
PROMO
#2
JACK MURPHY

13JUN76

The Vietnam War had been like a good television show. It had a nice long run, got renewed for few seasons, and then suddenly, inexplicably, the network canceled it.

Sean Deckard was out of the Army and back on the streets, coming home to find out there was nothing to come home to. After everything he'd seen and done there was no turning back. No going back to the way things were, the way thing had never really been to begin with.

Being a National Guard recruiter or stocking shelves as a grocery store just didn't cut it after running recon with SOG. Even after they shit canned him over the fiasco with General Farnsworth, he had gotten to tag along with the Phoenix project. He'd spent the next year with them doing to the VC in South Vietnam what SOG had done to them in the surrounding three countries. Then the network execs pulled the plug and it was all over.

He snorted at bitter memories. The COSVN raid was supposed to end the war; instead it ended in a cover up.

Sean fixated on a point somewhere in the distance and began walking towards it. It was just a lump of a hill several kilometers away, barely visible against the night sky. The soldier cursed himself in frustration. Looking down at his watch, he squinted to see the hands, knowing he would never make it in time.

Linking up with some old buddies in a dive bar back in the States, he'd heard stories. Stories about Montagnard refugees hung out to dry after Uncle Sam turned his back of them. Arriving in Thailand he heard more. Rumors of American POW's sold down the river by Tricky Dick and his boys. He'd spend months walking the filthy back alleys of Bangkok with a suitcase full of gold coins, looking for answers.

Families of the missing soldiers had even gotten word to him that they were offering rewards, huge ones in some cases. Sean worked *pro bono*, accepting only what he needed to survive. Teaming up with a few other vets and some locals they had made several deep penetration patrols into Laos. Despite their best efforts, they never caught more than a whiff of the POW's, just enough to encourage them to keep looking.

It had gone on like that, one long booze filled spiral. Meeting with informants in smokey bars. Fist fights in Singapore. Hung over in Chaing Mai. Plotting and planning on cocktail napkins late into the night. Eventually

he had realized what was happening to him and knew he needed to get back into the action or he'd lose himself forever.

A few hundred meters from the hill, he took a knee in the African bush country. After setting down his heavy rucksack he pulled out his map and compass and plotted the next leg of his journey. He had already taken a wrong turn twenty kilometers back, going in the wrong direction for several hours. There was no way he could make up that kind of time, no matter how hard he pushed himself across the rolling terrain.

Hearing the gentle gush of a stream downhill from his position, Sean nodded his head. It matched with the topography on his map. He was in the right place, if not at the right time. His back cracked as he shouldered the ruck. He'd been going like this for several weeks, moving from point to point, day and night.

He struggled to set the azimuth on his compass. He was exhausted.

Next came the Spanish Foreign Legion, high in the running as the stupidest mistake he'd ever made. He'd heard some war stories about La Legion from a guy in Hamburg and signed up on impulse. The French government by this time had had enough of coup attempts by their Legionnaires and was screening anyone who showed up at Legion Etrangére looking for a hot meal. In Spain, La Legion had no such qualms.

As it turned out, La Legion was not an infantry unit or anything of the sort. They were shock troops plain and simple. Franco literally had them at his disposal to throw against the enemy, use them up, inflicting as well as suffering massive casualties. Intake and training was a combination of sadism, marksmanship, and military drills. It was an experience that some recruits did not survive. Deckard kept his head down and his mouth shut.

Training often consisted of live fire assault courses, crawling under and over obstacles while Sergeants fired machine guns over their heads, usually, and detonated explosives next to them. The last straw for Sean was an airborne jump they did one afternoon. They jumped at five hundred feet over a mid-sized city in southern Spain, training for urban warfare. Over a dozen Spanish Legionarios died, dozens more were critically injured.

Sean had quickly jettisoned his rucksack the moment his parachute deployed, watching it explode on the cobblestone street below before slamming into the side of a building and breaking his arm.

Like so many before him, he had deserted.

Sean forced one foot in front of the other, his canteens long since

drained. He felt like the tin man, his joints creaking, each step landing heavy, dragging his feet. He'd lost three toe nails in as many days, his feet covered in blisters, socks soaked in blood. Each night, before getting a couple hours of sleep, he was terrified of what he'd find when he took his boots off. By now his feet were ground into hamburger.

