to me. The current emergency must end soon, and there’ll be plenty of vehicles moving around again. They’ll pick us up.”

“If you’re sure.” I was doubtful, but it made a lot of sense. The medics were needed elsewhere, and the only quick way to get them out was by air.

They all nodded. “We’ll come with you, Hoffman,” Ed Walker put in. “I’d like to see the medics safely back. It was my mission after all.”

We all grinned. “Right. Before we make any plans, I need to check out the aircraft. Rachel, shall we take a look at her?”

We walked to the ladder and climbed up to the cargo door. I moved the lever to open it and climbed into the dark, cold and silent interior. Rachel followed. We went straight through to the cockpit, and we both started bringing the aircraft’s systems online. There was no immediate problem, so I left Rachel going through the pre-flight checks while I got out and conducted my walkaround check. If it was ever necessary, it was now, when this aircraft had been left unattended in enemy territory for several days. But no one had stolen any parts from the fuselage, and everything looked intact. I watched Rachel checking the operation of the ailerons and flaps. It all looked fine, and so I called over the medical team.

“You may as well get aboard while we prepare for take-off. We should be able to leave in fifteen minutes or so if everything is working.”

“We’ll get aboard too. Come on, men.”

Walker signaled to his two bodyguards to accompany him, and they waited impatiently at the foot of the ladder while the medics boarded. Rains and Art Schramm were together, discussing the best route back. I went over to say goodbye to them both, especially to Art.

“You just get that thing flying, Max. We’ll be seeing you again. Maybe we can meet up for a beer,” he grinned.

“Where are you headed when you get out of here?”

He smiled. “That’s need to know, I’m afraid. But it won’t be a million miles away from here. You’ll be operating out of Kabul International?”

“Yeah, that’s certain, until we can unravel this CIA nonsense.”

“I wish you luck then. We’ll be in and out of Kabul, so we’ll pick up

with you there."

I shook hands with him and then Rains. The American lieutenant did look different to when I'd first encountered him. In the space of a few days, he'd become less hesitant. It was as if the mercenaries had exerted an influence on him in some way. Perhaps he realized that their shocking and brutal style of combat had something to commend it. It wasn't new, the current American doctrine of 'shock and awe', hitting the enemy hard and fast in overwhelming force, proved effective. But until he'd met Schramm's men, he hadn't grasped the way of applying the tactic at platoon level. He'd seen combat now, had been bloodied by the enemy, and then helped to turn the tables and inflict heavy losses on the same enemy. He was a different man.

"Good luck, Lieutenant, I'll see you in Kabul too, no doubt."

"Yeah, I owe you a beer, that's a promise. When we…"

He didn't finish. A line of shots stitched holes in the ground less than a foot away from where we stood. Art reacted first.

"Take cover!"

Everyone hit the ground and started to crawl for the nearest cover, except me. I only had one place to go, the aircraft. I started to run, and behind me, I heard Schramm's men and Rains' troops start to return fire. Walker was framed in the doorway to the cargo hold, and he'd climbed aboard, but when the shots started to whistle around us, he unslung his M4-A1 and started to shoot in the direction of the enemy. I reached the door, took a flying leap inside and shouted to him.

"Walker, get inside. We need to get the door closed and get airborne!"

"The fuck I will. They need all the firepower they can get. Hey, you two," he shouted at his men. They were sat on the floor, trying to ignore the pandemonium that had erupted around them. "Get the fuck out here and start shooting!"

We could take off with the door open. If he fell out, it was his choice. I left him and ran into the cockpit. Rachel was beginning the start up procedure. She turned a white face towards me.

"I didn't have time for the pre-flight checks. It's anyone's guess if she's ok to fly."

"Just start the engines. If we don't move now, there won't be anything left to get off the ground."

As she went through the engine start procedure, an almost automatic

series of actions, I looked out of the window. From the slightly elevated position of the cockpit, I could see more clearly what was going on. A band of insurgents had arrived, black turbaned Taliban. But instead of preparing an ambush, they had no choice but to fall on the soldiers that they encountered on the ground. And the soldiers fought back hard. A lieutenant, who had discovered what it meant to lead men into battle, led the American infantry, and Art Schramm's mercenaries were capable of giving a Taliban force much larger than this one a severe headache. Bullets struck the fuselage, and I reflected that we'd have more than our share of repairs to make, patching up the holes, when we got back. Bursts of gunfire echoed from the cargo space where Walker and his men were lending their support to the men on the ground. I heard a scream, someone shouted, and one of Walker's men ran into the cockpit.

"It's Ed, he's been hit. You need to get this motherfucker of the ground."

"Is he bad?"

"Bad enough, there's blood everywhere. He needs a hospital. That doctor is looking at him now, but he's going to need blood, that's for sure. I don't think he's got long."

The guy looked concerned, which surprised me. Ed Walker's men were not the kind to be worried about the fate of their fellow man. Then it came to me. Ed Walker was the meal ticket. Without him, their well-paid employment may come to a premature end.

The engines roared to life, and I turned my attention back to getting the Twin Otter off the ground. As we taxied towards the ribbon of the tarmac road, I could see the mercenaries going forwards in short rushes, from cover to cover. As they ducked out of sight of the enemy, they proceeded to lay down a curtain of fire to cover their comrades coming in from behind them. At the rear, Rains' men laid down further fire that served to make it all but impossible for the insurgents to look out from behind cover without receiving a bullet in the head for their pains. It was like watching a well-oiled machine going forward, and I had little doubt that the end of the Taliban warband was imminent.

"Max, the road, it's blocked!"

I looked forward as Rachel shouted. It explained why we hadn't seen them before; the insurgents had been busy building a roadblock to prevent take-off. It was out of sight of the area where the aircraft had been parked on

the ground. They'd piled rocks onto the road, several tons of them. It had all been done so swiftly and silently that we had no idea it was there.

"I'll take the controls," I snapped at Rachel.

She took her hands off the column, and I steered the aircraft slowly towards and then around the obstruction. As I bumped back onto the tarmac road, Rachel turned urgently to speak to me.

"You won't be able to take off, Max. There's not enough room to clear those rocks."

"Except that it slopes uphill just before their roadblock."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like the ski-jump they use on aircraft carriers. We might be able to use the same principle. Didn't you see that kind of thing when you flew military?"

"I was USAF, not Navy. We didn't have aircraft carriers."

"Right. Well, that's the principle anyway. It was a British invention, an alternative to the catapult system. The ski-jump ramp at the end of a runway or flight deck allows an aircraft to make a running start to transition a portion of its forward momentum into upward motion. The idea is that the additional altitude and upward angled flight path from the jump provides extra time, until the forward airspeed generated by the engine thrust is high enough to maintain level flight."

"You're not serious? Making it work on this roadway may be a little different, of course."

"You don't say."

I ignored her sarcastic rejoinder and concentrated on steering the aircraft. We reached the end of the tarmac road at the point where it disappeared into a sharp bend between two low hills, and which were too close together for the aircraft wings to fit between them. I spun her through one hundred and eighty degrees and looked ahead.

"It's awfully short, Max."

I nodded. "It's all we have."

The brakes were full on. I pushed the throttles forward, the twin turboprops built up speed, and the airframe started to shake as it strained against the leash of the wheelbrakes.

"For God's sake, Max, she'll tear herself apart."

But it was the only way. "Nearly there. My grandmother told me that my grandfather used to shout 'Hals und Beinbruch', break a neck and a leg,

as they went into the area of maximum danger. Kind of a German good luck thing."

"Max!"

I let the brakes off, and the Twin Otter leapt forward. It was all we could do to keep it on the narrow ribbon of tarmac. Rachel was right, the rocks were awfully close, but I figured we had to try it. There could be another Taliban force on their way to reinforce the first group, and we may find ourselves under mortar or machine gun fire to add to the difficulties of the roadblock. The rocks came nearer, nearer still. To her credit, Rachel didn't close her eyes even though she must have been tempted.

"Are we full out?" I shouted at her. "Can you increase power at all?"

"You're right forward on the stops, Max. There's nothing else."

"Ok, hang on."

Then we were on it, and I felt the nosewheel start to rise as it ran onto the slope, then the rear wheels. It was now or never, so I heaved on the control column just as the aircraft hit a bump. That bump in the ground saved us. It was enough to nudge the aircraft upwards, and I felt the propellers biting as they screamed against the wind, clawing for a hold, battling for some kind of altitude. There was another bump from the undercarriage as the tires hit the rocks a glancing blow. I refused to sacrifice speed for height, and for several hundred yards we flew only a few feet of the ground. Then I pulled back gently, and we started to climb. We'd made it.

"I feel sick."

I looked across at her and grinned. "Maybe it was a little close."

"Close! Jesus Christ, we brought half that roadblock with us. I'll bet we find pieces of rock tangled in the undercarriage."

"Souvenirs. Rachel, would you go back and see how Ed Walker is. He got hit badly before we left. Shit, hang on!"

The vast curtain of the Hindu Kush loomed in front of us, and we were about two thousand feet too low to clear it. The terrifying rock face loomed towards us, filling the cockpit windshield.

"Rachel! Hard to starboard, we'll need to fly adjacent to the mountain range until we've got enough height to cross."

I heaved on the control column, kicked on the rudder and fed in as much right aileron as I could manage to drop the right wing. The de Havilland almost dropped perpendicular on the starboard wing as it came around, slowly. The rocks were near, too near!"

“Bank her harder, it’s our only chance.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“Rachel, this isn’t a test, pull!”

We both put all of our effort into turning away from the rocks that waited to end our flight almost before it began. There were shouts from the back of the aircraft as the passengers were tossed around, but I didn’t have time to worry. Inch by inch we clawed our way free of the mountain range. At last we could see clear sky in front of windshield. When I was satisfied we’d averted disaster, I asked Rachel to check on Ed Walker. She came back a few minutes later, her face grave.

“He’s dying. He said he needs to talk to you, and it’s urgent. I’ll take her from here.”

“What does he want?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you go and see?”

I handed over, and she continued climbing to clear the mountains. I went aft to where he lay on an old tarpaulin. His lifeblood had drained into it so that the canvas had taken on the sheen of a wet oil slick, but this was a blood slick. He was white, struggling to speak. I bent nearer and put my ear close to his mouth.

“Tell them to give me some room. This is for your ears only,” he whispered.

The medics and bodyguards heard him and went further down the cabin. As Yves walked away, he caught my eyes and shook his head.

“How do you feel?” I asked Walker.

It was a stupid question to ask a dying man with multiple bullet wounds. His lips bared in the ghastly parody of a smile.

“I’ve been better.”

“We’ll get you to Peshawar very soon. There’s a good hospital there.”

“Yeah, fuck you, Hoffman. I’m finished, and you all know it. There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Ed, it’s ok. Why don’t you try and rest.”

“No time,” he whispered, his voice even fainter. “Your satphone, you’ll find it in my pack. I told Kyle to give it back to you.”

“Ok.”

“Joe Ashford, he…”

He bucked then as the agony hit him hard. I waited for a few minutes until the spasm had died away. He tried to speak again, but it was barely

audible.

"What? What is it about Joe Ashford?"

"He's…deal…" I waited again.

"Mullah Omar."

"Mullah Omar? The leader of the Taliban?"

"Yeah. Weird, ain't it? But listen, he…"

Another spasm, and I waited to hear the rest of it.

"It's a double-cross. They think he's on their side, but…"

Then he died. A fountain of blood spurted from his mouth, and I leapt aside to avoid it. Yves was watching and rushed over, but it was too late. Something internal had ruptured from the bullet wounds, and it had pushed his body beyond the limit at which it could survive. His men came over and looked down at their boss.

"He's dead." I looked up and stared at them, but there was no reaction.

"He told me about the satphone, would you let me have it later and cover the body. We'll bury him when we land."

One of the men folded the bloody canvas over the body. The other lit a cigarette and sat down, smoking quietly. He saw me watching him. "Stupid bastard, he led us into that trap and got most of the men killed. Good riddance."

I nodded. "Some epitaph."

Back in the cockpit, I told Rachel what he'd said. She looked puzzled.

"But, who thinks he's on their side? And who is he double-crossing?"

I shook my head. "It beats me. The Taliban, I assume."

"But that makes no sense. They wouldn't trust an American CIA man, so how could he double-cross them?"

She had a point there.

"So maybe it's the Americans, ISAF, the CIA, even the Afghan government."

"But why?"

A new voice called out a reply. "Drugs."

It was one of Walker's men, the one who'd covered Walker's body. I still didn't know his name. He was short, thin and wiry, probably for Special Forces; like so many mercenaries and security contractors I'd come across, especially lately. He saw my raised eyebrows.

"I guess it's time we were introduced. I'm Saul Madden, and the other guy back there is Kyle McDonald."

It was the most words I'd heard him speak. I nodded.

"Ok, well, I guess you know who I am."

He grinned. "Yeah, the guy whose gonna get us back safe."

"I hope so. What's this drugs business?"

"I wasn't gonna say anything, but I've about had enough. The cause of all this trouble is Joe Ashford. The guy's a fucking lunatic."

"The drugs?" I prompted.

"Yeah, I guess you know why he's here in Afghanistan. He's building up a bank balance, something to retire back to the States with."

"I doubt he's the only one doing that, Saul."

"Maybe not, but he's probably the only one whose sacrificing his own people to do it. It was Ashford who put Ed Walker in command of the team, when he knew the guy didn't know squat about military operations."

"But why?"

"Yeah, good question. The only people we can figure out who got any benefit were the Taliban."

"He's working for the enemy?"

Saul shook his head. "I wouldn't go that far, but it's possible. I think it's more likely he deals drugs from these Taliban people, buying them direct and shipping them out Stateside. And in the process, he wouldn't want to put anyone too experienced in command, in case it upset his business contacts. He sends us people out into the field, and we have the occasional success, but not against the big guys. It's always the little ones, like the last mission. A few local leaders, that's about it. The time before we destroyed a bombmaking shop. Only trouble was there wasn't enough material there to make a Fourth of July rocket."

"So how does he run his operation?"

"Like I say, he does just enough to convince the brass that he's serious. On the side he makes his drug deals."

"The bastard," I murmured. "So he's giving the Taliban the money to buy weapons to use against his own people."

"Money? I didn't say anything about money," Saul exclaimed.

"No? If not money, what does he give them in exchange?"

It was a puzzle, and Saul supplied the answer I was least expecting.

"Guns."

The enormity of the double-cross astonished me. So that's what Walker meant. He was selling US military equipment to the Taliban for them to use

against US troops. Not actually selling it, exchanging it for drugs with which to destroy the nation's youth.

"We have to do something about it. The guy sounds completely out of control."

"Hey, buddy, a word of advice. Don't fuck with Joe Ashford. Don't even think about it. He's more poisonous than a hungry rattler, and a thousand times meaner. He's got contacts all over the country, back in the US too. Not just CIA, either, he's pretty tight with the drug people."

"So what the hell do I do?"

"Same as me, my friend. Nothing. There's nothing you can do, not if you want to live."

"What about your comrade, Kyle? How does he feel?"

Saul shrugged. "He's in it for the money. If he's got any conscience, I haven't seen it yet. I don't talk to him about it."

Shortly after, I had to help Rachel navigate to Peshawar. Saul returned to the cargo hold, and Luk came forward with Najela.

"You don't mind her sitting up front with me?"

He looked better, much better. Still pale, obviously recovering, but he was doing better than any of us had expected. And as for Najela, anything that helped him recover had to be a good thing. I grinned.

"I'm always in favor of some extra company up front, especially someone as pretty as Najela."

He signed what I'd said to her, and she looked away, not used to compliments from male strangers. If, as I suspected, Luk intended taking her home to Thailand, she'd have to get used to them. And enjoy them, if she was like most women.

* * *

Joe Ashford finished the brief conversation that had come in from Kyle McDonald on the aircraft. So Ed Walker was dead. That was too bad, he'd have to find a replacement, and maybe bring out some snot-nosed youngster from Langley. He'd lost most of his men, so he wouldn't be able to blame anyone else for his shortcomings. He'd have to remember to keep his promise to reward Kyle McDonald for giving him the heads up. What he'd said could be serious. Kyle suspected that Walker had blabbed to that fucking pilot, Max Hoffman, before he'd died. What had he told him? He'd have to assume the worst, and that he'd told him everything about his operations. It was too bad,

but Ashford couldn’t allow that kind of info to get back to his masters in Washington. That meant Hoffman would have to be dealt with very soon. How could he organize that? Oh yeah, Mullah Omar. He’d help, in return for a favor. Ashford knew that Omar operated a base in Pakistan, guarded by the Pakistani Secret Police. The Inter-Services Intelligence, ISI, was Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, and responsible for providing critical intelligence assessment to the Government of Pakistan. Its work had included supporting the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban against the Indian and Iranian-backed Northern Alliance in the Afghanistan Civil War in the 1990s. The connection to the Taliban had withstood the American backed invasion, and they made certain that the Taliban facilities were safely guarded well away from the American spy drones. Omar’s base was near the stricken village. All he’d need to do would be to order Hoffman to fly into the nearby airfield to get aid into the village as fast as possible. Then make sure that Omar’s fighters took him out. In return for the favor, they’d be welcome to help themselves to the medical supplies. What was it Joseph Stalin had said? ‘Death solves all problems - no man, no problem’. It was neat, and it would work.

## Chapter Eleven

*What we need to do is to correct some of the ways we operated in the past. We need to show the kind of resolve and the imagination in some cases to do this smarter and to do it right.*

*General Stanley McChrystal*

“Let’s have it, Charlie, what’s the current situation?”

Marine General Daniel Westwood stared at his intelligence officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Brooks. The atmosphere in the room had changed from the last time they’d met here. Then, the whole country was in crisis. But after several days of fierce fighting, they were regaining the upper hand. The other officer present, Lieutenant Colonel Vance Everard, was about to be let off the leash. Defensive operations were almost over, and his new mission was to seek out and destroy the enemy, wherever he could find them. Westwood went to the wallmap and used a pointer to illustrate his talk.

“We’ve got ‘em beat, Sir, no matter where you look. They’ve been

given a bloody nose, here, here and here. Even Helmand Province is back under our control. The time is ripe to counterattack and give them a real bloody nose."

"Good. Vance, are you ready to go?"

"I am, General. The boys are getting cabin fever, stuck behind the defensive lines. They're waiting to go out and finish these bastards. You heard about my infantry, Sir?"

Westwood nodded. "I did, it's good news. A pity about their losses, but they shouldn't have been ordered to go out in those M113s. When this is over, I want that bastard hung, drawn and quartered. Make sure you deal with it, Vance."

"I hear you, General. He'll answer for what he did, don't worry about it."

"Good. Those mercs who helped them out of there, does anyone know where they're at?"

"They're still here, General. We brought them in and gave them facilities to clean up, some hot food and a good night's sleep. Last I heard, they were checking out their weapons ready to make their way back to Peshawar."

Westwood grunted. "Damn, I'd like to thank them personally. And that pilot, Hoffman, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, he did good work. He's in Peshawar, working on a CIA backed contract."

"Peshawar, eh? Pity, he sounds like a resourceful guy. Let me know if he's ever up for grabs, we need contractors like him in country. He's wasted with the CIA." He turned to his intelligence officer. "You get any more leads on Mullah Omar? The President is anxious to see that guy taken down. Wasn't he supposed to be somewhere near Peshawar? I guess that after discovering Bin Laden's hidey hole, we can assume that our Pakistani intelligence friends are offering him the same cozy hospitality?"

Colonel Brooks nodded. "I've no doubt, Sir. He's sure to stay close to the border, Tora Bora, the Khyber Pass. It's easy to slip away in bandit country."

"Keep on it, I'd like to catch up with that character. Fix up for me to meet those mercs. I mean it. They're not leaving here without a handshake. And good luck, Vance, ace those suckers."

"Yes, Sir."

Both colonels saluted and left. One of them to get his wish and go out on the warpath; the other to continue his patient tracking of the important Taliban targets, and one target more important than any of the others.

* * *

We landed in Peshawar, in an airfield that was dominated by Pakistani military aircraft and helicopters. The airfield was surrounded by rolls of barbed wire, and with sandbagged machine gun emplacements at regular interviews. Not exactly a fun holiday destination. I taxied over to the Double Eagle hangar and switched off. Joe Ashford waited outside to greet us next to a pair of white painted SUVs. While the medics helped unload the body of Ed Walker, I climbed down to meet him. He stared at the lifeless form of his subordinate.

"How'd it happen, Hoffman?"

I explained how we'd been hit by a last minute Taliban attack just as we were preparing to leave. He looked angry, which I guess was to be expected.

"There was nothing anyone could do?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, just bad luck."

He grunted. "That's too bad. I asked for a replacement officer to be sent out from Langley, and he should be here in a few days."

"Replacement? How did you know he was dead? I thought you only just found out."

"Oh, yeah. But he was about to be promoted, so the new guy was already lined up for the job."

It sounded a bit lame to me, but I couldn't work out any possible way he could have known, except the satphone. Of course, I hadn't recovered Luk's satphone. So maybe one of his men had contacted Ashford direct, but who? Kyle Macdonald, probably, but it could have been either of them. I made a mental note to ask for the return of the phone. It belonged to Luk, or his father Abe. The medics had cleared the aircraft, and a gang of cargo handlers was loading a number of wooden crates.

"What's going on, Mr. Ashford? No one said anything about another cargo to me. She's shot full of holes. We need time to repair the damage and make sure there's nothing badly damaged."

He leered at me. He was so huge, I felt as if I was facing a hungry bear. "As I recall, your contract is to run cargos, not hide in a maintenance hangar. This one can't wait. It's a humanitarian mission."

“I prefer that to running guns and mercenaries.”

“I couldn’t give a shit what you prefer. There’s a cargo of medical supplies waiting at Kabul that needs to be delivered to Kakulah. That’s the village those MCF medics are heading for. There’s no point in going out empty, so they’re loading a cargo for me right now. You’ll need to collect the medical supplies from Kabul, and then make a stop on the way back to Pakistan to unload the cargo they’re putting aboard now. It’s an easy stop close to the border. They have a temporary airfield, no control tower or landing lights, but it’s no sweat for a daylight landing.”

“Is there a strip at Kakulah?”

“There’s a flat field, it’s been used before, and you’ll have no trouble getting down.”

“And what’s this other cargo?”

“It’s just my cargo, Hoffman. That’s all you need to know. I want a fast turnaround, so get your wheels up inside of two hours.”

I left him then and went to supervise the loading of the cargo. The wooden crates were heavy, very heavy, so I assumed they carried weapons of some sort. Walker’s two men, McDonald and Madden, had their things together ready to leave. I went over to them.

“I’d like Luk’s satphone back if you don’t mind.”

Saul Madden looked surprised. Clearly, he hadn’t realized it had been stolen. McDonald opened his pack without a word and handed it to me.

“I trust the satphone was useful to you,” I remarked.

“Yeah, it worked fine.”

“Good. I’d hate for Joe Ashford to be left out of the loop.”

He glanced at me in surprise, then shrugged and left. Madden started to follow, but he turned and shook hands.

“I never knew he’d taken that phone. Did it cause you any problems?”

“No. Joe Ashford doesn’t need any help to make our lives difficult.”

“You’re right there.” He seemed to stop and think. “Look, are you returning to Kabul?”

“Yes, we are. Why?”

“Could I bum a ride? I’ve had a gut full of Joe Ashford and the psychos he had on his payroll. I need to look for a new contract, and there’s plenty of work going there.”

“I imagine there is. You’re not planning to ask Ashford for a new job?”

He grinned. “In your dreams. I lost some good friends when Walker led

our people into that ambush. It was Ashford who put him in charge, and he knew the guy was inexperienced. I don't need that kind of work."

"I guess not. I'd be glad to take you back to Kabul. We leave in two hours, maybe less, so stick around."

"I appreciate that, Max. How about I wander over to the passenger terminal and rustle up some coffee?"

I nodded. "It'll pay the fare to Kabul."

I handed Luk the satphone, and he nodded his thanks. He stuffed it into his pack and was about to speak when Najela signed something to him.

"She says that she'd like to make a quick visit to her uncle who lives here in Peshawar. He lives close to the airfield, so we'll be back in just over an hour."

"Ok, but don't be late. It's a long walk to Kabul."

They waved and walked over to the terminal where there was a line of waiting taxis. Rachel had been in the cockpit, making the usual shutdown checks and calculating the figures. She jumped down.

"So we're going back to Kabul?"

"That's right."

"I've calculated the fuel, and the tanks are just under half full. It's not a problem, provided we don't fly to any distant destinations with no refueling facilities."

I explained that we had a series of short hops, to Kabul, a stop on the return leg, close to the border, and then back into Pakistan with the medical supplies.

"I'd assume that we'll be come back here, to Peshawar, for the next cargo."

She looked doubtful. "That won't be a problem, but if Ashford wants us to pick up anything else, we could run low on gas."

"I'll tell him to keep it in mind."

We stood in silence for a few moments, watching the activity taking place around us. A military helicopter clattered in for a landing. A few minutes after a commercial jet made its final approach and dropped neatly onto the tarmac. It had the letters PIA stenciled on the fuselage, Pakistan International Airlines. Their safety reputation wasn't the most envied in Asia, and more than once I'd been advised to stay clear of them. Maybe it was true, or maybe it was sour grapes.

"I'm sick of this," Rachel spat out abruptly in a show of passion that

surprised me.

"Sick of what? Pakistan, Afghanistan? Or something else?"

"Working for the CIA. When we've finished the immediate contract, I'd like to get out. For both of us to get out and start again."

I thought about that. The airline industry was in dire straits worldwide, and they were going broke in large numbers.

"It won't be easy to get a regular job flying commercial," I pointed out.

"I realize that. But if we can get out of this with a single aircraft intact, say the Twin Otter or something like it, we could make a new start. I don't care where we fly, or what cargoes we carry, except for drugs and guns, of course. But I draw the line at the CIA. I'd almost prefer to fly cargoes for the Taliban."

"Almost," I grinned.

"Yeah, ok. Almost."

"I agree. We'll finish up this current contract, and we're out of here. Even if we don't get out with the aircraft intact, we'll find a way to start again."

"The two of us?"

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her long and hard.

"That's a given. I'm not letting you go, Rachel."

"Do you love me, Max?" she asked, her eyes misty but watching me carefully.

"I love the fact that I don't have to pay you wages."

She pushed me away. "You bastard. Is that it?"

I reached for her again. "No, that's not it. Of course I love you."

"It's not just the slave labor pay rates?"

I chuckled. "That does help."

She punched me on the arm. "Bastard."

But it was an affectionate blow. She was one tough girl, and if she punched me and meant it, I'd sure know it.

Saul returned with three coffees, not quite Starbucks, but it was fresh and hot. We drank it and began making the preflight checks for the short flight to Kabul. A taxi rolled up, and Luk got out with Najela. They looked unhappy about something as they climbed aboard. I wondered whether to ask them about it but decided it was their business. Rachel started engines, and I radioed the tower for clearance. They were not quite ready for us, and we had to wait while a pair of Pakistan Air Force F16s swooped in for a landing.

Rachel watched them in frank admiration.

"Hey, look at those two beauties. I was too late to fly one of those. They're obsolete in the USA, but they're still a great aircraft."

"They're sure nice to look at."

"They call them the Fighting Falcon," she went on. "Look at them, a frameless bubble canopy that give all round visibility. They have a side-mounted control stick to ease control while maneuvering, and a fly-by-wire flight control system that makes them handle like a racing car. They carry an internal M61 Vulcan cannon and eleven hardpoints for mounting weapons and other mission equipment. They kick ass, those babies."

"Rachel, let's concentrate on getting this particular baby airborne first."

"Yeah, boss, I hear you," she grinned. The tower came on with our clearance now that the Pakistani military aircraft had landed, and we taxied out to the main runway and took off for Kabul.

The flight to Kabul wasn't quite uneventful. Luk had been back in the cargo space with Najela. They came forward and sat on the jump seats. They obviously had something important to say, so I waited. Rachel was flying the plane, grinning from ear to ear. We both expected them to announce an engagement or something like that. They'd got so close in the past few days it was impossible to imagine one without the other.

"Max, Rachel, there's something important Najela has to say," Luk began.

"Hey, don't hide behind her," Rachel shouted good naturedly, "speak up for yourself."

He looked mystified. "But, it's about her uncle, about what he said."

Rachel and I exchanged glances. It wasn't what we expected.

"Ok, Luk, shoot! What did he say?"

"It's a message from her father in Yaluk. He wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing keeping it secret, but he decided he wanted you to know. It's about the man you saw in the stone hut on the outskirts of the village."

I pictured him, the magnetic gaze, and the astonishing sense of overwhelming strength in the feeble body.

"Luk, don't string it out. What has he found, a cure for cancer? Or is it for AIDS?"

"Neither. He's there for treatment, and he's very ill. His name is Omar."

"Ok, and?"

Then it hit me, like a meteorite in the guts. "You don't mean…?"

“Yes. Mullah Omar. He’s there for treatment, and Yaluk was the only place that would treat him.”

“Christ, Luk, we were there with a force of infantry and mercenaries. We could have picked him up and walked out with him. And we didn’t know!”

He shrugged. Najela looked miserable. “He couldn’t make his mind up whether to pass on the information or not. But since we left, he started to get serious about the women, making them cover up, you know what they’re like. His men punished a couple of women who defied him. They were whipped, and it was nasty. They thought that the presence of Western soldiers meant that they could relax a bit, but he cracked down hard. Ban said he was sickened by it.”

“So what the hell do we do with this information, Luk? Pass it on and see the village saturated with drone launched missiles?”

“That’s your choice, Max. You’re still the boss.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

There were times when I regretted that title. Times when I’d like to walk away, and let someone else take responsibility. And then I thought of my grandfather. He’d earned his spurs in Russia, fighting as an SS officer, and battling the overwhelming Red hordes that fanatically defended their homeland from Hitler’s invading armies. Then he’d joined the French Foreign Legion and earned a reputation as a tough and uncompromising warrior. And then he’d started his airline, the one that I was faced with losing. What would he do? But the answer was simple. He’d fight to his last breath. So be it. I’d work this problem through, and all the others as well.

Once more the military held us up. Flocks of helicopters were taking off, followed by a squadron of F18 fighter jets. From a far corner of the airfield, I could see a ground crew getting ready to launch a drone, one of the Predators or even the lethal Reaper, the MQ-9. Finally, we received our clearance, and I took her straight in for a landing. I taxied over to the cargo area where a ground crew was waiting to unload the cargo. Saul came into the cockpit.

“I wanted to thank you for the ride. Is there anything more I can do?”

I was about to say no, but something flashed across my mind. He was a tough, brutal fighter, and no friend of Joe Ashford. I remembered the old proverb, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’.

“Saul, we could do with someone to guard the aircraft, at least until we

know what's happening around here."

"You think Ashford will try something funny?"

I shrugged. "I've no idea. But we've had enough problems lately, and I'd like to be ready if something did happen. At least until we're out of his hair."

He nodded. "I'd be glad to. I'll stay by the aircraft as long as you wish."

"I can't pay you, Saul. Not yet, anyway."

"If I get a shot at Ashford, it'll be worth it."

I smiled. "I think you've just joined a long queue."

I sat in the cockpit filling in the flight log, chatting idly to Rachel, when a military police Humvee rolled up and a squad of MPs jumped out. They stood outside the cockpit window, and I slid it open.

"What's up?"

"Max Hoffman?"

"That's me."

"We want you to come with us, Sir."

"Where to?"

"To Camp Phoenix."

"And if I don't?" I had a bad feeling about this. What the hell had I done wrong?"

The MP sighed. He looked hard and competent, and probably a veteran of countless Saturday night squabbles between rival groups of soldiers. He wasn't particularly tall, maybe five feet eight inches, but his body was about the same width.

"It'd be better if you didn't force it, Mr. Hoffman."

"Ok, no need for any rough stuff, I'll come."

"I'll come too," Rachel exclaimed.

"There's no need, I'll be fine."

"Yeah, but I've seen these military types. I don't want you railroaded by some desk jockey colonel. I'm coming."

"Luk, stay here with Najela. Keep an eye her, and on the aircraft."

He nodded. "Don't worry, I'll keep everything safe."

The MPs escorted us into the Humvee. It was cramped and hot when they piled in after us. It was only a short drive to Camp Phoenix. It was one of the most depressing places I'd seen. The journey through the impoverished capital was bad enough; ragged civilians, beggars, cripples, women in blue burqas, and men driving donkeys loaded with miscellaneous goods. I doubted

it was much different to the way it looked hundreds of years ago. The presence of motor cycles and battered old trucks struck a modern chord, as did the occasional military unit, soldiers with M-16s patrolling the streets, fully kitted for war in camouflage uniform, Kevlar helmets and full body armor. There sure was a long way to go before this war was anywhere near won. Camp Phoenix did nothing to lift my spirits. Concrete and barbed wire were its main features, decorated with sandbags and machine guns at regular intervals. We drove straight through the gate and stopped at a low building.

"We're here," the sergeant said. "If you'd like to step out of the vehicle, we'll see you inside."

I bet you just would, I thought. We walked through the double doors, flanked by the MPs. Inside, stood a group of soldiers. They looked as if they were waiting for us. Then I nearly collapsed with shock. They clapped and cheered. One soldier stepped forward, and his cap had four stars on it.

"I'm General Mann. Congratulations on what you did for my men. You saved a lot of lives. My thanks to you, Sir."

"That's ok, General. They'd have done the same for us."

"Yes. Come on inside my office, Son. I want to hear all about it. Someone bring us a tray of coffee."

We sat down in his office, and I looked around. It was austere and functional, maps pinned to the walls, filing cabinets, and a huge desk. Apart from the folding chairs, there was little more furniture on display. I had to go through the account of our encounter with Lieutenant Rains and the MSF medics, the fight with the insurgents at the foot of the Khyber Pass, and their rescue by Art Schramm's men. Then our subsequent flight through the tunnel and the take-off and flight to Peshawar.

"So that's about it, General. Here we are."

"You did well, Hoffman. Damn well. I gather your grandfather was something of a military hero?"

So I had to explain again about his beginnings in Russia, then the Foreign Legion, and finally his fledgling airline. I got the impression that he took in every single detail. This wasn't a man who'd got where he was by missing any part of a conversation. When I'd finished telling him about Jurgen Hoffman, he had more questions.

"What about the CIA? I gather you're working for them."

I nodded. "No disrespect, General, but I'll be finishing this contract, and then I'm out. It's not my kind of employment."

“Too violent?”

I chuckled. “It’s a violent world, Sir. No, it’s not the violence that concerns me. It’s more a matter of who you trust.”

“Yeah, they do have a certain reputation. And then, when you move on?”

“If possible, I’ll carry on hauling cargo over South East Asia.”