Looking down at the needle of his compass he felt himself getting delirious. Little sleep, food, and constant physical exertion had taken its toll on his mind and body. Pointing himself on the right heading he pushed himself forward, head down, half asleep.

Hours later he stumbled onto a dirt road, dragging his FN FAL rifle behind him by the barrel.

“This bloody bloke is completely out of his head,” he heard a voice say.

Sean looked around thinking he was hallucinating.

“Your done number eight,” the voice said.

Finally he saw the man standing directly in front of him. He wore green and brown camouflage shorts and shirt. Behind him were several Land Rovers with a small cluster of soldiers wearing sand colored berets nearby, smoking and laughing with each other.

“This way,” the soldier turned around and led Sean to the vehicles. He trailed behind, slack jawed, barely hearing the words.

“Have a seat,” the man handed him a canteen of water as he flopped down and shrugged out of his rucksack.

Sean drank greedily, beginning to come to his senses. He was alone, not another recruit in sight. His detour had hopelessly sabotaged any chance he might have had. The others were already back at the barracks, racked out in their cots after a full meal.

“Get the bloody medic over here and cut this ouens boots off,” the instructor ordered. “The blood has soaked right through the leather.”

Emptying the canteen, Deckard hung his head. The sun was just cresting above the horizon, the brilliant red and orange hues lost on him at the moment. The medic came running and took a knee next to him, opening his aid bag.

“Congratulations,” the medic said smiling at the American. He passed something cold into his hand. Looking down Sean saw it was an ice cold beer. “You are the first one back.”

Sean's mind skipped a beat, left him struggling to catch up.

“Welcome to the Rhodesian Special Air Service.”

22SEP77

The parachute popped open, jarring his senses as it caught the air and slowed Sean's decent to the ground. The Dakota airplane zoomed overhead, disappearing into the night as it regurgitated dozens of paratroopers. With just enough time to lower his rucksack before the ground came rushing up to meet him, the Vietnam veteran braced himself for impact. Keeping his feet and knees together he dropped into the open savannah like a sack of rocks. Despite the pain of the parachute harness digging into his skin and the rough landing, he felt relief as his parachute drifted down on top of him.

Any landing you can walk away from.

In seconds he had pushed the parachute aside and put his FN FAL rifle into action. As Rhodesian Light Infantry Troopies dropped all around him, he shouldered his H-frame rucksack and began moving out. A small SAS contingent had gone out on patrol several days prior to his induction into the unit, causing him to miss the insertion.

The Rhodesians had put him through a fair amount of training after he had graduated selection. Other foreigners who had come from the British or Australian SAS were accepted straight into Rhodesia's C Squadron, but they didn't recognized the American's military training and experience. It was just as well since he wasn't supposed to talk about most of it anyway.

They would para-drop him and the other recruits into areas to conduct training missions, their instructors jumping in hours later to track them down and capture the patrols before putting them through vicious POW type training. It was a long road before he had earned his beret and stable belt.

With his team already deployed and conducting forward operations in order to recon targets for the RLI, Sean had made a nuisance of himself until the paratroopers allowed him to strap hang on their jump. One of the pilot's had told him that Captain Du Plessis had sounded none to happy on being informed during a radio check that his newest member was inbound with the Fire Force he had called in to sort out the nest of ZIPRA guerrillas his team had found.

RLI Mag 58 gunners began lighting up the night. They had landed closer to the enemy than any of them had expected. The SAS Captain had described

nearly a hundred of the communist fighters making their way down a dry river bed, headed towards the Rhodesian border. Tracer fire was exchanged as RLI sticks advanced, riflemen bounding forward as machine gunners laid down suppressive fire. Red tracers swept suspected enemy positions and green tracers answered back.

It was the first full blown contact Sean had seen in years and he was tempted to get involved, however, he was under orders to link up with his commander immediately. The SAS had a mission of their own. For years they had been conducting deep reconnaissance during cross border operations. They identified the enemy for the RLI who were than called in to sweep and clear enemy hold outs. In some regards, their mission wasn't that different than when he was with SOG.

Aging Alouette helicopters buzzed overhead, K-Cars with 20mm machine guns lending a helping hand to the fire fight.