“Right, we always have cargos looking for aircraft to move them. I’ll keep you in…”

“General, you’re needed urgently on the phone.”

“Can’t it wait?”

“It’s the White House, Sir.”

I got up to leave, but he waved me back to stay. “This’ll only take a moment. Sit yourself down.”

He picked up the phone. “Mr. President. How are you, Sir?”

I only heard one side of the conversation, but it didn’t take a genius to fill in the gaps.

“Things are going well, Sir. Very well. We’ve blunted their attacks, and we’re hitting them back strongly.”

He winced as the other party said something that hit hard.

“That’s true, Sir, but until our intelligence comes up with any…”

He listened again. His eyes closed as a torrent of words slammed into him from several thousand miles away.

“Yes, Sir, I understand. Yes, they’ll keep coming back at us until we cut off the head, but until we find the head…”

He grinned at me, but it was an effort, I could see that.

“You can’t be serious! If we pull out prematurely, it’ll mean another Vietnam for us. That’s unacceptable, Sir…”

“Yes, Sir. How long?”

He looked grave. “I understand, Sir. I’ll do my best.”

He put the phone down and looked at the silent instrument for a few moments. Then he looked up.

“You got the gist of that?”

“I did, yes. He’s not happy.”

“Damn it, Hoffman, I’m not a miracle worker. He’s saying that we’ve got to take out the leadership, and that means Mullah Omar. And that’s like looking for a needle in a haystack. The Man says that we need to catch up with him, like we did Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi, and Noriega in Panama. It

puts an end to things. If we'd taken Giap or Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, history may have been different. He feels that it's a simple equation. Catch up with the bastard or lose." He looked troubled. Very troubled. "You know what really upsets me, Max? It's the women in this damn country. You remember the Taliban using that football ground for executions, women being beheaded in front of masses of people? And for many of them, a quick death is preferable to what they have to put up with here."

I thought of what Luk had told me, in the village where the women had been severely punished for not covering their hair properly. Whipped, beaten tortured. I thought of Rachel. What if someone did that to her? I came to a decision.

"So you need to locate Mullah Omar."

He stared at me. "In a nutshell, yes. That's what we need, and that's what we can't do."

He slumped, and put his head in his hands. I felt sorry for the guy. There was no doubt he was a successful career soldier in an impossible situation. But more than that, I felt sorry for the women of Afghanistan; the women who would suffer the torments of hell if a Taliban dictatorship returned. That was what prompted me to speak.

"I know where he is."

He nodded absently. Then he looked up and stared at me. "Who?"

"Mullah Omar."

"You're kidding, right? No one knows where that guy is."

"I do."

His gaze intensified. "What's the punch line, or the catch? Maybe the price, there has to be something."

I'd given it a lot of thought; how it could play out if I told the Americans where he could be located. I returned the General's gaze. "He's in a village, close to Jalalabad. There's no price, but there is a problem."

"First off, why haven't you said anything before?"

"I only found out on the flight here back from Peshawar."

"Ok. Go on."

"He's in a small, very peaceful village. I'm concerned that if your troops go in heavy handed, or you send over a swarm of drones to rain down a hail of missiles on the place, the village will suffer badly. They could even be wiped out."

"Yeah, collateral damage. It's regrettable, but it's part of modern

warfare."

"I'm sure that's true, General, but I can't allow that to happen here."

"You know these people, these villagers?"

"I've met them, yes."

"Ok, I understand. So what are you proposing, what's the price?"

"Price? I'm not a bounty hunter. I'm just trying to do the right thing."

"I see. Spell it out, Son. I don't understand, what exactly do you want?"

I'd worked out the idea in the short time since Luk had told us of Mullah Omar's whereabouts. Maybe it was crazy, but no, there was no maybe at all. It was crazy. But I wasn't going to stand by while an innocent community was flattened in an awesome display of military power. I couldn't be a party to that kind of indiscriminate bloodletting.

"I want to lead a small party in to arrest him and bring him back. There's no other way to do it without endangering the lives of the innocent civilians around him."

His jaw dropped open. "You? Do you know about this guy? It won't be easy. He's very slippery and very clever. Do you have military experience?"

"Some. A bit."

I winced inside. My military experience had been gained at the expense of a man's life, at the expense of creating a widow, and fatherless children. It was a load I would have to carry all my life, and one I'd need to put aside for the duration of what had to be done to help bring this war to an end.

"A bit! How could you lead a team in on an operation like this? It's crazy!"

"Crazy or not, that's the deal. Lieutenant Rains didn't ask about my military experience before I helped him out."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, that's true."

He hadn't asked me the sixty-four dollar question yet. He was too smart to push me that far, and he knew that I wouldn't part with the location until I was satisfied.

"Tell you what, Max. Why don't I call in some of my staff for a meeting, and we'll toss your ideas around, see if we can't come to some agreement? We need to act fast, before this character changes location."

"There is another problem. I have a cargo on board that the CIA chief, Joe Ashford, wants delivered right away."

"Cancel it. I'll square it with Ashford. Any problems, tell him to talk to me. I'll arrange for the cargo to be unloaded and stored in one of our military

warehouses inside Kabul International. He can arrange for someone else to collect it when he's ready."

"That sounds fine to me. I'll want my co-pilot, Rachel, to join us for this meeting. She is here with me."

"Good. A bit of glamour never did anyone any harm."

* * *

Master Sergeant Carol Wendelski watched her screen carefully. She'd already had a fruitless day. Her Reaper drone wandering the skies of Afghanistan, loaded with the most advanced weaponry known to man, yet found nothing to aim it at. It's ordnance stores of AGM-114 Hellfire II air-to-ground missiles and the GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided bomb, were still safe on the hardpoints, awaiting a successful enemy sighting. It was so frustrating, to be master of such a sophisticated weapon, to know that the bad guys were down there, yet she couldn't locate them. Her headset cracked into life.

"Creech, this is ISAF control Kabul, the Reaper pilot operating north of the Khyber Pass. We have a target for you."

Her blood raced, and she felt the adrenaline high as her nervous system began pumping the blood around her body at an increased rate, readying itself for action.

"This is Creech, MQ-9 operator Wendelski, Master Sergeant. What have you got?"

A minute later, she moved the joystick a fraction, and her bird swung onto a new course. In less than a minute, she was over the new target, or at least, she was at the correct coordinates. Where were they? She banked the Reaper and sent it lower, the unmanned aircraft obediently moved onto a long, curving trajectory that would take it closer to the ground.

* * *

Ismael Raqim never knew why he looked up at that moment. He'd heard nothing, seen no movement or even a shadow. They were the advance party, a small band of fighters to secure the route for the larger warband of a hundred men that followed a mile behind. Their mission was to reach Yaluk village and escort their leader to a new safe house over the border in Pakistan. The venerable Mullah was old and frail. He'd be a sitting target without a fit,

tough escort that could help him across the high mountains. They'd carry him if necessary. In fact, they'd probably have to. One of his men carried a folded gurney on his back in case it was needed. He held up his hand, and the twenty men behind him stopped instantly. At first he saw nothing, but it must have banked, for he saw a reflection from the wings. At once, he shouted a warning.

"Drone! Get under cover!"

His men scrambled off the narrow track they were on and dived behind the loose rocks at the side. He squinted up at the sky, had he acted quickly enough to prevent their discovery?

* * *

There! The human eye often finds it difficult to detect irregular shapes in a scattered and broken landscape. It was the principle on which camouflage was designed. But movement is something else. She saw the movement several thousand feet away and automatically adjusted her controls to bring the drone closer. It was a Taliban warband, there was no question, and they were scattering for cover in the rocks. 'Too late, you assholes', she muttered to herself. She brought up the weapon selector and chose the Hellfire. The aiming system aligned itself to the location of the hidden fighters and flashed a 'ready' warning. She checked across the board, it was all green, no ISAF forces in the area. Nope these were bad guys for sure. Not for much longer! She hit the button and watched the missile fly off the rail and roar straight down to the track. It was uncanny watching it impact, the explosion of smoke and flame, chips of rock, bodies, earth and foliage all flew into the air. Yet it was silent. That was so weird. She took the Reaper down even lower and made several passes over the area. She could see at least three of them still moving. That was no problem, and she selected a second Hellfire, checked the aiming point and fired. The drone was almost on top of them now. The missile launched and within a few seconds had impacted. She moved the controls to climb higher, then circled to inspect the impact site. There was no movement. She'd done her work well. If she'd searched an area half a mile to the north, she may have found what she was looking for. Instead, she spent the time making certain of her kill.

"ISAF control Kabul, this is Creech. Your fire mission successful, repeat successful."

"That's good to know, Master Sergeant. Score one for the good guys."

“Yeah. Let me know if anymore business comes my way.”

“That’s affirmative, Creech. Good work. We’ll keep in touch.”

Carol Wendelski continued on patrol. She’d struck a blow against the enemy, and at last she was blooded. And it felt real good; now for the next one.

* * *

The agony was terrible, more than he would have realized was possible. Ismael Raqim lay on his back. He knew he was dying, as were his men, either dead or dying. He turned his head and saw the pool of blood in which he lay, his blood. He’d failed, failed to provide the protection that his leader so sorely needed. He thought of his wife, waiting for him at home. She’d become very bitter of late. They had three daughters, and she always blamed him for not giving her a son. She said that the lot of women in Afghanistan was so terrible it would have been better if they were not born. He’d wanted to talk to Mullah Omar about her strange ideas, he didn’t understand it. Women in this country were treated entirely according to the laws that were handed down to them. Surely his wife knew that? It should be sufficient. A hot agonizing spasm ripped through his body. He tried to move his head to look for any survivors, but nothing moved. Nothing would save him now, and he could feel a darkness creeping over his body. Perhaps Western medicine, nothing less than their hospitals and drugs would save his life, and that probably wouldn’t be enough. A pity they’d bombed that new hospital in Jalalabad, but there was no choice. His leaders had reported the staff were not obeying the correct Islamic rules, so it had to be destroyed. He closed his eyes for the last time, still not understanding the irony that he had personally destroyed the very institution that may have saved the lives of those men that had survived the Hellfire missiles and lay wounded amongst the rocks. Instead, they would die, like him, as much victims of their own stubborn ignorance as the missiles that exploded amongst them. Now it was up to the men who followed behind.

* * *

Abdul Qadir watched impassively as his advance force was destroyed. It was as well he’d sent them ahead, so that any drone that sighted them could waste their energy wiping them out, and his main force survived. He looked

back at his warband; a hundred men crouched in the shadow of a shallow ravine. They would wait for an hour, to give the cowardly drone enough time to vector to a different location, and then they would move off again. He searched for the man he needed.

"Rashid Osman, take ten men. You will form the new advance party. Move off in half an hour, and watch for any movement in the sky."

His man nodded. "You think the enemy drone will be gone by then, Commander?"

"It should be, yes. If it has not, you will be attacked. Better a few men than our entire force. This mission is holy, and it cannot be allowed to fail."

"As the Prophet wills it, we are certain to succeed," Osman replied. It was the correct response to his leader's order. But he looked up and scanned the sky, trying to hide his inner qualms. All of them had seen the explosions, and the debris hurled into the sky. They all knew that some of that debris was all that remained of their friends. Some men had brothers who'd been slaughtered in the drone attack. It was not the way of the fighter for Islam, for their bodies to be ripped apart and tossed in the air like so much rubbish. Yet there was nothing he could do. It was the sensible way to send an advance party. It was just a pity that it hadn't been someone else to lead it.

# Chapter Twelve

*We are certain that NATO member states will take more effective steps to accelerate the readiness of the Afghan National Army and police. This is the only way that Afghanistan's wish for the soldiers of our friends to return to their countries soon can come true, and for the Afghans themselves to take full responsibility of their security… We hope that the Afghan forces will lead the task of security and stability throughout the country in the coming five years.*

*Hamid Karzai*

"Secure the room, Colonel. I don't want any of this getting out."

The room had cleared after the meeting. Marine General Daniel Westwood waited until his intelligence officer came back and reported that they had total privacy. Only then would he continue. Without Max Hoffman. He glanced at his infantry commander, Lieutenant Colonel Vance Everard.

“What’s your state of readiness, Vance?”

“One hundred percent, Sir. We’re ready to go out and hit the enemy hard wherever they are. This defensive posture is getting on all our nerves. The men are raring to go. All we need is a target.”

“You may have one. It’s a biggie.”

“How big?”

“As high as they come.”

“Jesus Christ, that can only mean Mullah Omar.”

“I’m not sure the connection with Jesus is appropriate for that one-eyed murderer, but yes, that’s who we’re looking at.”

He went on to explain the report from Hoffman, and his insistence on leading a small force in to arrest him and bring him back to face trial.

“That kid?” Everard scoffed. “He’s not an American, not even military. We don’t know where the hell he’s from.”

“He’s one quarter American, actually,” General Westwood corrected him. “And the rest French. He’s a skilled pilot, the son of a war hero, and he did fine work helping your Lieutenant Rains out of trouble. I wouldn’t underestimate him. Besides, he’s the only one who knows where this Mullah Omar is holed up.”

“Even so, we’re talking about the Taliban leader. It’s a hell of a gamble, letting him go it alone.”

“Not quite alone, Vance. He’ll have Rains’ men along with him.”

“It’s not enough. He needs more.”

The General nodded. “I don’t want to risk too many casualties amongst our own men, Colonel. Rains’ platoon is enough for the initial recce. If this goes wrong, I don’t want more of our troops at risk.”

“What about the Delta Force?” Colonel Brooks suggested. “This kind of mission is right up their street.”

“Except we don’t know where to send them. But it’s a good idea. Contact their CO, have him shadow Hoffman’s unit with some of his men. If they use helicopters, they can stay well back and get in quick if the shit hits the fan. You’re right. It’s their kind of work. Get in fast, do the job and get out fast.” The General was quiet for a few moments, thinking hard. “That gives me an idea. Are those mercenaries still in town, Schramm and his men?”

“They are, Sir. They’re helping drink the local PX dry, last time I heard. They were due to fly out but their principal cancelled on them, so they’re

waiting for their next contract."

"Maybe we could offer them one?"

Colonel Everard stared at the General. "Mercenaries?"

The intelligence officer, Lieutenant Colonel Brooks, leaned forward. "Sir, that's against military law. We can't do that. The President would have us hung, drawn and quartered."

General Westwood fixed him with an intense stare. "Vance, do you think I'm that crazy?"

Everard looked down. "No, of course not, Sir."

"No. We are only allowed by our UN charter to employ security personnel. My proposal is that we offer Schramm and his men a temporary security contract. They'll travel with Hoffman and Rains, who incidentally they got on well with, according to my reports. That'll be a tight, compact force to send in."

"Excuse me, General," Colonel Brooks, the intelligence officer interjected. "That's still not much more than platoon strength. Against this man, Omar, it's not enough. Not if we want to be sure."

"You're right, Charlie. That's why I asked Colonel Everard to stay here to listen. My intention is for him to track Hoffman's force at a distance, and be ready to move in at a moment's notice if he runs into trouble."

Both Colonels smiled. "I assume Hoffman knows nothing about this?" Brooks asked.

"No, nothing. And it's to stay that way. Clear?"

They both nodded.

"Good. Let's go over your strength, Vance. How about APCs, you've plenty of Strykers to carry you cross country?"

* * *

We had to wait until the morning before we could meet with Rains. The plan was that we'd meet at five, load his platoon onto their vehicles, and set out on the mission. I had more than a few misgivings. Although the man I'd seen had little obvious security, I doubted that the most senior leader in the Taliban movement would lack for protection. We'd come upon them without warning before, and they were unaware of the existence of a viable tunnel leading to the village. Now that they knew, they would without doubt have called in fighters to protect him. The question was, how many. We'd only get the answer to that when we got there. Then there was Rachel. She'd gone

with Najela and Luk to fix up a hotel for us to stay in overnight. I knew she'd be determined to come along, and I was equally determined that she wouldn't. And Luk had a similar problem with Najela; he'd want her to stay back, and she'd want to come with us. In her case, it was even harder. We were going to her home village, and her local knowledge could be invaluable. There was Joe Ashford, and he wouldn't take too kindly to having his cargo held back. At least I had General Westwood to watch my back now, but that could change at any moment. He was a senior army general, and no man achieved that lofty height of command without being an astute and wily politician. I'd been looking at some of the local maps in the Camp Phoenix operations room, and he'd agreed to give me free rein. I had to look at maps covering a much wider area than I needed. I was well aware there would be plenty of sets of eyes on me, now that I had the prized secret of the whereabouts of Omar. I needed an edge, and something that would offer me a defense against the inevitable problems I knew I'd be facing in the near future. I was thinking of Art Schramm and his gang of cutthroat mercenaries. They'd be the best possible edge any man could ask for. It was right then, when I was thinking about him, that I felt a tap on the shoulder, turned, and stared into his smiling face.

"Art! What are you doing here? I thought you were leaving for another contract."

"Not while there's cheap beer on sale in the PX. Why don't you join me? Some of the boys are already in there."

"I don't mind if I do. What are you going to do now that you're out of work?"

We were walking towards the camp PX. It suddenly occurred to me that I'd met Art in an odd place. Why was he there? Unless…

"They told you where to find me."

He smiled. "Sure, they asked me to look you up. What're we going to do? That's up to you, but the General said that if you'd take us, the contract's ours."

"You mean…"

"To take out the one-eyed monster, Omar the Merciless," he chuckled.

"Is that what they call him?"

"I've heard it said, yes. So what do you say? I gather you're the only one who knows his location."

"That's right. It would be good to have your men with us. You know

that Rains will be along? Of course you do. What do you think about him?"

"Same as you. He did well, once he'd ironed out a few wrinkles. His men are ok, especially that sergeant of his. So where exactly are we headed?"

"Sorry, Art. That's classified, until we're almost there. But it's in the general direction of the Khyber Pass."

He nodded. "Fair enough. Come on and meet the boys."

I spent the next two hours talking to his men, listening to the colorful stories they had to tell. It was almost midnight when I walked back to the hotel Rachel had booked us into. I gave the receptionist my name, and he handed me a key. We were on the fifth floor, which was well away from the blast areas if terrorists struck, he assured me. I wasn't assured, but I went up the stairs, there was no elevator, and entered the room. I thought Rachel was asleep, so I undressed quietly. As I got into bed, she spoke.

"You're late."

"Sorry, I bumped into Art Schramm. You know he's bringing his men along?"

"No, I didn't know. But I'm pleased. Max, I don't trust the Americans."

"Me neither."

"How do we know that they won't follow us and carpet-bomb the village as soon as they know the location?"

"I've no doubt they'll try exactly that."

"Max! Those villagers, I can hardly believe it."

"Don't worry, I've got an idea. I'll tell you later. For now, there's something else on my mind."

"Something good, I hope?"

"Oh yes."

In the morning we dressed, and after a short argument, I was overruled.

"Max, I'm your co-pilot and your partner. My place is with you, and if nothing else, to watch your back. Don't try that macho bullshit with me about women staying behind when men go to battle. My job was flying fighter planes before I met you, not knitting cardigans. You need me."

I wondered about the partner bit, but she read my mind, correctly as usual.

"I'm with you for the long haul, buddy. If you think you're going anywhere without me, you've got another think coming. And besides, I reckon when this mission is over, we'll be looking to restart the airline. We still have one aircraft, and General Westwood is sure to look favorably on

handing us enough contracts to borrow the money for another."

"I would remind you that we're still in debt to Joe Ashford's outfit for our aircraft."

She snorted. "I couldn't give a rat's ass about that asshole. If he wants to come after us for the money, I'll tell him to collect it from the DEA."

The Drug Enforcement Administration was a federal law enforcement agency, tasked with combating drug smuggling and use within the United States. They had the sole responsibility for coordinating and pursuing US drug investigations abroad. But Ashford was CIA.

"I wouldn't threaten him, Rachel. He's too powerful for that."

"Not if he's locked up in a Federal Penitentiary."

"I wouldn't bet on it. Leave him alone. I'll deal with Ashford when the time comes."

"I'd like to put a bullet through his fat head," she snarled.

"I know, but forget him, I'll find a way out."

We joined Luk and Najela in the lobby and walked together back to Camp Phoenix. Lieutenant Rains had a small armored column prepared, four Strykers, enough capacity to carry all of our supplies and us on the mission. And bring back one prisoner. Art Schramm's men lounged around in the morning sunlight, and like Rains' men they were dressed in modern Uniform Camouflage Pattern combat clothing. The only way to tell them apart from the infantry was weapons, an exotic array of pistols, rifles and submachine guns. Unlike Rains' men, they wore little in the way of body armor. I'd asked Schramm about it before.

"It's like this, Max. We operate as a small, tightly controlled group. Our specialty is getting in fast and hitting them hard before they realize we're even there. If we're slow getting in, and they get wind of our coming, we've lost before we begin. Body armor isn't going to help us then."

Rains stepped out of the General's HQ building. "It's time to mount up. Let's lock and load!"

His men scrambled for their vehicles and tumbled aboard. I climbed into the lead vehicle with Rachel, Luk and Najela. We shared the space with ten of Art Schramm's men. The only infantry we had with us were the driver and the weapons technician, who sat in front of the tactical screen that monitored the turret-mounted weapons systems. Rains' man handed me a headset, and I put it on.

"This is Rains. We're ready to go. It's up to you to lead the way,

Hoffman."

"Understood. Our direction is Jalalabad. Driver, take the main A1 road, let's go."

We lurched forward out of the gates of Camp Phoenix, leaving behind the reinforced concrete blockhouses, the rolls of razor wire and alert guards manning heavy machine guns. Before we got out on the open road, we had to pass through an Afghan national Army checkpoint, manned by nervous looking dark-skinned Pashtuns. Theirs was not a secure occupation and were distrusted by both their ISAF allies and their Taliban opponents. They were constantly aware that when ISAF pulled out, they were threatened with being totally overrun by the Taliban, just like the North Vietnamese steamrollered the ARVN after the American withdrawal.

"I wouldn't be in their position if I could help it."

I looked around. Art Schramm was next to me, staring out of the viewing port.

"What would you do, it you were an Afghan soldier?"

He grinned. "In this hellhole? I'd emigrate. But a lot of their problems they bring on themselves. Their loyalties are more tribal than to their commanders and the government. It makes them ideal candidates for suicide missions. If they tidied up their act, and started fighting the enemy instead of squabbling amongst themselves, they'd be a lot better off. Instead, they're always looking for a kickback, and they're not above selling their kit to the highest bidder."

"Just like the ARVN in South Vietnam."

"Yep. It's not their fault. It's the crap system they live under. The men at the top could change it, but why should they when they're getting rich out of billions of dollars of aid from overseas."

"So there's no answer to it? The people have just got to keep on suffering?"

"That's about the size of it, yeah."

I shook my head. It seemed the only solution for most of them, was to get out. But get out to where? The poverty in Pakistan, just over the border, was as bad if not worse in some cases. And Pakistan was the limit of where these people could travel. They had no papers, no money, and no possessions. Nothing.

I opened the hatch and looked out. Close to me was the formidable remote turret, controlled by the weapons technician inside the vehicle. Either

side of me was the rugged wastes that bordered the Kabul-Jalalabad Highway, the A1. The remote turret moved suddenly, and I realized the operator was panning it around, constantly seeking out any possible enemy threat. The other vehicles' turrets were doing the same, so that all four turrets were moving around in a balletic, high-tech dance. In the distance, the mountainous countryside loomed above us, almost threatening in its overpowering desolation. Closer to the road, the ground was a mix of shale, sparse grass covered meadows and more expanses of broken rock. There were no people, no buildings, just a vast expanse of harsh landscape. I climbed back inside and closed the hatch; we were nearing Jalalabad, and the chances of ambush were greater. I'd had a conversation before we left with Rachel about a possible ambush, but from our own side.

"How will you hide the direction we're heading in?" she'd asked me. "Once we get near Yaluk, they'll know where we're going."

"Remember that first abandoned village, where we left the aircraft?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"That's where I'm leading them. With any luck, I'll be able to convince Rains that Mullah Omar is hiding close to the village. Somehow, I need to get us all into the tunnel that leads through to Yaluk. If General Westwood's people are focusing on that empty village, we can go through the tunnel to Yaluk, sweep in and grab Omar."

"But surely, once we're in the tunnel, Rains will know where we're headed and radio Kabul."

I smiled. "If he has a radio that works underground, he will. Otherwise, he'll be out of radio contact."

She still looked doubtful. "I hope you're right, Max. If they attack Yaluk, a lot of people are going to be killed. Don't forget, Najela's family are from that village."

"I haven't forgotten."

We reached Jalalabad, skirted the city and stopped for a break. We parked the vehicles in a small circle, like the wagon trains of the Old West, and sat inside their protective cover. Rains came over to where I sat with Luk, Rachel and Najela.

"This road only leads one way, Max, over the Khyber Pass into Pakistan. As I recall, there are not many villages along the way. There's Basawul, just before the pass, and that abandoned village just before the Torkham Border Crossing Station. So which is it?"

“He’s hiding close to that abandoned village, just outside, in fact. Do me a favor. Don’t pass if back to Kabul. We’ll have a B-52 raid inbound if they think he’s hiding there.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think they use that kind of tactic these days.”

“No? Would you bet your shirt on it?”

“Ok, no, but I won’t say anything, it’s your show. We’ll be there in an hour, so how do you want to play this?”

“We’ll use Art’s tactics, and go in hard and fast. My vehicle will go in first. Deploy the others in a covering formation. As soon as we know it’s not heavily defended, we’ll go in on foot and grab him. He’ll have a few guards with him, so we need to be careful and take them out before they even realize we’ve arrived. Art’s men can do that. As soon as we have him located, I’ll call you in with your men to make the arrest.”

“Really?”

“Sure. It makes no difference to us, Dwight. But you’ll go down in the history books. It’ll be Captain Rains by the end of the day.”

His eyes shone, and I could see he was hooked.

“That’ll be something to tell my folks.”

“Yep. But don’t screw up, Lieutenant. Let us go in first, and you provide the cover."

“I’ve got it, don’t worry.”

We got moving again and covered the remaining distance to the village. It was just as I’d remembered it; a few mean, miserable stone huts, most of them with their roofs tumbled in. There was no sign of life, and not even a bird sang. I ordered our driver to go straight into the center of the squalid ruins, and Rains deployed his three Strykers just outside with their guns trained on the buildings. One of Art Schramm’s men opened the door to exit the vehicle, but I pulled Art to one side.

“He’s not here.”

He stared at me. “I wondered about that. It didn’t seem a likely place for the Taliban’s chief mullah to be holed up. So where are we headed?”

“To Yaluk. I saw him while we were there.”

“Christ, he’ll be long gone.”

“No. He didn’t know that I’d seen him, or recognized him anyway. The message from Najela’s father suggested that he was very ill and needed treatment. He’ll be there. But you know what’ll happen when General Westwood finds his location?”

“An airstrike.”

“Yes, exactly. Probably a drone strike, followed by a huge influx of troops who’ll be shooting at anything that moves. I’m trying to save those villagers who protected us from being caught in the crossfire.”

“Understood. But you know Rains will already have called them.”

“Yeah. Let them come and saturate bomb an abandoned village. We’ll be halfway to Yaluk, underneath the mountain in the tunnel.”

He smiled then. “Yes, I like it. I’d suggest we pull the vehicles back from the expected attack site. Five hundred yards back from the village should do it.”

I could hardly believe what he was saying. “They surely wouldn’t target their own vehicles. There could be soldiers inside!”

“Are you prepared to bet on that?” He looked grim and hard. “It happened to me once before. So-called friendly army saturation bombed our position, and I lost half my men. Never again.”

“Were they American?”

“No. French.” His face relaxed. “But they could have been any nationality. Soldiers are the same the world over. They have fixed objectives, and they’ll usually use whatever force they have at their disposal to reach their objectives.”

I thanked him and called up Rains on the radio.

“We should laager our vehicles five hundred yards outside the village.”

“Yeah, I’ve already given the order, Max. We’re about to move out now. Is this guy in the village itself?”

“No, we’ll need to go in on foot. He’s outside the village.”

“Got it. We’re moving out now.”

I watched the puff of smoke as his driver gunned the engine and drove back out of the village to the road. Our driver followed and they parked their vehicles in laager, just as we had outside of Jalalabad. Rains detailed one man to remain with each vehicle then assembled his men ready to move out. I noticed him look up at the sky and smiled. “We’re ready to move, Hoffman. Do you want to take the point? It’s your show.”

“I’ll do that, Art, would you and your men travel right behind us. Dwight, you can take the rear. Is that ok?”

He nodded. I could see he wasn’t too happy to be in the position that would put him closest to whatever action the General had planned, but he nodded his agreement and gave the orders to his sergeant. Vince Mason

issued the orders and got his men into formation, ready to move. The tough sergeant was no fool, and his men were spread out in a loose spearhead formation, far enough away from each other not to present an easy target to an enemy, but close enough to give each other supporting fire. Mason himself took the position at the rear. I wondered if he knew what Kabul had planned, maybe not. Probably only Rains was privy to that information.

"Max, up there!"

I followed the direction of Art's gaze. A drone banked lazily in the sky. It was perhaps five miles away and about three thousand feet high.

"I see it. I hope I'm wrong, and it's just an unarmed Predator on a routine reconnaissance."

"Yeah, and my mother was the Queen of England," he returned grimly. "I'd bet my pension it's a Reaper, and carrying a full weapon load."

I looked at him. "I wasn't aware that mercenaries had pension plans?"

He shrugged. "Well no, we don't. But I've never liked to gamble."

Rachel heard his sardonic comment, and we both laughed. If it was a Reaper, it was early. I just prayed that whoever flew it was patient enough to wait until we'd cleared the area.

* * *

Master-Sergeant Carol Wendelski touched the joystick and brought the MQ-9 back to the straight and level. She had the village in sight, and now all she needed was a target. Her orders were clear. She was to use the Hellfires, of which she carried a full load on the drone's hardpoints, and not to use her ace-in-the-hole, the laser guided bomb, until she had cleared the order with local control, Kabul. She could see the Strykers, which meant ISAF, so she had to be very careful. Where was the enemy? Corporal Vernon Munch stood at her shoulder, watching. He was due off shift, and he'd been flying a Predator for the past four hours, patrolling the skies between Kabul and Helmand. He should have gone home, but the buzz in the Ground Control Station was too much, and he'd stayed to watch.

"I have to see this, Sarge. I've never seen one of those laser guided babies fired in anger. Not yet, anyway."

His Sergeant kept her eyes glued to the screen. "I've only done it in practice, Vernon, on the simulator. I don't even know if I'll get clearance to use it yet. It's Hellfires only on my command, and they'll let me know when I can toss the big one. Hold up, there's something coming in from Kabul."

She listened intently, and her eyebrows narrowed in puzzlement. “Could you repeat that, Sir. You want me to launch the laser guided bomb on your command, even if it endangers our own people?”

She waited for the reply. Then, “I understand, Sir. But it could mean inviting a friendly fire incident. Are you certain about that order?”

The reply left her in no doubt as to their intentions.

“Yes, Sir, I understand, crystal. I shall fire immediately on your order. Creech out.”

Ok, it was obvious what they wanted. And what they intended. But it wasn’t obvious to her how to play this one. She had a sneaking suspicion that she was about to receive an illegal order. One that she could obey, and be hung out to dry in the subsequent furor. Or disobey, and be put through the ringer, all the way to court martial. Or was there a third way?”

* * *

I led the way through the village, towards the tunnel. When I turned around, I could see Dwight Rains looking around with an uneasy expression on his face. A few yards from the entrance to the tunnel, I slowed and waited for his men to catch up. He came up with his Sergeant, wearing a puzzled expression.

“What’s the deal, Hoffman? Where are we headed? There’s no one here.”

“Lieutenant, would you follow me into the tunnel. Art, you take the rear, we’re going underground.”

“Sure, we’ll be here,” he acknowledged and winked at me, enjoying the conspiracy.

We entered the tunnel, Rachel, Luk and Najela in the front with me, and Rains following with his men. About five hundred yards in, there was an open space where the tunnel widened into a natural cavern. I called a halt and told Rains I needed to talk.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant, but I deceived you. Mullah Omar isn’t anywhere near the village.”

“The hell you say! You mean you’ve led us all this way for nothing?”

“No, not for nothing. He’s not far away, but not where I said.”

I explained my belief that General Westwood would launch a bombing raid as soon as he knew the target.

“You can’t think he’d drop bombs on top of us, Hoffman? The man’s a

tough soldier, but he's not a homicidal warlord."

"Perhaps you're right. What message did you send him?"

His eyes darted away then came back to me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Rains. You know as well as I do that he wouldn't allow you on this mission without making sure you kept in contact. What did you say?"

His hesitation was brief. "I sent the coordinates of that ruined village, which was all. If you're right, it's about to be flattened, but I don't hear any bombs dropping."

He was right. There was only silence in the tunnel, no loud explosions, and no shuddering vibrations as the earth shook to the detonation of high explosives. I wondered for a few moments if I was wrong, but only for a few moments.

* * *

She'd lost sight of the soldiers. One moment they were visible in the village, moving through the buildings, checking for enemy activity or IEDs, she presumed. The last she saw of them was when they were close to a heap of rocks at the foot of a nearby hill that formed the southernmost border of the village. When she'd brought the Reaper around again they'd gone, but she'd no idea where. Back to the village, or somewhere else, but where? Her headphones crackled, and she listened intently.

"Creech, this is Kabul. Are you over the target?"

So it was a target now, not a village. Of course, in the post operation report, it would sound much better, colder, more military; a target, and something to be hit, to be destroyed.

"That's affirmative, Sir."

"Confirm the location of our troops. Are they in sight?"

"No, Sir, I cannot see them."

"Roger that. You have permission to fire, do you understand, permission to launch a single GBU-12 Paveway laser guided bomb on that village? Flatten it for us, Master Sergeant."

"But, Sir, I can't confirm that our troops are clear of the area."

"You have a fire order, Master Sergeant. Do it, now!"

She sighed. She'd seen the soldiers disappear to the south of the ruins, and she could give them a chance. She sighted the laser target designator to the north of the buildings and pressed the fire button. There was brief spurt of

smoke and flames as the rocket motor fire, propelling the bomb towards its target. Seconds later, it impacted in a huge explosion as debris was thrown skywards; rocks, earth, lumps of wood and rusty old iron used to patch the roofs of the decaying buildings, but as far as she could tell, no bodies, no torn scraps of uniforms or equipment. Thank Christ for that. Except that she knew it was a wasted shot, there was nothing down there. Whichever Taliban warband they were attempting to take out, they were nowhere near. But neither was her side. They'd be pissed that she'd skewed the shot, but that was tough. She had one GBU-12 Paveway laser guided bomb left on the rails, now how could she use it to inflict the maximum damage on the enemy?