Moving out, he broke into long strides, finding his pace as he crossed the drop zone. Approaching the bush to the North East, he stopped and initiated two flashes with his red lens flashlight. From the treeline in front of him, three red flashes answered. Getting to his feet, Sean double timed it to the wood line. Link ups in combat were extremely dangerous for all parties involved. Some kind of *bonafidis* had to pass back and forth before meeting face to face.

A bearded SAS sergeant waited for him with his flashlight in one hand and an AK-47 rifle in the other. Sean came to a halt in front of the Sergeant, sweat now beading on his forehead. Captain Du Plessis knelt deeper in the bush, listening to his radio while a third and fourth SAS troops faced outward, manning the perimeter.

“Get on the line and watch your sector,” the Sergeant snorted. “And keep your fucking mouth shut.”

Sean was about to say something but thought better of it. Moving past the Captain, he set his rucksack down and manned the perimeter. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the other two enlisted men eyeballing him. One was a younger Corporal with non regulation length hair typically found in Special Forces units. The other was older, another Sergeant with a huge mustache wrapping around his upper lip like a caterpillar. Ignoring their skeptical looks, he got down in the prone and set about watching for ZIPRA intruders.

On the other side of the drop zone, the firefight had kicked into high gear. A constant stream of machine gun and rifle fire reverberated across the open

field, grenade detonations sounding occasionally even over the Alouette helicopters providing air support.

“Understood Four-Five-Alpha,” the SAS officer said into the A76 radio's hand mic. “We are commencing movement to locstat shackle on 48258331 shackle off,” he finished speaking in short hand code in case their transmissions were monitored.

Sean continued to scan the bush, envious of the fire fight raging in the distance.

“Hey, you,” the Captain said under his breath. “Come here.”

Sean got up and moved over to meet the SAS officer.

“What do you see wrong with this picture?”

“I know your weren't expecting me until a few hours ago-”

“Besides that.”

“No idea.”

“What weapon are you carrying?”

Sean looked down at the FN FAL in his hands and then around at the other SAS members. Each one wore olive colored uniforms similar to the rebel fighters and carried enemy web gear, including Eastern bloc weapons. Each man was armed with an AK-47. Even a cherry trooper knew that that was fucked up. In a firefight they couldn't exchange magazines if someone ran out of bullets when each of them carried rifles chambered for different calibers.

“We only carry the FN's for overt combat operations. Had you waited to be briefed and trained by my NCO's you would have known that. Instead you choose to grandstand and hitch a ride with the RLI before I could radio ahead to someone and have you stopped.”

“I wanted to get back in-”

“You're not the first Yank to come to this unit and be drummed out in short order. Vietnam veterans mostly, or so they claim, running around wearing all their Yank metals and looking like a Christmas tree. Nearly everyone of them reckoned themselves some kind of Karate expert until a few tussles in the canteen with my men.”

Sean gritted his teeth, knowing that the Captain had a point.

“I'm Du Plessis. You can call me, Sir. My senior NCO is Alan,” he said pointing to the Sergeant he had linked up with at the perimeter of the patrol base. “The younger one is Robin and the Aussie is James. You stick next to him until we extract. Fuck this up and we leave you out here.

“Welcome to Zambia.”

The newly minted SAS trooper was left standing there with his rifle in his hands as the rest of the team kitted up and prepared to move out. Grabbing his own gear, Sean elected not to get his new team mates more pissed off at him than they already were. Moving behind James, the SAS men headed out with Robin taking the lead.

Even in the dark, Sean could make at the crows feet in the corners of the Australian's eyes as he glared back at him. To say they were skeptical of their new member would be putting it mildly. Sean looked right back at him before they both turned to watch their flanks. Off in the distance they could now only hear the occasional burst of gunfire. The RLI had sorted out the ZIPRA terrorists in short order, their Fire Force missions having proven to be extremely effective.

Robin weaved in between the trees at a brisk pace. Sean immediately pegged him as a native born Rhodesian. Some of the young men he had met in selection were amazing outdoors men, having grown up on farms out in the bush country they had a natural understanding of the terrain. Knowing exactly where he was going, Robin led the patrol towards a shallow depression near the base of a mahogany tree.

Alan then took charge and had the patrol set down a good distance away near a wooded copse that could provide the five man SAS team with some cover and concealment.

“Alright, Yank,” the senior NCO barked. “You're up.”

Robin suppressed a laugh. He was enjoying not being the most junior member of the patrol any longer.

“As I'm sure you know, ZIPRA uses this entire area to infiltrate across our borders after receiving training from the communists. We were out here for days before we caught up with that large group moving along the riverbed and called on the RLI to jump in ahead of them. On the way we found one of the caches they hid out here for resupply.

“It's right over there,” he said pointing to the depression they had passed. “Robin spotted it earlier but we didn't have time to destroy it. Since you've shown so much initiative in getting yourself out here, I will give you the honor of crawling over to it and sweeping the cache for booby traps.”

“Thanks,” Deckard muttered.

“Then it's settled, be a good ouen and get on over there.”

Dumping his ruck, the American held his rifle at the ready as he began to

stalk forward. He could hear the others chuckling as he neared the depression. They were enjoying themselves a little to much.

Picking up a stick, he slung his rifle and began probing the ground for anti-personnel mines. Stabbing into the soil at an angle would theoretically hit the side of the mine, making him aware of it's presence without setting it off. Theoretically. It wasn't really that bad. His last year in 'Nam he had chased a Viet Cong guerrilla into an elaborate tunnel system with nothing but a flashlight and a snub nosed .38 revolver. The VC had made his escape and Sean was left lost and in the dark. Once the batteries in his flashlight died it had taken several hours to feel his way out.

A shiver went up his spine. He still had nightmares about that particular incident.

Carefully clearing a narrow path up to the depression, he began slowly pushing dirt aside with his hands. It wasn't long before he could feel the familiar shape of Kalashnikov pattern rifles wrapped inside plastic sheets and the cold metal of 60mm mortar tubes buried naked in the ditch. With only the ambient light cast from the moon to work with, he uncovered as much of the cache as he could. There were wooden boxes with Cyrillic writing on them, belts of ammunition, pineapple shaped hand grenades, all told a sizable find.

Deckard looked over the ordnance, a preview of what he was sure to encounter in the coming months. ZIPRA was one of an alphabet soup of Marxist and Maoist inspired terrorist organizations that invaded Rhodesia. Formally known as the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, they were the armed wing the Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU political group. Often at odds with each other, they none the less pursued a policy of aggression against Rhodesia, sponsored by Soviets, East Germans, Cubans, and some even said the North Koreans. Meanwhile, Robert Mugabe's ZANU received significant support from the Chinese. They all cooperated with each other to some extent along with MK, the ANC, and other communist organizations.

Landlocked in the heart of Africa, Rhodesia had become a pariah state since claiming unilateral independence and was now a prize in the geopolitical chessboard that was the Cold War. Sean Deckard didn't care much for politics, but like the Montagnard soldiers he had fought alongside in the past, he had seen communism up close and knew that he didn't want any part of it.

Reaching down, Sean retrieved his flashlight from where it was clipped to his chest rig. He wore a chest harness manufactured by Fereday & Sons in

Salisbury, made to his own specifications. Having a few patrols under his belt, he knew what he liked. Alan once again responded to his two red flashes with three in return. Seconds later, the Corporal came bounding up with the charges.

The young Rhodesian began unwinding a spool of detonation chord, creating a ring main around the exposed cache. Cutting the chord with a Swiss Army knife, he tied the ends together with a square knot. Once the task was completed, Sean assisted him in tying a half dozen bricks of plastic explosives into the detonation chord.

In less than a minute, the Rhodesian SAS soldiers had initiated the time fuse and began jogging back to join up with their comrades.

“Kit up,” the senior NCO ordered. “We've already radioed for an extraction.”

Sean and Robin rucked up, their backpacks weighing on them like giant ticks. The patrol headed back in the direction they had some from, Sean keeping an eye on his watch as the time fuse burned.

Moving through the bush, Sean watched the second hand tick down, looking up just as the blast sounded behind them. Several things suddenly happened at once. The entire team flinched, an involuntary reaction as the explosion ripped through the cache, detonating the ordnance it contained. Sean brought up his FN FAL rifle to his shoulder, looking down the iron sights and pulling the trigger. The rifle bucked hard into his shoulder as Captain Du Plessis spun around to face him, anger spreading across his face over what he assumed to be an accidental discharge.

The ZIPRA terrorist squatting in the bush fell to one side, the rusty AK-47 in his hands falling from limp fingers. The flash created by the exploding cache had only illuminated the outline of the terrorist for a nanosecond, just long enough for Sean to draw a bead.