* * *

The blast brought down a shower of rocks and stones near the entrance to the tunnel, and a mass of small pieces of rock nearer to where we waited. A huge cloud of dust swirled around us, blotting out our vision, so that it was as if we were in one of the fabled London peasoupers; the fogs that blanketed the city during Victorian times. Several of the men started to edge further away from the tunnel entrance where the explosion had occurred. Rachel held my hand tightly, more a woman and less a tough fighter pilot now that we were inside a dark cavern, waiting for the roof to collapse and bury us alive. The dust eventually settled, and we were able to see again in the beams of the flashlights the soldiers carried. Rains was frozen, unmoving. I borrowed a flashlight and looked at him closely, shining the beam into his eyes. They were wide, dilated in the abrupt shock caused by the explosion, and the knowledge that everything he'd believed about his army, about the honor and principles that were its guiding light, had just been shattered. At last, he'd left West Point behind for good and planted his feet firmly in the soil of Afghanistan. I pitied him the terrible culture shock, but there was not time for pity. War was a pitiless occupation, and we were stuck in the middle of it. I looked at his sergeant.

"Are any of your men injured?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. It was just the, er, surprise, I guess you'd call it."

"You'll need a couple of men to look after the Lieutenant. I think he's out of it for now."

"Yeah, you're right. Johnson, Venner, come and look after the LT."

Two PFCs came forward. "Is he injured, Sarge?" one of them asked, a

pale, pimply youth of no more than nineteen years of age. He looked half starved, his helmet oversized on his thin face. Too young and frail to fight, except for his eyes. They were eyes that had seen combat, eyes that measure, assessed and then acted in a split second. I'd noticed those eyes many times in the past few days.

"Nah, he's just a bit shaken. Keep him at the back of the column."

" I assume we're going forward, Sir?"

"We are, yes. There's no going back."

"Why's that, Sarge?"

Vince Mason nodded towards the direction we'd come from. The roof was down and the entrance blocked.

"We're trapped, oh Christ, we'll never get out of here!" the other trooper shouted. His companion sniggered. "You crazy fool, Johnson, we just go out the other end, like we did before."

I interrupted them. "We need to get moving. Make sure Rains stay in the rear. Art, when we get near the tunnel entrance, your men need to be ready for anything. That bomb will have alerted them that something's going down."

"I hear you, Max. We'll be ready."

We started again moving along the tunnel, crawling where the roof got lower and lower and then we were back on our feet, and I quickened the pace to the end. When we saw the daylight, Art and three of his men overtook us and went ahead. As we came to the end, he turned to me.

"It's all clear. How do you want to play this?"

"You're not going to like this, but we need to split our forces. I want about half the men to go to the north and half to the south. We'll leave four soldiers here with Rains. They can stay out of sight inside the tunnel entrance.

"It's going to be a long walk back now that they've brought the roof in. I'd guess about fifty miles, and we won't make that in less than two days in this terrain."

"No, that's why I'm going to radio the Strykers to start heading this way. They'll get here in two or three hours. That's time enough for us to do what we have to do and move out."

He looked chagrined. "Christ, I'd forgotten the Strykers. I must be getting old."

I laughed. "Not old, Art. You're just not used to that kind of luxury."

I called up the infantryman who carried the radio and used it to contact the Strykers. The corporal in charge was dubious at first about taking orders from me, so I called Sergeant Mason to come over. He put on the headset.

"Who's this? Corporal O'Shea? Right, Mr. Hoffman is in charge, you know that. So get your ass into the APC and get its wheels turning."

"Hold on, Sergeant. Tell him to stop five miles short of Yaluk. We'll call them in when we're ready."

He passed on the order, ended the call and looked at me. "Anything else?"

"Yes, get your men up and ready to move off. We're going in. Take your squad south, we're going north to encircle the village and then move in."

"You've got it, Sir."

## Chapter Thirteen

*This is a government based on nothing because of the continuing presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Karzai's call to the Taliban to come to the government has no meaning. He became president through fraud and lies.*

*Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid*

"What's the story so far, Charlie?"

General Westwood put the question to his intelligence officer without looking way from his wall map.

"We're not making much progress, General. One Paveway hit on that village, but by the looks of it there was nothing there. Hoffman's team has disappeared."

"What are they up to? Soldiers don't disappear."

"I've no idea, Sir."

"Damn. That Mullah Omar is almost within my hands. I can smell him. Are the backup forces on standby?"

"Everything's ready. We've a squadron of Deltas. You may have met them. They're the Night Stalkers. The guys are waiting on the tarmac, waiting to get their choppers airborne."

"What are they flying?"

“Little Birds, General. There are ten of them, forty Deltas in all.”

“What about ground forces?”

“Vance Everard is already on his way to Jalalabad, and they’ve been shadowing Hoffman’s’ mission at long range since they started. There are twenty Strykers, about three hundred aboard.”

Westwood grunted. Where the hell was Hoffman, where was he headed? He pored over the map, checking, rechecking, and making calculations. Then it hit him.

“Charlie, that village where they pulled back to after that attack when Rains was hit, what’s it called?”

“Yaluk, General.”

“Yeah, Yaluk, that’s right. Hoffman was playing us for suckers. I don’t know what his game is, but they’re headed to Yaluk.”

“But General, that’s another fifty miles and they’re on foot.”

“It didn’t take them that long to get there last time. There must be a tunnel under the mountain. That’s where they’ve gone. Through a tunnel to Yaluk.”

“Are you sure, Sir?”

“Damn right. Get onto them, and get the Deltas airborne. Tell Vance Everard to put his foot on the gas. Send his company in. They’re headed to Yaluk, and you can get onto Creech. I want that Reaper overhead with a feed to this headquarters. This time we’ll nail that bastard Omar once and for all.”

* * *

I led the group to the north of the village. Luk and Najela were with me. We needed her knowledge of the local terrain and Luk to interpret her sign language. Rachel was there too, despite me trying to get her to travel with Art Schramm. I tried to persuade her to stay in the center of the group of mercenaries, but she’d refused.

“I’m coming with you.”

I didn’t argue further. She was a woman, but she was also ex-military and knew how to handle herself and her weapons in a scrap. I could see Sergeant Mason leading the infantry towards the south of the village, and so far we’d hadn’t encountered any of the enemy. Three hundred yards ahead of us lay the village itself, and two hundred yards further the stone hut where I knew that Omar stayed.

“What do you think?” I asked Art.

He stood next to me. I'd called him forward to decide on how to move in. His usual tactic of hurtling in, all guns blazing, was not what I wanted for these villagers who had done so much to help us.

"You mean other than an all out assault?"

"That's not going to happen, Art. They were good to us when we needed them."

He nodded. "That's right. But Omar is certain to have sentries out, and they could start shooting at us anytime."

I saw Najela signing to Luk, and her hands were moving frantically, like semaphores. Luk turned to me.

"She says she will go into the village and see if there are any enemy soldiers lying in wait."

I didn't like it, but it was her village.

"Ok, Luk, but you go with her and protect her."

"I was going anyway," he smiled.

They walked quickly towards the silent mass of stone huts and disappeared around a corner. At first I thought the place was empty, and I had a feeling of dread that I'd led them here for nothing. Then two children appeared, playing with an old motor tire. It was slightly incongruous. We were watching with a force that could bring down overwhelming military might on their tiny community, and yet here they were, playing as if there never had been any threat to their peace and security. So the village was still occupied. I turned to Art.

"Remember, no massive shows of force. We don't want those children hurt."

He shook his head. "No, of course not. We'll be careful. When do we go in?"

That was the next question, whether our main target was still in residence, and if so, how to tackle the task of taking him alive.

"Let's wait a little longer, and see if anyone appears."

A few minutes later, we were rewarded with the sight of a bearded tribesman carrying a water container to the village well. That was unusual. It was the norm here for such work to be done by women. But what was significant was that this man didn't just carry a water container. He also had a Kalashnikov assault rifle slung over his shoulder, the iconic AK-47, together with crossed belts over his shoulders bearing pouches for spare clips. He also wore a black turban. Everything about him screamed Taliban insurgent, so

they were keeping a guard post in the village. I whispered to Art.

"I think we're in business. The stone hut I saw Mullah Omar in is over there, a couple of hundred yards from the center of the village."

I pointed it out to him. "I suggest we circle around behind and rush it when we're a few yards away."

He nodded. "We're ready."

At that point everything started to go wrong. My intention was to make a clean, incisive attack on the area where Omar's house stood, so we'd stay away from the main village and avoid any threat to the inhabitants. Sergeant Mason was waiting for the order to go, but I saw a figure running towards them, several hundred yards away. Even at that distance, I could see it was Rains.

He was shouting, "Attack, attack, go in and get him before he escapes!"

The fighter with the water container looked up in alarm and dropped it. He unslung his AK-47 and cocked the action. Then he released a burst that threw up chips of stone near to where the infantry were milling, uncertain whether to obey their sergeant's order to wait or their lieutenant to move in. The military has a hierarchy, officer's trump sergeants, and they came to that decision automatically, as they were trained to do. They charged.

Mason was running alongside, them, shouting, "Get back, and get under cover."

But they ignored him. They were committed. Their blood was up, and they were following a legitimate order. I cursed the men at the tunnel for letting him go, but it was no time for recriminations.

"Max, look!"

I followed Rachel's gaze. Four black turbaned fighters had materialized, but these were armed with RPG-7s, the shoulder launched missiles that were the preferred weapon of Islamic terrorists worldwide. Two of them launched; one missile went wide, and the other detonated close to Rains' men. I saw them diving for cover.

"Hoffman, we have to go," Art shouted.

"You're right. Lead your men in to help Rains' people. I'll go into the village and try to locate Luk and Najela."

He led his men off without a word, charging in the direction of the fighters with the missile launchers.

I shouted at Rachel. "Let's go, we need to find Luk and Najela."

She followed me on a curving run that took us into the village, keeping

us out of sight for most of the way from the missileers. I heard the sound of automatic gunfire. First there were only two assault rifles, and then they were joined by many others."

"I wish I knew who was firing," I shouted at Rachel. "We don't know yet how many enemies there are."

"They taught us to hear the difference," she panted as we ran. The slower rate of fire, it's a deeper sound as they shoot, are the AK-47s."

"There seems to be more of those," I replied.

"Yeah, one hell of a lot more."

We rounded a corner and ran into Luk and Najela. Luk had his sniper rifle ready to use. He stared at me as we rushed up.

"What's going on? It sounds like a war has broken out."

"That's about right, yeah. They saw us coming, so we'll need to fight it out with them."

"Do you have any idea of their numbers?"

"No, none."

Najela signed rapidly. Luke turned to me to interpret.

"She says there are more than a hundred fighters. Most of them were staying in a cave on the hillside just above the village, so as not to attract attention from enemy drones. But they will be on their way here."

The firing was increasing by the second, and a full-scale firefight was developing.

"I think we can work that one out for ourselves, Luk." I turned to Rachel. "You need to get her somewhere safe. She's too important to risk out in the open." I saw her open her mouth to argue, but I overruled her. "Just do as I say, and try to keep the villagers safe if you can."

"Where are you going?" she asked, not moving.

"We've got a battle to fight, Rachel. Now get her under cover."

I left them and Luk, and I headed for the firing. We reached the edge of the main village square and joined Art's men who were pinned down by heavy incoming machine gun fire.

"They tell me there are more than a hundred enemy fighters," I shouted to him. "Do you know what Rains' men are doing?"

He pointed to a larger building down a side street. "Last I saw they were pinned down behind that place. I only hope to Christ…"

Before he could speak, two rockets hit the building in quick succession, and when the smoke cleared it was almost flattened. We could hear the cry of

at least one soldier who'd been hit, but there was no time to go and attend to the casualties.

"Art, those men, we have to draw the enemy off them, and give them a chance to regroup."

"That bastard Rains! They're good troops, and he led them straight into trouble."

"Forget Rains. There's only one way to do this."

"What's that?"

"Your way. Straight in and hit them hard."

He gave me a broad smile. "That's my way of thinking." He turned to his men. "We're going in fast, are you all ready?"

A chorus of shouts announced their enthusiasm. These men did this for a living. The money was good, but what drove them were situations like this, and I guessed that some were as addicted to the adrenalin rush of battle as a junkie to his crack pipe. Then Art leapt up, and they followed, running at breakneck speed straight for the enemy, but not all of them. Art had deployed four of his men with light machine guns to give covering fire. Luk joined them, shoulder to shoulder, aimed and firing his sniper rifle at high speed. It could have been another Charge of the Light Brigade, magnificent but foolhardy. But if there was a massacre, it was the enemy who fell, not the mercenaries. I ran behind them and got caught up in the adrenaline-fueled chase. One man next to me went down. I bent to him, but his companion shouted, "Leave him, he's ok. We need to kill these bastards first. We'll worry about the wounded afterwards."

I nodded and ran on.

We were still a hundred yards from the stone hut that was temporary home to Mullah Omar, and the Taliban were dug in fifty yards back from that. We threw ourselves through the gaping holes in the stone building that stood directly opposite. Art was already deploying his men to bring their fire to bear on the enemy. I ran over to him.

"Why have we stopped, Art? We're nowhere near the hut."

"Look!"

He gestured to the ground that lay in front of us. It was open ground, and the Taliban had been crossing it to intercept our force. Art's shooters had killed a score of them, and their bodies lay strewn over the ground.

"The reason we killed them so easily was because of the flat, open nature of the ground. If we try and cross it, they'll do the same to us."

“You’re right. They still outnumber us by more than two to one, and we don’t know yet about Rains’ casualties. I need to send someone back to bring his men forward.”

“Max, they’re coming!”

It was Luk who’d shouted. I searched the ground ahead of us.

“No, behind us. Sergeant Mason, he’s bringing the men forward to join us.”

I looked, and there they were, Rains’ platoon of infantry, dashing forward to join us. Mason slid in next to me and grinned.

“I thought it was time we did some good.”

“What about Rains?”

He shook his head. “The Lieutenant’s dead. He was the only fatality. A couple of the men took minor flesh wounds but nothing to stop them fighting. At least Rains is out of our hair.”

“Forget Rains. We’ll record he was hit when leading his men into action.”

He gave me a scornful look.

“It’s too late for him,” I continued. “But at least his family won’t suffer.”

He stared at me silently for a few moments then nodded. “I copy that. I guess the poor bastard just wasn’t ready for all the flak that was thrown at him over here. What’s the next move?”

I was about to reply when there was a burst of firing and bullets zipped around our position. They weren’t coming from directly in front of us, to the east, but this time from the north. Reinforcements!

“Luk, I’m worried about those missiles. Cover our front with your sniper rifle. Sergeant Mason, could you deploy your men to cover the north. We need to find out how many of them we’re dealing with. What’s the situation with machine guns?”

“We have two, M249 light machine guns. They’ll keep their heads down.”

“Good, get them firing as fast as possible. We don’t want them overrunning our position.”

He gave orders to his men, and they moved their positions to cover the north side. Almost immediately, they began to fire, blunting the new attack that had materialized from the north of the village. I turned to Art Schramm.

“Art, we’ve got to face the obvious. We can’t defend this position. They

can pin us down here with machine gun and rocket fire, and we've nowhere to go. It seems to me we either break out or stay here and die. The only other alternative is a miracle."

"You're right. A frontal attack will result in casualties, and a lot of the men are going to get hit."

I checked my watch. We had several hours to go until darkness. It was going to be a difficult choice to make. There was a renewed burst of heavy gunfire. I strained to make out the direction it had come from, but everything was covered in a thick cloud of smoke that had swirled down around us as if by magic.

"Well if that don't beat all," Art exclaimed.

"What?" I still couldn't see anything.

"It's the damned cavalry, and in the nick of time, as always. It's a flock of Little Birds, coming down on us."

"Little Birds?"

Then I saw them, small, agile, attack helicopters. They swooped in, peeling off one by one in formation to fire a salvo of rockets into the enemy position. They carried on down, firing the twin thirty millimeter chain guns mounted on a stubby wing either side of the fuselage. I could see the troopers clinging to the cockpit, two to each side, heavily armed and heavily armored. They were waiting to land and deploy, and we all knew that hell would break loose the second their boots touched the ground. From below, they seemed like mythical lords of war, watching the results of their savage gunfire on the enemy below. It was cold, clinical, dispassionate killing. It was magnificent. The Taliban were jumping to their feet, attempting to fire on the helicopter borne troops. It was no time to sit and do nothing. I jumped up, shouting at the men.

"Luk, keep pouring it onto those bastards. The rest of you, we're attacking. Sergeant Mason, take out those enemy to the north. Machine gunners, cease fire as soon as we move off unless you have a clear field of fire. We'll take down those bastards in front of us. Let's go!"

I ran out, uncaring about who would follow me. I knew they'd be there, right behind. We flung ourselves down in a narrow ditch that crossed the open ground. We were less than fifty yards from the enemy, and now they'd seen us some had started to fire in our direction. I waited for an opportunity for us to start forward again, scanning the enemy position, watching them try desperately to fight off the assault from both sides. The tide had turned.

They'd been part of a two-sided assault on us, but now they were on the receiving end, and already the panic had begun. It was time to finish it.

"Max, behind you!"

I whirled. We'd climbed the rocky ledge the enemy were using as a barricade and jumped down amongst them. I fired again and again. It was as if time had slowed, and there was no universe except for this tiny place, where expectations became a brutal binary reality of life or death. A fighter had just tossed down his assault rifle, out of ammunition, and he was jumping at me with a huge blade in his hand, a richly ornamented Afghan fighting knife.