As the terrorist wheezed a final ragged breath, the entire forest came alive. Muzzle flashes were everywhere as the Special Air Service patrol was caught in an ambush. The automatic gunfire lit up the bush like a series of disco strobes. The five soldiers immediately went to the prone, throwing themselves to the ground as green tracer fire speared over their heads.

Caught in the open, Sean returned fire, estimating the enemy's size at a dozen or so based on the amount of incoming gunfire. Ditching his ruck and rolling to his right, he took up a position behind a nearby tree, his comrades doing the same. Zeroing in on the closest muzzle flash, Sean waited for the

ZIPRA terrorist to fire, making sure he was on target before he squeezed the trigger. The FN recoiled, the terrorist flailing backwards.

Alan plucked a white phosphorous grenade from his web gear, pulled the pin, and hurled it toward the enemy positions. Meanwhile, Robin and James provided cover fire with their AKs. Undoubtedly, they had run into a group that had bomb shelled, cut and run, the moment the RLI went on the offensive. The SAS men he walked right into their perimeter.

The Willie Pete grenade went off in a brilliant display of deadly fire works. From the enemy ambush line, the SAS men could hear the screams of hapless ZIPRA guerrillas. Few things in the world were more painful than the chemical burns caused by exposure to phosphorous.

A torrent of 7.62 jacketed rounds chipped away at the tree Sean had taken cover behind. A stray bullet impacting the ground in front of him, spraying dirt his face.

“We need to wagon wheel around,” Sean screamed to the Captain. “If we don't out flank them we will be-”

“Shut up,” Du Plessis grumbled as he pulled his radio's hand mic away from his ear. “Bloody bastard.”

Just then, red tracer fire arced down from the sky, tearing into the enemy's ambush line. The 20mm MG151 cannon mounted in the K-Car hovering overheard swept autofire across ZIPRA's lines, making quick work of the terrorists. The aging Alouette gunship had swung into action, raining lead down on the Soviet trained insurgents.

It was a slaughter as the remaining terrorists attempted to flee. The 20mm cannon hosed them down and for a moment it looked like their bodies were surrounded by squirming red snakes as the flesh was stripped from their bones.

Gunfire crisscrossed the enemy's lines for several more seconds until Du Plessis called them off, speaking to the pilot of the radio.

Getting to their feet, the SAS team now stood in a cloud of gun smoke that wafted through the trees, the stench invading their nostrils. Robin gagged on the sulfur smell left lingering in the air. Turning to the American he smiled while dusting himself off.

“That's how we get it done out here,” he coughed.

* * *

Sean Deckard angled the .45's slide back onto the pistol's frame, making sure the barrel bushing was in place before inserting the release catch pin. Inserting a seven-round magazine, he let the 1911's slide slam home with a satisfying metallic click.

A classic never dies.

Robin and James turned away from the newest member of their unit as they sat at the bar. Instead, they looked down into their beer mugs. The Cranborne Barracks, where the SAS was stationed, had it's own canteen for the men of C Squadron to relax in. The walls were lined with plaques and memorabilia. Photos of giants and legends, living or otherwise, adorned the bar. The place was currently packed with troopers, several teams having just gotten back from external operations.

The two veteran SAS men snorted as their new team mate continued to sit alone in the corner of the bar, nursing a beer and cleaning his pistol.

“Bloody wanker that one is,” Robin mumbled into his beer as he took a long gulp.

The older man shook his head.

“I've been doing some checking up on our Yank,” James said between sips.

“Checking up with who?”

“You know I'm on good terms with many of the Americans in the security services, including that McCabe over in the Scouts,” he reminded Robin.

The Rhodesian military had become something of a foreign legion in many respects. As the bush war dragged on the military was increasingly open to enlisting foreigners. French, British, American, Spanish, German, Australian, South African, and many other nationalities were represented in the ranks of the Rhodesian forces.

“I remember, you said that you had worked with him and some of the other Yanks during their war in Indo-China.”

“They call it Vietnam now, but yes, back when I was with the Aussie SAS. Anyway, I've been asking some of the other Yanks who this Sean Deckard is. McCabe is the only one who ever heard of him.”

“What did he say?”

“Truth be told, not much. He got a little cagey with me when I brought up Deckard's name.”

“A regular James Bond, eh?”