I knew that in societies like this these blades were handed down from father to son, as a sign of adulthood. Some were not functional, and purely used for symbolic, ritual purposes. Others were savage killing blades. I realized at once that this was the kind of weapon I faced. I dodged to the side and missed the first killing stroke. He back swung the knife, and I pulled the trigger, but my gun had jammed. I used the rifle to ward off the blow, but his blade slid down the barrel and the stock, slashing into my hand. It felt unreal. In the midst of the high tech action, where men fought with machine guns, assault rifles and missiles, I was in a fight with a man using a weapon that could have been made two thousand years ago. I felt the pain as the blade cut in. The man smiled and lifted the knife again for the killing stroke. He swung down, and I kicked him hard in the groin. His breath left his body in a searing scream of pain, and he hesitated for that one moment; it was enough. I still had my Colt .45 in the holster, and in one fast, smooth action, I ripped it out, levered off the safety, then for a second, a whirlwind of images flooded my mind, and I saw the face of that Vietnamese. Then I cocked the pistol and fired. The heavy bullet caused him to stagger, but he still made another lunge, and I fired again, two more shots. This time there was no more resistance. He doubled over in agony and fell to the ground, blood pouring from his wounds. In that moment, I knew I'd thrown off some of the chains that shackled me to that image of long ago, on the Vietnamese border. It had been a question of life or death, and I'd chosen life. I was also certain that the decision I'd made all those years ago was based on the same, fundamental premise. He'd meant to kill me, and I'd chosen to live.

It was time to get back into the fight. I looked down. My hand was bleeding badly, but not enough to stop me fighting. I picked up a dropped rifle, a Soviet AK-47, distinctive with its banana magazine. I'd no idea if it

was loaded, but when I pointed it at a pair of insurgents hacking towards me, a stream of bullets came out of the barrel, and they fell dead. There was the sound of screaming and shouting. I looked up, and my blood chilled. We'd hacked clean through the line of Taliban, but a second wave was coming in.

"Take cover," I shouted. "Get behind the rocks, and pick them off as they come."

The men jumped behind cover as the new assault came at us. One of the men shouted, "Holy shit! Look at them go."

I looked around. For a moment I thought even more enemy had appeared to join the battle. But this time the Gods of War were smiling on us. The Delta Force, they'd deployed from the helicopters and begun their fearsome killing work. They came in on the run, fast, expert, sliding from cover to cover, each man protecting his partner, laying down a lethal curtain of fire as they attacked. Pure poetry, at least, of the efficient, killing kind. The enemy had formed a defensive curtain around the area where Mullah Omar's hut stood. I still hadn't seen him, but he was here. These Taliban were fighting ferociously for one reason only, to protect their leader. The Deltas forced them back, and they retreated over a carpet of their dead and wounded. The assault never let up. The Little Birds poured down fire from their miniguns, decimating the robed ranks, whilst the Deltas pressed forward, pushing them further and further back. We came in behind them, although there was little we could do, except make certain that there were no survivors waiting to hit the Deltas from behind when they'd gone past. Slowly the battle wound down as the fight ascended the rocky slope above the village. Then it was as if we'd hit a brick wall. The enemy staged a last stand, manning a defensive pile of loose boulders and shale that stretched across the narrow pathway leading into a cleft between the rocks. Bullets and rockets hammered towards us, and we dived for cover. I knew instinctively what was happening. These were the sacrificial rearguard, making a suicidal last stand while their leader escaped. And there was nothing we could do about it. The gunships zipped around like angry bees, unable to locate a target. And we still had a formidable blocking force to fight before we could even begin to give chase. In that moment, I knew that we'd won, and yet we'd lost. And then something happened. Something strange. The question in all of our minds was Mullah Omar. Was he ever here, or was it all for nothing?

"Max!" I looked around. Luk had been using his sniper scope to spot for the enemy. "He's there, look!"

I gazed in the direction he was pointing and focused my binoculars. Just where the rocks parted to give way for the dark cleft that led into them, a group of men stood; insurgents, Taliban. They were staring down at us, and almost daring us to take a shot at them. In the center of them stood a man dressed entirely in black. A patch covered one of his eyes. Mullah Omar. The rest of our force stopped to look, and we all looked up at our main foe. It was like a frozen tableau that lasted for a couple of minutes, a frozen moment in time. No one fired, as if it was some ancient battlefield courtesy, facing the enemy after a hard battle. Then there was a flurry of movement, and they were gone.

"Sergeant Mason, over here!"

Two of the infantry searching the area where Omar's stone hut lay had emerged with two men. They were so ragged I thought at first they had caught two more prisoners, but when I focused my binoculars I saw they were American. I walked towards them with Mason and Art Schramm, and as we drew near, it became clear they were an officer and an NCO. The officer held out his hand to us.

"Major Roberts, and this is Corporal Blakeney. My thanks to you gentlemen, I thought we were going to be here a lot longer than this. Maybe forever."

We shook hands. "How long have you been a prisoner, Major?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I wish I knew. We lost track of time. A year, I guess. We were captured in the winter of 2009."

"It's 2012 now, Major. I'd guess you've been there for three years."

Their faces fell. Three lost years! "We were hooded for most of the time," the corporal explained. "It was disorientating."

I nodded. I'd bet it was all of that, and more.

* * *

"Mr. Ashford, my employer has been very fair with you. Yet now you tell me that the shipment has not arrived, and you do not have the money to repay what you owe. I'm afraid that his patience is finally at an end. Do you have his money?"

Ashford stared at the phone. He wanted to recruit a team, send it in to those spic drug dealers, and blast them all to hell. Except that they were too strong, too heavily armed, too numerous.

“Listen to me. It’s all lined up. The guns are stuck in a warehouse in Kabul. As soon as I can get them moved to my contacts, I’ll have the drugs, and I can swap them for the money. Just a few days, that’s all.”

“But Senor! That is exactly what you said last time we spoke. My Jefe has given me explicit instructions, no more extensions. Either you pay, or we shall have to proceed with the alternative.”

He pictured his life, as it would become; a fugitive, running from the South American hit squad. The Agency wouldn’t support him, and if they found out what he’d been doing, he’d be facing a lifetime in a Federal prison. He had to get more time, had to!

“I’ll give you more money.”

There was a slight hesitation the other end, and then a sigh. “But you have no money.”

“As soon as the deal’s done, I’ll up the ante. Twenty-five percent on top.”

Another hesitation. This time it was briefer. “Five days, no more. After that, there will be no more calls. You would be advised to make your peace with God if you fail to keep your side of the bargain, Senor Ashford.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your money.”

“It is not I who should be worried, Senor Ashford.”

The line went dead, and he hung up. The damn spic had gone. Ashford started working out how he could play this. The first task would be to get the crates loaded back onto the Twin Otter, and he’d need to arrange to divert some extra ordnance to make up the amount he’d promised the Taliban. That was easy. He knew who would issue the necessary orders, and they’d have no choice but to carry them out. As soon as that little shit Hoffman got back to Kabul, he could fly out to the field and do the swap for the drugs. The intelligence officer had told him they should be back by the following day. He’d have to move fast. He climbed into his SUV and started to drive to Kabul International. Now what would make Hoffman do as he was told? Hadn’t Ed Walker said that he was sweet on that co-pilot of his? That should do it. Perfect!

# Chapter Fourteen

*After our victory in Afghanistan and the defeat of the Soviet oppressors who had killed millions of Muslims, the legend about the invincibility of the superpowers vanished. Our boys no longer viewed America as a superpower. So, when they left Afghanistan, they went to Somalia and prepared themselves carefully for a long war. They had thought that the Americans were like the Russians, so they trained and prepared. As I said, our boys were shocked by the low morale of the American soldier and they realized that the American soldier was just a paper tiger.*

*Osama bin Laden*

President Barzai looked tired and irritable. He glared at the two senior men. The man in uniform was his Army Chief of Staff. The other was a constant thorn in his side.

"What is it, Defense Minister Wardak? You have called me away from vital work to attend this meeting. Tell me why?"

Abdul Rahim Wardak spat out one word. "Drones." He looked at the President and the Army Chief of Staff. "These hideous aircraft fill our skies, killing our people and destroying our mosques. Shall I tell you who they're fighting for, Mr. President? The Taliban. Every time one of their missiles attacks our innocent people, they cry out for revenge, for the blood of the Americans."

"Yes, yes, you have said this before, Abdul. But remember, the drones are doing a fine job, destroying the Taliban leaders wherever they gather."

"A fine job you call it? When every missile recruits more fighters for the enemy cause."

"And how would you deal with the Taliban leaders, Abdul," General Kadim asked gently.

"By negotiation. It is time we talked, instead of driving more fighters to fill their ranks."

Barzai stood up and leaned on the table. "Talk to them! Are you serious? Do you know how many times I have tried to talk to these people? Every time it is impossible. Do you know they don't even have an address, and somewhere I could contact them? How can you talk with non-existent ghosts, Defense Minister?"

It was true. Wardak knew that. The Taliban were virtually unreachable.

They made contact only when they had something to say, and then the conduit would quickly be broken off. He stayed silent.

"Yes, you know the truth of it, don't you? Talk to them, you say, but I say, talk to who? Stop the use of drones, that's what you suggest. But how then do we take the war to the enemy? When we talked about the American mission to target the Taliban leaders with mercenaries, you protested. I'm beginning to think you don't want to win this war, Abdul," The President ended scornfully.

Wardak flushed. He knew he was on dangerous ground, and Barzai had a harsh way of dealing with his ministers who failed him. Yet when everything they suggested was tantamount to a recruiting drive for the enemy, what should he say?

"My information is that the American mercenary operation General Kadim was so enthusiastic about ended badly. Our intelligence sources say their people were badly mauled and only achieved limited ends. We have to stop this nonsense now. Even the tribes that formed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, they're turning against us. Many of them are swearing revenge for the failed American drone attacks. Some have even allied themselves with the Taliban. We're losing this war, Mr. President."

Both men stared at the Defense Minister. Had he lost his mind? His words were tantamount to treason. But Barzai merely nodded.

"We will discuss these things, Abdul. Perhaps there is merit in what you have to say. This meeting is at an end. General, would you stay a moment? I need to talk to you about an approach to the American military."

Both men were silent as the Defense Minister left the room, and when the door was closed, Barzai picked up his telephone to call his private secretary.

"Bring us a tray of tea, and then we are not to be disturbed. Not by anyone."

He put the phone down. "Now, General, you know what has to be done? I will not have such treasonous defeatism in my cabinet."

"It will not be easy," Kadim replied. He is Pashtun, of course, like us. But his tribe, the Khattak, will swear revenge if anything happens to him. It could even start a civil war."

"We already have a civil war, General. But I take your point. I would suggest an accident. No, I have a better idea. If he were killed in a Taliban suicide bombing, it would strengthen the determination of his tribe to fight

our enemies. Can you arrange it? You know how they operate. Perhaps one of your prisoners could be killed and placed in a vehicle on the route that the Defense Minister uses each day."

The General nodded. "It could be arranged, yes. There may be many civilian casualties. It would need a large bomb to be certain of killing him."

Barzai spread his hands wide. "So much the better. We need to stir hatred against the Taliban. Now listen, there is a nephew of my wife, he is a colonel in the army. I feel he would make an excellent Defense Minister, especially if I instructed him to obey your wishes for the military."

Kadim kept a straight face. He already had a cousin he'd hoped to put forward as a replacement for Wardak, but he'd have to bide his time. Barzai couldn't survive forever. Afghanistan was such a dangerous place. He'd survived several attempts on his life already, and maybe he wouldn't be so lucky next time. He'd even suggested the way to dispose of unwanted politicians that would deflect public opinion against the enemy.

"Excellent, Sir. I will arrange it."

The President nodded. "Good. Anything else?"

"Sir, I've had a request from the American CIA Station Chief here in Kabul, Mr. Ashford. There is a shipment of arms destined for our loyal tribes who are fighting the enemy in the northern provinces. Apparently, there's some kind of bureaucratic foul-up, and it would help immensely if you would issue an order to release the shipment without further delay."

Barzai waited. They both knew that this kind of affair was never quite that simple.

"Of course," the General continued, "Mr. Ashford will be more than happy to make a sizeable donation to your fund for the education of the poor."

"See my secretary and have him draw up the paperwork," the President nodded carelessly. "The shipment must be made available without delay." The door opened, and a tray of tea was brought in. Both men sat drinking tea, making small talk. Each one wondered when the other would make an attempt on his life to ease a relative into a promotion, or satisfy some ancient vendetta, or both.

"I'm so glad we had this meeting," the General said to his President. "I feel it will go a long way towards making the kinds of changes and improvements we need to govern this country."

"I agree. It is good to be able to speak frankly with men you trust."

* * *

We sat on the rocks exhausted. All around us the debris of the battle lay strewn on the ground. Bodies, ripped clothing, abandoned weapons and equipment. The Delta Force men were in a tight group on their own, and each was busy checking and reloading their weapons. Their helicopters had landed further down the mountainside, close to the village. There was no sense in their burning up fuel when their main target had disappeared into the deep clefts and caverns of the mountain.

"I've had my men check the bodies. There doesn't seem to be any survivors."

I looked at Mason. He'd done well, taking charge of the platoon when his officer blundered in and nearly got us all killed. But we were still bitter with the sense of failure. I nodded an acknowledgment and looked up as one of Art Schramm's men cried out.

"He's alive, this guy. One of the insurgents, he must have banged his head when the bullet grazed his skull. He's starting to come round."

I walked over to take a look. Art was already there, bending over him to examine his wounds. He straightened up. "He's right, the guy's ok. I think he's one of their senior officers."

I gazed down at him, but he looked like the usual collection of ragged clothes, bandoliers of ammunition and a black turban. His long beard covered most of his face, but his eyes were open, staring at me.

"What makes you think he's an officer?" I asked Art.

By way of a reply, he reached down and pulled the Afghan's sleeve up his arm. He wore a watch, but not an ordinary watch.

"It's a Swiss Gallet. This model is a Flight Officer time zone chronograph, very, very expensive. There's also this," he picked a canvas folder off the ground. "It's a map case. There are a few documents that we'll have to hand over to the intelligence guys, and a map of this area. A military map."

"American?"

"Pakistani. They actively support the Taliban and supply them with a lot of intelligence data, especially maps like this. So this guy can read a map and tell the time with a watch that would cost an average Afghan ten years' pay. And that's just the down payment. He's a senior officer, no question."

For some reason the watch disturbed me. I'd seen it before, or one very

much like it. I put it to the back of my mind; it would come to me later. I just knew it was important. But how many ten thousand dollar Swiss watches were floating around Afghanistan? I suspected I could count the number on the fingers of one hand and have four fingers left. The major we'd released came over.

"He's an officer alright. That bastard used to enjoy beating us on the back with canes. We had little enough to eat, and he made his men tip it out onto the ground so that we had to eat it like animals. I'd like some time with that gentleman."

I smiled. "I'm sure you would, Major, but we're not like them. Or not supposed to be, anyway."

I looked around as we all heard the sound of engines in the distance. It was the Strykers. They had arrived.

We boarded the APCs and made our way back to Kabul, the long way around. The Deltas climbed aboard their helicopters and took off for a quicker, more comfortable ride. There were no handshakes, no goodbyes. They were soldiers who arrived without fanfare, conducted their deadly business, and left in the same way. Once again we had to endure the bone-jarring ride along the Afghan roads; the ride cross country, following dried up riverbeds and open plains was comfortable by comparison. I had a lot to think about. I knew that the military people at Camp Phoenix would not be impressed by the failure of our mission. Rachel tried to cheer me up.

"It wasn't all bad," she smiled. "We'll get back in one piece. We only lost one man."

"Yes, Lieutenant Rains. A pity about him."

"A pity he fucked up, you mean. Stupid bastard, he screwed the whole plan."

"Maybe." I felt tired and depressed. Then our vehicle stopped, and I popped open the hatch. We were facing a horde of Strykers, the same as ours, but many more of them. Their remote turret guns all pointed in our direction. It turned out to be a company of American infantry. I got down to face a hard-looking officer who'd climbed out to stand on the track, hands on hips. It occurred to me that he'd seen too many American cowboy films. It was like watching a scene from High Noon, and we were cast as the bad guys.

"I'm Lieutenant Colonel Vance Everard. Are you Hoffman?"

"That's right."

"We heard on the radio that your mission was a fuck up, Hoffman. We

came in to see if you needed any help."

He was abrasive, to the point of downright insulting. Clearly, he had no time for me, as a non-military person. I was about to reply, but Art Schramm came up beside me with Vince Mason. The Sergeant saluted, but Everard ignored him. He was about to continue when Art stepped forward to stand six inches from his face.

"What's this about a fuck up? Were you there, Colonel?"

"No, and it's a pity I wasn't. Maybe it would have been different."

"Maybe it would have been worse. Ask your Sergeant here for a mission debrief, and you'll find it was an American officer who fucked up, not Max Hoffman."

Everard gave him an icy stare and turned to Mason. "Is that true, Sergeant?"

Mason hesitated only for a few moments. "I'm afraid Lieutenant Rains was ill, Sir. He went off half-cocked and gave away the element of surprise. But it wasn't his fault, he'd suffered a blow on the head from an explosion."

Everard sighed. "I'll have to talk to the men when we get back. But not a word of this is to get out, you hear me, Sergeant? I don't want Lieutenant Rains to be known as anything other than a hero. That's the story his folks in the US are going to hear."