“McCabe says the two of them were in the same unit over in Vietnam, but wouldn't tell me which unit it was. When I asked what they did, he said pretty much the same thing I do in the SAS, which I took to mean external operations.”

“It stands to reason the way the Yanks were getting their asses handed to them over there.”

“He said that Sean Deckard is some kind of mad man. First I had to convince McCabe that he was still alive, which he seriously doubted. He told me that Deckard used to come in off one op and than just jump on with another team, fly out to the next mission, and run with them for a few days. He'd go on like that for weeks.

“Then he tells me that their Colonel finally forced him to take some R&R days. Well this guy promises he is going to the beach in Thailand with all the other GI's. Instead, he sneaked back up North to the DMZ with North Vietnam, linked up with his old Recon outfit and spent the week going out on patrols with them.”

“He sounds like a strange one all right,” Robin said before upending his beer and draining it. He set the empty bottle down in front of him with the other three dead soldiers he had killed over the last hour or so.

“No matter,” James said slamming down his beer. “I'm going to sort him out right now.”

“Hey, you-” Robin began, but it was already to late.

James got up and walked to Sean's table. The 1911 was holstered somewhere, not that it would have stopped him. Sean looked up at the Australian, noting his crooked nose, the scar tissue under his eyebrows, and his cauliflower ears. By all indications, he was a boxer.

James noticed the scar on Sean's forehead, more than likely the result of being cut by broken glass. His eyes trailed downwards, looking at the Americans bare knuckles. Long slashes of pink scar tissue covered them where the skin had been broken open multiple times. He was a street fighter.

Just like that, the bar exploded.

Captain Du Plessis strolled towards the canteen with his hands in his pockets. One of the things he liked about the Special Air Service was that it was permitted, if not expected, that officers would socialize with the enlisted men. Men who worked in small teams in combat conditions needed to know

each other, frontward and back, on and off the battlefield.

Upon further consideration, the SAS Captain was having second thoughts about the newest addition to his team. The Yank had made a horrible first impression, but seemed competent enough, he would have to be to have had made it through selection. It was known in certain circles that Rhodesia's selection course was quite a bit harder than the the ones run by the British and Australian SAS. Du Plessis would know since he was on loan from Britain's 22 SAS.

The American had great initiative, if bad judgment. Some more time with the team and he would fit right in.

Closing in on the canteen, Du Plessis frowned, hearing the shouts emanating from within.

“What in the bloody hell-”

His words were cut off by one of the window's exploding in a shower of glass, something heavy landing at the Captain's feet.

Looking down he saw a trophy with a golden figure running with a ball in one hand, perching on the top. He could just make on the etching on the base of the trophy with the light flickering from inside the bar.

Lieutenant Rodney Du Plessis

1st Place

Salisbury Rugby Championship, 1969

Days later, several SAS members would recall seeing steam blasting from the Captain's ears as he entered the canteen.

24 hours later

Near the Nyaodza River

The baboon had been strung upside down by it's legs two days ago. It festered in the African heat, flies buzzing angry circles around the carcass. In another two days they would be permitted to eat the rotting creature. It would be their first and only meal that week.

This was Sean's punishment for his indiscretions.

The Selous Scouts called it Dark Phase.

Considered to be an advanced training course, a highly experienced SAS operator had been scheduled to attend the training offered by their sister unit in a kind of exchange program to help the two units learn from each other.

The grueling nature of Dark Phase involved living in a mock terrorist camp and undergoing harsh survival training.

After the punch up at the pub, Sean was quickly volunteered for the assignment.

A felled tree served as a bench for him and his fellow students to sit on during the classroom portion of the course. They lived inside the terrorist camp mock up, learning the philosophy of Maoist insurgents, their politics, indoctrination, tactics, organization, familiarizing themselves with the multitude of communist groups that threatened Rhodesia's sovereignty.

The Selous Scouts were a military unit completely unique to Rhodesia. Specializing in pseudo-operations, white operators paired themselves with black terrorists who had been tamed and brought over to their cause. In this manner, they were able to successfully infiltrate terrorists gangs from the inside out, the white operators standing off at a safe distance, black makeup disguising their features.

Once the enemy had been identified they would call in the Rhodesian Light Infantry to sort them out. Other times they would move in and make the kill themselves. In still other instances, they would move in entire pseudo-columns, utilizing captured enemy vehicles and dressing up in communist uniforms. The exploits of the Selous Scouts had become legendary in Special Forces circles, some operators conducting singleton operations, close recces on terrorist camps deep behind enemy lines after dropping in by free fall parachute jump.

Jerusalem Kindo stood at the head of the class, delivering a sermon as he called it. Just like a real terrorist camp, there were propaganda quotas that had to be met.

Sean listened carefully as the former guerrilla explained why his former comrades fought, what their inner drive and motivations consisted off. Sean was no stranger to communist indoctrination techniques. In Vietnam they would sweep into villages, insisting that the locals got politically correct, otherwise their entire family would be killed off by some of the most brutal means.

What Jerusalem described was just as bad, if not worse. Sons would be butchered, their mothers forced to eat his ears and nose. Daughters would be raped and mutilated. It was no wonder why black Africans supported psychopaths like Mugabe and Nkomo. They had little choice in the matter.

“What about you?” Sean asked raising his hand.

“What do you mean, white man?” the former guerrilla shot back, angry at being interrupted.

“You told us you had no family to speak of. You said they took you to Russia for political and military training. You saw the end result of communism first hand while in Moscow. You saw the fear and terror that exists in communist nations, so why would you fight for that?”

“It's very simple white man,” he said crossing his arms. “In a communist nation you take power by force. Once you seize control you no longer have to bother with the support of the people, no need for elections. You see, communism is superior to what you call democracy. This is why the Africans fight for communism. Once you have power, you have it for life!”

* * *

Sean stood eyeball to eyeball with the terrorist gang leader, his face illuminated by flickers of light from the camp fire.

The terrorist was naked, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. True to form, once his gang rolled into the village they had demanded everything the poverty stricken Africans had, specifically their alcohol and their women. The gang leader had just emerged from one of the thatch huts having been the first to partake in the wares of the village prostitute.

Taking a swig of whiskey, he set the bottle down, retrieved his AK-47 and fired a celebratory burst of gunfire into the air. Hot brass glinted through the night as the fire reflected off each piece sent spinning from the ejection port.

Deckard held his ground as the gang leader motioned him forward, imploring him to hop in the queue with his men. The .45 tucked into the waist band of his OD green uniform felt entirely too far away for Deckard's taste. The communist uniform and *black is beautiful* face paint might have fooled the drunken terrorist from a distance, but his disguise wouldn't stand under scrutiny for long.

Jerusalem stood by the fire, chuckling at Sean's extremely dangerous predicament.

A live pseudo-operation would be considered his final exam, proving that he had learned what he was supposed to in Dark Phase, and god willing, earn

him another shot in the SAS. He'd been holed up in a clandestine observation post with another white operator, an experienced Selous Scout, while Jerusalem infiltrated a local village that had come under control of a terrorist gang. After gaining their trust, he told the terrorists that he had a friend he wanted them to meet, a terrorist named Sean Deckard as it turned out.

Cutting loose with another burst, Sean held his breath. What the idiot didn't realize was that those bullets had to come down somewhere, hopefully not on their heads.

Motioning Sean forward again, the gang leader held his erection in his other hand to help make his point. Sean already understood all to well.

Jerusalem spoke something in his native language, Shona, to the gang leader. Laughing, the terrorist waved his hand dismissively and went back to his whiskey bottle.

His former instructor swaggered up to Sean, playing the part like the experienced professional that he was.

“He was getting suspicious so I told him that an RLI call sign shot your penis off last year.”

“Thanks for that,” Sean remarked dryly.

“I've been listening to them for two days now. They plan on laying in a ambush tomorrow night on a nearby road. The gang wants to kill some soft targets, farmers, civilians, whoever, they don't care. Afterwords they will run across the border into Zambia before the RLI can catch up with them. So this is your final test white man. What do you want to do?”

Sean reached inside his cargo pocket and pulled out a curved piece of plastic housing with extendable metal legs. *This side towards enemy*, was written in English on one side. Grabbing a spool of wire from his other pocket, Sean popped the shipping cap off the end of the wire with his thumb and attached a trigger mechanism. The other end of the wire ended in a blasting cap that went into the plastic device.

“Give this to the gang leader.”

“Then what?” Jerusalem asked.

“Tell him it is a radio. Robert Mugabe has a special message for him.”