"He was a hero, Colonel. He was doing a good job, up until he ran into that blast. All of these men are heroes. If you're in any doubt, ask the two American soldiers we rescued."

"From the Taliban?"

I nodded. "That's right. We also brought back a prisoner. A high-ranking Taliban officer."

He finally relaxed. "Maybe it wasn't so bad after all. You need to tell it to General Westwood. He's waiting at Camp Phoenix for the debrief. Let's get the show on the road before it gets dark." He shouted to his troops. "Turn them around. We're heading back."

I heard a ragged cheer. Evidently, his men did not share the Colonel's enthusiasm for roaming the Afghan countryside.

We followed Everard's APCs back to Camp Phoenix. Our driver parked the Stryker near to all the others, a neat, military line of formidable steel and state of the art weaponry. But I thought about Mullah Omar's escape route. These vehicles could not travel where the hardy Afghan insurgents could run and move around at will. Rachel and I climbed down to stretch our aching,

tired muscles. Luk followed with Najela.

"What's the next move, Max? Najela and I want to find somewhere quiet for her to clean up and change. She needs to shop for some new stuff too."

"You may as well take her," I replied. "We'll give the General everything he needs to know. I suggest we meet at the hangar in Kabul International, and we can check out the Twin Otter. I expect Joe Ashford will be chasing us for the next load."

"We didn't deliver the last load," Rachel reminded me.

"That's true, but it wasn't our choice. He'll need to talk to General Westwood about that one."

She grimaced. "I don't think Ashford will take it lying down. He's sure to blame us."

"To hell with Ashford," I muttered. "Let's get this debrief over with, and we'll ask Westwood to explain it to him."

She raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, right."

I grinned, "Don't worry, it'll be fine."

Art Schramm and his men had dismounted from the APC that had transported them, and I went to speak to them.

"Art, thanks for everything. I hope they pay you well for what you did."

He grinned. "Don't worry about that, the military squares the bills for our services pretty quick. They don't want disgruntled mercenaries running around in their rear."

"No, I guess not. Where are you headed now?"

"Into town for a meal and a few beers."

"I'd like to fix up to meet, maybe this evening?"

"Make it tomorrow," he replied. "I've got some business to attend to tonight, and she won't wait any longer."

"Tomorrow it is. Lunch at Abe Woltz's place?"

"It's a date."

We shook hands and he left.

"Mr. Hoffman? Max Hoffman?"

I looked around, an American Military Policeman, a sergeant, had walked up quietly behind us.

"I'm Hoffman."

"Yes, Sir, I'm Sergeant Mostyn, a message from the manager of Kabul International. There's a problem with your aircraft, and it needs resolving

right now."

I sighed. "Sergeant, I've just got in, and we're about to attend a debrief with General Westwood. You know who he is?"

"I know General Westwood, yes, Sir. But this is an emergency. If the plane isn't cleared, they're going to destroy it."

"What! Cleared for what?"

"I dunno, Sir. That's the message. Either come now and sort it out, or they use a controlled detonation to destroy the aircraft."

I nodded. "I'll come now. Rachel, you go on to the debriefing."

"No way, I'm coming too. The debrief can wait."

"I've got a vehicle outside the gate. I'll give you a lift," the MP said. "But we need to get there fast, before they decide to go ahead with the controlled detonation."

"Ok, we're coming."

We followed him outside the gates of Camp Phoenix and there stood a military Humvee. It was unmarked, which seemed strange, but so did everything else that the ISAF forced did in Afghanistan. We piled in the back, and Sergeant Mostyn drove us away towards the airport. It didn't seem quite right, any of this. The message about the aircraft, the unmarked Humvee, but when we turned into the airport and drove to the hangar, I relaxed. We both still had our pistols, the Colt .45s that Abe Woltz had given us, so I felt able to defend ourselves if there was any funny business. The Twin Otter was outside the hangar, and Roy Waverley stood by it with a clipboard. We climbed down from the Humvee and joined him.

"What's up, Roy. What's going on?"

He looked up. "Hi, Max, Rachel. The crates are all loaded ready to be shipped out, and the bird's fueled up, so you can get her in the air straight away."

"I don't understand. What's this about a controlled detonation, some kind of security scare?"

"It's news to me." He looked mystified. "Ask Joe, he's inside."

"Joe Ashford? He's here?"

Sure, he sent for you, said you were flying out as soon as you got here."

I felt my anger surge. "We'll have a word with him. I think he needs to understand who's running the war in Afghanistan, and it isn't him."

I stormed into the hangar, and Rachel came with me. Ashford was stood inside, and at first we didn't see him, the interior was too dark. Then I

recognized his huge bulk and walked up to him.

"Ashford, what the hell's going on here? We're supposed to be with the General."

"The guy you think is running the war here, isn't that what I heard you say?"

He grinned and held out his hand. Automatically, I shook it. Then I remembered where I'd seen the watch on the Taliban commander. On Joe Ashford's wrist, where there was just a white line marking where he'd worn it until recently. Everything started to click into place, but I kept it to myself. I realized we were in trouble, with the phony MP to collect us from Camp Phoenix. When he released my hand, I repeated my question, "Tell me, what's going on?"

"Yeah, I will. Soon. First, take off those guns, real slow."

"Fuck you!" Rachel exclaimed. "You want our guns, you'd better try and take them."

"I'd be happy to take them off your dead bodies, if you prefer."

We both whirled around at this new threat. Kyle McDonald, Ed Walker's henchman. That reminded me, where was his former buddy, Saul Madden, who we'd left guarding the aircraft? McDonald read my expression correctly. "You're wondering about your friend, that traitor Saul Madden? Don't worry, he won't be coming to help you out, he made a big mistake."

"What was that?"

"He got in my way, so I had to deal with him. Permanently. But he sure screamed a pretty tune while I carved him up. I dumped his remains outside the airfield where the dogs could have themselves a feast." He belly laughed, a vicious psychopath who'd stop at nothing to inflict pain and injury, and purely for his own personal pleasure. Ashford interrupted him.

"That's enough, McDonald. You want to know what's up? Here's the deal. You're gonna fly this aircraft out with the shipment already loaded, pick up a return load, and deliver it to Peshawar. You'll be leaving in less than thirty minutes, so you can say your goodbyes."

"To whom?"

"To the pretty lady. She's staying here with me. Kyle will go with you, and if there's any funny business, the girl will go the same way as Saul Madden. Savvy?"

I nodded.

"Now take off those guns, it's the last warning."

We unbuckled the canvas holsters and dropped them on the floor.

"Good. Now get into the fucking plane and get it into the air. Kyle will give you the landing coordinates when you're airborne."

I looked at Rachel. "I'm sorry, I don't think I have any choice."

She nodded. "Go and deal with his cargo. I'll be waiting for you when you get back."

"Yeah, very touching." McDonald sneered. "Now do what the boss says, and fly that plane."

Ashford took hold of Rachel's arm and led her away. "She'll be safe here," he shouted over his shoulder. "Very safe, believe me. Just get up in the air and get that cargo delivered."

"I'll be back," I shouted to Rachel.

McDonald sneered. "This isn't a movie, Hoffman. Now move!"

Roy Waverley was still writing on his clipboard as we came out. He looked at us curiously but said nothing as we climbed aboard the Twin Otter. When I looked out of the window, he was still staring, looking straight up at me. McDonald sat in the co-pilot's seat with his pistol drawn to cover me. He watched as I went through the pre-flight checks and called the tower for clearance. Once more, the CIA chief had smoothed the way, and we were given the go right away. Minutes later, we were in the air.

"I need a heading, McDonald."

"North west."

"Is this going to be the same field as before?"

"Maybe. Just fly the plane."

I didn't ask again, but the coordinates were already in the navigation computer, so I punched in the memory recall and sat back while the autopilot took over. After an hour, McDonald checked his watch and decided it was the moment to hand me the coordinates. The watch, that reminded me of Joe Ashford, and the link with the Taliban commander. First, I needed to get us out of this situation, next, to make a decision on what to do about Ashford. I smiled inwardly; taking down Ashford would end the financial arrangement that bailed out the airline. But that was the way it would have to be, conducting business with traitors, drug runners, thieves and murderers was not my style. We arrived over the field, and I made a preliminary pass to check that nothing had changed, but it looked clear enough. I landed, turned the aircraft around, and taxied to where a group of SUVs waited. McDonald gestured with the gun.

“Outside, Hoffman. I’m not leaving you on your own in the cockpit.”

I shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

I felt disappointed. I’d hoped to be able to use the radio. A group of Afghan men made haste to unload the cargo. They wore black turbans, and although I couldn’t be certain, I felt sure they were the enemy. Not all Taliban wore black turbans. Some rival tribes who weren’t Taliban wore them, but their arms and equipment screamed insurgents. This was no ordinary Afghan warband or drug dealer’s bodyguard. They started to load the crates that had been stacked on the ground, and the aircraft filled with the pungent smell of opium. So that was it; a straight swap, guns for the Taliban, and drugs for Joe Ashford to sell on. McDonald saw my expression and sneered.

“Yeah, it’s opium, Hoffman. You’re now part of one of the biggest business operations in the world.”

“So why doesn’t it feel good to be involved with something that causes so much death and misery?”

“That’s tough,” he chuckled. “If you want to feel good, just be happy that you’re still alive. For now.”

I didn’t reply. The loading ended, and I went into the hold to make sure the cargo was secure, and I found that they’d tossed it in an untidy heap. If it shifted in mid-flight, we’d probably lose control and plunge into the ground. I estimated at least two tons of cargo, and a lot of weight to suddenly slide loose in the air.

“This needs to be lashed down,” I said to McDonald.

“So?”

“So it’s a two-man job. I’ll need a hand.”

He grimaced. “I reckon you should be able to handle it yourself, but if you really need me, I’ll do it.”

I didn’t need him, and it wasn’t a two-man job. But I’d hoped to get him close enough to tackle him without fear of him getting a shot at me. It was not to be. He kept the other side of the cargo from me and gave me an evil grin when I asked him to come around and help me. When it was done, I fastened the door shut and went forward again to the cockpit. My shadow slipped into the co-pilot’s seat beside me. I started the engines, and with the brakes on, gunned them up until they were screaming. McDonald started to look nervous.

“What the fuck are you doing, Hoffman?”

“I need the aircraft to accelerate fast when I take the brakes off. This field is too short for a normal take-off. Does it worry you?”

“Fuck off,” he snarled.

It was a small victory. I released the brake, and we shot forward for the difficult take-off. When we were in the air, I turned to my guard.

“I assume we’re still heading for Peshawar?”

He nodded. “You’ve got it. He was planning to hop a military flight and wait for us there. So get a move on, Mr. Ashford will be waiting.”

“Ashford? I thought he was in Kabul with Rachel. What’s happened to her?”

“Don’t worry, it’s all organized. Your woman will be waiting for you in Kabul when you get back.”

If I get back, I reflected. The only consolation was that he needed me to fly his illegal cargoes; at least until he found someone else to do it.

“Who is with Rachel? Who’s looking after her?”

“No one.” He looked over at me with a broad smile, enjoying my discomfort. “The little lady is safely locked up in a storage locker inside the hangar. You’ll get all the details to release her when the job’s finished.”

But there was something in his eyes. Whatever they planned, it wasn’t to tamely let us go. Either they’d kill us both to stop details of their scheme reaching the military, or they’d keep her prisoner to ensure my cooperation. I had no choice but to follow their instructions, and to find a way out of the mess the second I had the slightest opportunity. I went through scores of different ideas to turn the tables on them, but not one of them would ensure Rachel’s safety. I was surprised when I realized we were on the approach to Peshawar. The voice came through my headphones, jarring me out of my thoughts.

“Unidentified twin-engine aircraft heading out of Afghanistan for Peshawar, identify.”

I came awake. “Peshawar, this is Helene Air flight to Peshawar requesting clearance to land.”

“What was your departure airport, Helene Air?”

I hesitated, but there was only one reply I could give them. “Kabul International.”

“One moment. Keep on your course.”

They knew very well that I hadn’t come from Kabul. We’d crossed the mountains on a heading from the south west of Jalalabad. Would this be the

opening I needed? The voice came back.

"Thank you, Helene Air. You are already cleared to land. Come straight in to the main runway and taxi to the Double Eagle hangar. The cargo handlers are waiting for you."

Ashford. Of course, he'd arranged it all, and maybe he had the cooperation of the Pakistani Security Service, the ISI. But however he'd done it, it meant that one of my plans to turn the tables, by making the landing at Peshawar so suspicious that the authorities boarded the aircraft to check it out, had been trumped. I dropped down onto the runway and slowed at the end, following my instructions to taxi to the hangar. I saw Ashford straight away. There was a group of locals dressed in the usual rags, and in the center of them Ashford, taller, bigger, and much more imposing. I stopped next to them, shut down, and went aft to unfasten the door. Ashford's face greeted me with a grin.

"You're on time, Hoffman. Well done. Now get down off that aircraft, and my men will unload the cargo. It's very valuable, believe me." He laughed then. "Oh yeah, it's valuable alright." He looked at McDonald as the mercenary appeared beside me. "Stay with him, Kyle. Don't let him out of your sight."

"No worries, boss. If he even breathes, it'll be his last."

"Yeah, good idea," Ashford nodded absently. "Go around the side of the hangar. I don't want anyone seeing what goes down."

McDonald gestured with his pistol, and we both climbed down. He came behind me so that there was no way I could tackle him. So this would be it. There was no question that the man was going to kill me, and no doubt they had arranged for another aircraft and pilot. I was no longer useful to them. I had to take the chance soon, or it would be all over. We turned the corner, out of the beam of the overhead cargo unloading lights that lit up the front of the hangar, and I made my move. I slowed a little, just enough to let him catch up, then swiveled around and lashed out with my leg to bring him down. But he'd been waiting for me. He stepped back, and my leg only hit fresh air.

"You fucking amateur, Hoffman. You thought I'd fall for that? You must be crazy."

He held up his pistol, and I saw his finger tighten on the trigger. It all happened in slow motion. His teeth gleamed in the darkness, and I noticed for the first time that two of them were missing. He hadn't shaved for days, and

his stubble showed coarse on his sallow face. His eyes were dilated and the pupils huge. He was getting a rush form what he was about to do. I tensed my muscles for one last, despairing leap for the gun. It was all I had left. Then there was a soft ‘plop’, and a dark hole appeared on his chest. Blood flowed down his front to stain his shirt. His eyes widened as his face took on a puzzled expression. His fingers opened, the gun fell to the ground, and he toppled with a crash. I was stunned. What the hell had happened? I stood for what seemed like an eternity, shaking with the tension as adrenalin poured into my body, and my mind went into overload.

“Max, are you ok?” a voice whispered through the darkness.

I turned to see Luk walking towards me, carrying his sniper rifle with a huge silencer attached.

“Luk!”

“Schh, Ashford is still around there. Are you hurt in any way?”

“No,” I whispered. “What about Rachel?”

“You wouldn’t keep me away from this for a million dollars,” a familiar voice rang out in the darkness. Then she limped towards me out of the gloom, and we ran to each other. I held her tight.

“How…?”

“It’s ok, Max, we’re ok. Let’s get ourselves out of here.”

“But who…?”

“Waverley, Ashford’s manager in Kabul. He was suspicious and came looking around the hangar after Ashford had gone and found me. I got your destination from him and went to find Luk.”

“But, how did you get to Peshawar?”

“I hired a Cessna Air Taxi on short notice and flew it in.”

“It must have cost a fortune! We haven’t got any money.”

“Hey, your fiancée ain’t exactly broke, you know. I have got some cash from my pension.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I muttered.

“That’s ok, don’t say anything. We need to deal with Ashford. Don’t worry, Luk and I have a plan.”

“You’re not going to kill him!”

“No, he’s too powerful. We just need to make a deal. He lets us go, and we shut up about what he’s up to. At least for the time being.”

I hated the thought of him getting away, but she was right, he was much too powerful and well connected for us to touch him.

“One second, there’s something I need.”

I stooped down and picked up McDonald’s pistol that he’d dropped. Rachel carried a pistol in her belt, and Luk had his rifle. It was enough. We walked around the end of the hangar and into the light. Ashford looked up, saw the three of us armed, and smiled. I gave him credit for a quick recovery. He showed no sign of any concern.

“Well, well. So your little friend showed up.” He grinned at Rachel. “I trust you were comfortable during your stay in your new quarters at Kabul International?”

“Fuck you, Ashford,” Rachel intoned, but there was little expression in her voice, other than a trace of contempt.

“Oh dear, that bad, was it?” he laughed. Then his smile faded, and he turned to me. “What happens now, Hoffman? Or is this some kind of a Mexican standoff?”

“We fly out and leave you here.”

“And Kyle McDonald? I assume your friends killed him?”

“After he tried to kill me, yes.”

He nodded, and I could see the wheels turning in his brain. Another loose end taken care of, that’s all it meant to him. “And what happens when you get back to Kabul? I guess you’ll spill your guts to ISAF?”

But I’d already worked out how to keep him at arm’s length if we ever got away. “No. I want full and clear title to my aircraft and airline, all debts paid. You stay out of our hair, that’s all.”

“All?” he sneered. “I don’t believe you.”

“There is one more thing, Ashford. You come near us, or any of our people or property, and I’ll kill you.” He started to laugh, but my next words stopped him. “You know Art Schramm and his boys?”

He nodded. “The mercs, yeah.”

“Art is a friend of my family. When we get in the air, I’m going to call him up and spell it all out to him. Don’t worry. It’ll be on a satphone, and not over the radio for everyone to hear. He’ll know what you’ve done, and if anything does happen to us, he’ll come looking for you with his men. You wouldn’t like that, Ashford. There’s no way out of that. Not even you could deal with Schramm and his mercenaries.”

His smile had gone, and he looked grim. “I hear you. You’ve got a deal.”

“What about the aircraft title and my mortgage deeds? Where are they?”

“You’ll have them within forty-eight hours. Don’t worry,” he scowled. “I know what’s at stake.”

“You’d better.”

We left without another word and climbed aboard the Twin Otter. When we were airborne, I turned to Luk and Rachel. “You know I’ll never be able to thank you enough for this.”

Luk blushed, but Rachel was all business. “There is something you can do, Max.”

I nodded. “Anything, all you have to do is name it.”

“I’m the only fiancée in the world without a ring. You can put that right.”

I looked her in the eyes. “Is that what you want? Really?”

“You’d better believe it.”

“It’ll be my number one priority. Anything else? Luk what about you?”

“I’ll talk to Najela,” he grinned. “Then I’ll let you know.”

It was all surreal; in the midst of so much death, poverty and misery, they were talking about, well, life.”

* * *

They could see he was faltering with the hard, fast pace they had to maintain to cross the mountains without being seen by any wandering drones. But he was weakening. Abruptly, he stumbled. There wasn’t room for them to help him along the narrow, rocky path. He walked alone, and he fell to the sharp stony ground. They were horrified.

“Mullah, are you well? Is there a problem, do you feel ill?”

He looked up and surveyed them with his one eye. “The air is thin and the going hard. I just need a little rest. Do not worry about me. It was just a stumble, no more. Give me a few minutes, and then I will be refreshed enough to continue.”

“But, Mullah, it is not safe. The American drones are everywhere. We need to…”

“If the drones find us, it is God’s will. If God wishes to protect us, so be it. But I cannot go on. I must have a few minutes rest.”

Rashid Osman knew they shouldn’t have come this way, but there was no choice. That damned American attack had forced their hand, and it was the only way out. Even so, they’d lost a lot of men, too many men. There would be a great many grieving widows when they returned to the village

they used as a base. And even more, if they stayed out here in the open, high in the mountains that bordered the Khyber Pass.

"Sir," he tried once more. "Can you not make a few hundred yards to the group of rocks you can see in the distance. It will give us some cover."

Omar stared at him. "I have spoken, Rashid. We wait here."

"Yes, Sir."

He positioned sentries at all corners of their makeshift camp. But what could they do if a drone appeared? Nothing, except maybe shoot it down. He called over four men who carried RPG missile launchers.

"You know of the danger we face from drones?"

The oldest of the four men replied. "Of course. We are not children that have never learned how to fight."

"Post your men so that they have a clear shot at anything that appears in the sky. Tell them to be ready."

The man looked scornful. "For drones? You know how high they fly, and the range of our missiles."

"I know, but it is all we have. Make sure you are ready, and if God is with us this day, they will have no need to fire their weapons."

"You mean if the Americans do not choose to overfly this area, Rashid."

"That too. Now hurry, do your best."

He'd done what he could. His men were carrying a light machine gun, an old Soviet Degtyarev DP, nicknamed the 'record player' because of its pancake shaped magazines. He considered deploying that but decided against it. Its accuracy was not ideal even for ground operations. No, as an anti-aircraft gun, it was worse than useless. He sat near to Mullah Omar and checked his watch. Five minutes, no more. Then they'd have to move on, even if they had to carry him.

* * *

She was tired and almost at the end of her shift. Master Sergeant Carol Wendelski wasn't looking forward to the long drive home across the Nevada desert, but it was better than living on Creech Air Force base. She was piloting the MQ-9 Reaper. So far she'd fired off all of her Hellfire missiles, and she knew that when they checked the mission camera, they'd find she'd hit precious little. All she had left was a single GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided bomb, and her eyes, of course. If she saw anything, she could call in an air strike. But she was Air Force, and maybe not a fighter jock, but the

next best thing. She wanted, no, she craved a kill. And then she saw it, movement high up on the mountainside. She kept the drone straight and level so that the men on the ground didn't catch any sudden movements and scatter. Then she increased magnification and directed her camera to inspect the target. Yeah, insurgents, had to be. They were too heavily armed, and their direction of travel was too off the beaten track for them to be anything else. She flashed through a mental checklist of her rules of engagement and made a split second decision. She was still operating under the modified RoEs, so she was allowed to go for it. That was good enough for her. She locked the laser targeting system on the party of Afghans, and only then swung the drone over in a hard banking turn that would take it down and directly over their position. As she drew nearer, she armed the Paveway guided bomb at the same moment as she saw the men running around in obvious panic. Two missiles soared into the sky towards her Reaper, and she chuckled. Who the hell were they kidding? Her finger was over the button, the moment came and she hit it. At the last second, she swore she could see a guy looking up. He was in the center of the group, and he had a black patch over one eye. Surely not? After all this time, it couldn't be that easy, could it? But she'd report what she'd seen. They could make up their own minds; they'd rerun the video and see exactly what she'd seen. The picture disappeared into a blur of smoke and debris. She circled for a few minutes and took another look. There were a few bodies and no movement. That was good enough for her, time to fly the bird back to Kabul and punch out for home.

* * *

We landed at Kabul International. I was sick of seeing the place, but we had to clear up some loose ends; not least was the debriefing that I'd been sidetracked from attending. When we landed, Luk hurried of to check on Najela, conscious of the long arm of Joe Ashford. Rachel and I managed to get a lift on a Humvee driving to Camp Phoenix.

# Chapter Fifteen

*We will never allow you to dictate to us how to run our country and*

*whom to employ in Afghanistan. How and where we employ the foreign experts will remain the exclusive prerogative of the Afghan state. Afghanistan shall remain poor, if necessary, but free in its acts and decisions.*

*Daoud Khan, former Afghan President*

"Mr. President, Sir. A message from Kabul."

President Barrani looked up at the aide. His immediate feeling was one of relief. The meeting to discuss agricultural grants for organic fertilizers was one he would gratefully have avoided, but the delegation was from a marginal district, and the congressman had begged for his support. He put on his most regretful look.

"I'm sorry, this shouldn't take long. Keep the meeting going. I'll be right back."

They all nodded gravely. Affairs of state took precedence. They knew that. When he was outside, he took the aide to one side and grinned.

"Was this a genuine emergency, or were you just saving my ass?"

The aide didn't return the smile. "It's genuine, Sir. They're asking for you in the situation room."

He nodded. "Ok, let's go see if World War III has broken out."

Inside the situation room, he could see smiling faces. So it wasn't war, thank God.

"What's going on?" he asked General Mathew Mann.

"It's good news, Mr. President. At least, we think it is. It's Mullah Omar."

"You think? That doesn't sound promising. Did you find him or not?"

"We're almost sure, and we didn't just find him. We found him with a GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided bomb, from one of our Reapers. If you'd care to take a seat, Sir, I'll run the video."

He sat and watched the film. It was surprisingly sharp, and in color. Not at all like those grainy images that used to come out of his gun camera when he was attending post mission debriefs on his carrier off the coast of South Vietnam. He saw the man with the eye patch, and saw the smoke and debris. He watched for several minutes as it slowly cleared. The Reaper was circling, keeping the camera focused on the target. Then it cleared, and there was a heap of bodies and scraps of equipment.

"Is he dead? Really dead?"

"We think so, Sir."

He fixed his Chief of Staff with a hard gaze. “I’m not so sure. Number one priority, General. Find out the truth. Is the reward still in place?”

“Yessir, ten million dollars. American.”

“Ok. Make it public that the reward stands, dead or alive. I want to see a body. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir, I’ll get straight on to it.”

“Good. But well done, everyone, and you can send my congratulations to that drone pilot.”

He strode out. Please God, let it be true. If he could wind down the war in Afghanistan, and start bringing the troops back, his second term would be a kick-in.

* * *

The debrief was like a thick fog, and I fought my way through it, trying to keep my mind focused, but it was hard, very hard. Art Schramm was dead. Two hours before, a bomber had left his vehicle outside the hotel where he was entertaining his girlfriend. The explosion destroyed most of the building, killing Art, his girl and three other mercenaries from his unit, as well as scores of other civilians in the vicinity. After all the actions he’d fought through, the enemies he’d defeated and killed, to be murdered in his bed left me with a sense of disbelief and outrage. I knew who was responsible. There was no question. Ashford. He’d put the word out as soon as we took off from Peshawar. I knew it was a warning to my crew and me. I shouldn’t have used Art Schramm’s name as a threat to him. I realized my mistake and felt responsible. Yet deep down I knew that there was only one person responsible for the bomb, Joe Ashford. One day, I’d find a way to get even. The only way to achieve that end was to kill him. From that moment on, Ashford and I would be mortal enemies, and we both knew it. Each of us could harm the other immensely, that was obvious. I would have to be patient. ‘Revenge was a dish best served cold’, I believe that was the old saying. The Pashtuns had a better proverb. ‘A man taking revenge one hundred years after a slight to his ancestor, would fret that he had acted in haste.’ I didn’t plan to wait that long, but killing Ashford would from here on in would be part of the fabric of my life. One day, I’d find a way to rid South East Asia of his pestilential schemes without any comebacks on me, my friends and my partner, Rachel.

“To sum up, the operation was a mixed success,” General Westwood

said. I looked up. I hadn't even realized the debriefing was almost over.

"There were some good points and some bad points. I've recommended Lieutenant Rains for a medal, and I expect it to be approved by the time his body is shipped home. More good news, and this time it's about Mullah Omar. One of our drones got a hit on a party that was climbing the mountain right above where you lost contact with his people. They managed to drop a laser-guided bomb on the party, and as far as they know, all of them were killed. We're working now to get independent confirmation that Mullah Omar was in that party, but it'll take time. However, there's a good chance that he was there. So well done, all of you. Colonel Brooks, would you like to play the video and show these folks what went down."?

"Yes, Sir."

The blinds were already closed. Someone switched off the light and a video projector came to life. I saw the wide angle shot taken from high altitude, and then the rocky landscape came closer as the drone swooped down low. We could see them clearly now, a group of heavily armed insurgents. They looked up in alarm and launched a couple of RPG shoulder launched missiles. One of the men did appear to have a patch over one eye, but that was not conclusive. In a land of little or no medical care like Afghanistan, many men wore eye patches. Several of them fired their assault rifles, and then the bomb launched to arc down, exploding on the exposed mountainside. When the smoke cleared, there was just bodies. Then the lights came on.

"We're certain that we got him. The guy with the eye patch looked pretty conclusive. Our surmise is that you forced him out into the open when you attacked that village. Well done all of you. As soon as we know for sure, we'll let you know."

But I knew then. I had an icy feeling in my guts that it wasn't him. I could still remember that man in the village of Yaluk staring at me. That stare carried a power that was almost as powerful as the laser that had guided the bomb down to the party of insurgents. The man I'd seen looked similar, except for that one difference. He looked too ordinary. I hoped I was wrong. Mullah Omar's death could be the catalyst that begun the process of healing to end the war in Afghanistan. But I didn't think I was wrong. Like everything else in this country, time would give the answers, one way or the other.

"Lastly, we're sorry to hear about the death of Art Schramm and his

men. I'd ask you to stand and salute the man who fought so long and so hard for what was right."

We stood, the men in uniform saluted, and us civilians put our hands over our hearts. Then it was over. There was only one place in Kabul for us to head for, Abe Woltz's bar. General Westwood laid on a Humvee to take us there but asked me into his office for a quiet word before I left. Rachel didn't like being excluded, but she gave in.

"Sit down, Hoffman. This won't take long, but we may as well be comfortable."

I hesitated, but only for a second or two. When Generals give orders, even invitations, they have a way of making the subject go along with them. I sat down.

"What is it, General? I've a lot to do and people waiting for me. Can you make it quick?"

"Sure, but this business in Yaluk, hunting down Mullah Omar. You did well, damn well."

"If he's dead," I replied.

He looked and stared at me. "I gather you're not sure."

"No, I'm not. Frankly, I doubt it."

He nodded. "I see. In that case, it makes what I have to say more important. You know that US policy is to employ more security contractors and run down our troop strength?"

"Of course I do, that's common knowledge. It cuts down the number of soldiers being shipped home in body bags."

"That's not the sole reason," he objected. But then he smiled. "But I guess it figures pretty high in the politicians' thinking. Did you know I offered Art Schramm a long term contract?"

I wasn't surprised. "He was a good soldier. He would have been an asset."

"Yeah. The thing is, I also need someone who is more mobile, who can fly shipments and personnel around for me. Would you be interested? The money is good. I understand you've overcome your immediate problems, but this would guarantee a good future for your airline, even expansion."

"Who told you about our problems?"

He waved the question away. "I heard it somewhere. But what do you think, an exclusive contract to fly for the military in Afghanistan?"

"I'm not comfortable with it, General. I have a policy of not flying

weapons and soldiers."

"Not what I heard," he grinned. "But I guess you were forced into it by the CIA."

So he knew about Ashford. "That's right."

"It's like this, Hoffman. The Afghan government is starting to get serious about cowboy airlines flying all over their country."

"My outfit is legit, General, always has been."

"Sure, sure. But they're trying to encourage their own people to get involved more. I gather they'll be looking hard at license renewals for foreigners, and I believe yours is up in a few months time?"

It all clicked into place then, the quid pro quo. Fly for us, and we'll keep your licenses valid. Refuse, and you'll find yourself grounded. Permanently. I felt bitter, and it was a stab in the back. But I guessed it was the way things played out in this country.

"I'll think about it, General."

"Of course you will. Good man. The kind of thing I envisage is worthwhile, believe me. Extracting casualties from outlying areas, troops who fall sick. Maybe even picking up troops held prisoner by the insurgents, if it's ever needed."

My mind was diverted, thinking about how to transport sick people in the Twin Otter, when my brain picked up the word prisoners.

"I'm sorry, you said prisoners. That suggests to me that they'd be in enemy hands."

"That's right, yes."

"General, what you're describing is more than flying sick troops. You're talking armed operations into enemy held territory."

"Am I? Well, I guess it could come to that. That's why I'd be able to offer to employ Art's contractors as part of the deal. It would mean you'd have an armed escort, permanently attached to your staff."

I was stupid. He'd led up to this, and I hadn't seen it coming. So what he wanted was a convenient way to extract soldiers trapped or held captive in enemy territory. If he got his men back, it would be a feather in his cap for everyone who came home. If we got shot at and suffered casualties along the way, we'd just be another figure on a Washington balance sheet.

"No way, General. I'm not here to commit suicide."

He smiled. "Think about it, that's all I'm asking. You haven't asked about the money."

“No, I have not.”

“I’d quadruple your normal charter rates, double pay for every person who you recruit, and full insurance and equipment back up. Isn’t your Twin Otter due for a full engine overhaul soon? That’ll be expensive. Anything you want, it’s yours. Call in and see me tomorrow.”

I left him in a daze and called a cab to take Rachel and me into the city. On the way I told her what he’d said.

“Jesus Christ, Max, that’s amazing. We’d get the airline off the ground for sure, new aircraft. Think of it, we could even go international if we made enough money.”

“If we’re still alive,” I grumbled.

There were twelve of Art Schramm’s men drinking in Abe Woltz’s bar. Luk was there with Najela, and Abe was busy running around with the drinks. He greeted me with a huge smile.

“Glad to see you’re back, Max. Let me get you a drink. Are you joining the boys?”

“Yes, for a while.”

They nodded when I asked if we could join them at their table. Art’s second in command, Trip Wennerstrom, looked at me when I said how sorry I was.

“He was a great man, Art. The best. We’ll miss him,” was his eulogy.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked him.

“I’ve no idea. We need to find a new contract. The money from that last one will keep us going for a short while, but we all have bills to pay. Wives, children. They all need money.”

“You mean you have families?” I was astonished.

“Of course we have. After Iraq, we left the army and found that there’s precious little work in the US, because of the downturn. Most of us have kids in school, big mortgages, credit cards, you know how it is.”

I nodded. “Yeah, something like that.”

We spent a half hour with them and then left them to drown their sorrows while we moved to another table and ordered some food. Abe brought it out, and I asked him to join us while we talked about Westwood’s offer. His eyes narrowed.

“The conniving bastard. They never change. They did something of the same to your grandfather in ‘Nam.”

“I didn’t know that. All I was told was to avoid the CIA like the

plague."

"Yep, that's sound advice. So what are you going to do?"

"Rachel, you're in favor, I gather?"

Her eyes were dilated, bright with excitement. "You can count me in, any day."

"Luk?"

"I've had enough of tending bar," he muttered. "Sorry, Dad."

"That's ok," Abe reassured him. "A man has to make his own way."

"Is it ok with you?" he asked Najela.

She nodded shyly. He told us what she had signed. 'What's the difference? The war is everywhere. Last time we were here the war was outside, when those bombs went off.'

She sure had a point. I went over to the mercs. They were now Trip Wennerstrom's men, although it caused an ache in the heart to call them that. I explained the offer. Their answering roar was enough. I went back to our table.

"It seems we have a contract," I informed them.

Abe Woltz could not hide the excitement in his face. "You know what his means? The Devil's Guard is back."

"Hey, hold up," I grinned at him. "We'll be flying sick soldiers and casualties out of the remote areas."

"Yeah, right. I'll call your men over, and we'd better celebrate with another drink."

I had the feeling that things wouldn't ever be the same again for us, for Rachel and me, for Luk and Najela. For Afghanistan.