“As you say white man, but you wait until I am back here with you before you do anything.”

“I'd never do you wrong, hoss.”

With a smile, the former terrorist walked back to the camp fire as Sean unwound the wire from the spool. Giving the gang leader the Claymore mine,

Jerusalem spoke to him before hurrying back to Sean's position.

Laying down in the dirt, the two pseudo operators looked at each other for a moment as the terrorist spoke into the side of the anti-personnel mine, waiting for his great leader to respond. Flicking the safety off the squeeze mechanism, Sean detonated the mine, the blast washing over their heads in the hail of metal ball bearings.

23NOV77

A proper Parachute Landing Fall consisted of the paratrooper first hitting the ground with the balls of his feet, twisting and rotating at the hips as his calf muscles make contact, than rolling onto the buttocks, followed by the large muscle group in the back used when executing pull ups during physical training. Conducting a correct PLF negates virtually all injuries associated with parachute deployments.

Sean Deckard gasped as his feet made contact with the hard ground followed by his head, causing his vision to red out for a moment before coming to. A dry summer breeze gusted across the African plains, the wind cool on his face.

The parachute caught in the wind, fluttering behind him in the breeze. Reaching up and grabbing a riser, Sean grunted, pulling it down and collapsing the parachute. Like every other jump he had done since attending airborne school at Ft. Benning, Georgia, he had landed like a sack of shit.

Looking across the bushveld he saw Robin crawl out from under his parachute about twenty five meters away. He had a shit eating grin on his face, having seen Sean's decent from up close. They'd nearly collided in the air.

“Cheese dick.”

They had just hit the ground fifty-six miles inside Mozambique.

Jumping out the door of the C-47 ParaDak at one second intervals put the line paratroopers spread out across the edges of the objective, effectively encircling it and preventing the enemy from escaping. The method was called a vertical envelope in military terms, simply known as *the box* to most. The SAS had one leg, the RLI the two others, with helicopter gunships covering the rear area of the objective.

Loading a 20-round magazine into his FAL rifle, Sean let the bolt slam home.

Floppies were already fleeing across the plains, unaware of the Rhodesians laying in wait.

Taking a knee in the high grass, Sean watched the first terrorist's head bobbing as he ran towards their perimeter. Looking through the rear peep hole on his rifle, Sean lined up the front sight post on the terrorist's chest. His the Chinese-made chest harness and AK-47 in his hands left no doubt as to who he was and where he was running from. Rhodesian Canberras had begun bombing the training camp as as the paratroopers began to drop and now the terrorists were looking to bombshell back into the bush as fast as possible.

Taking up the slack in the trigger, a baseball sized chunk of flesh suddenly disappeared from the terrorist's neck in a shower of crimson colored gore. The report of Robin's rifle thundered on his right flank. Turning, the younger man still had that grin on his face.

Chimoio was ZANLA's largest training base with thousands of communist cadre stationed there. Overflight reconnaissance had proven the information provided by captured terrorists to be true. Chimoio was Robert Mugabe's nerve center for projecting his forces of terror into Rhodesian territory.

The base consisted of a headquarters, firing ranges, and other training centers where students would be instructed by ZANLA leaders who had in turn received training in Tanzania and China. The fortifications around the camp were extensive, the enemy dug in with a system of trenches and fox holes. How much of it had been destroyed by pre-assault fires by Hawker Hunter and B-57 Canberra bombers, they wouldn't know until the assaulted commenced.

Spotting another deserter, Sean beat Robin to the punch, dropping the terrorist with a single shot. The enemy was called Floppies, Terrs, or Gooks, depending on what previous conflict the individual soldier had fought in. Sean didn't much care what pet names they had.

More shots rang out along the line of SAS men, taking down targets as they presented themselves. Bombers were still streaking overhead at even intervals, one every five minutes or so, to drop their payload on Chimoio before returning to base to rearm.

Somewhere further down the line, he could hear Du Plessis on his radio, the occasional hiss of static as he talked to the pilots.

As another warm breeze rippled across the dry grass, several more terrorists were exposed. Slightly smarter than their late comrades, they were trying to crawl away under cover. A fresh round of gunfire broke out, 7.62 bullets buzzing like angry hornets towards fresh targets. No calls for surrender were made, no warning shots fired.

The Vietnam veteran knew better than most, that what is, is.

The hand and arm signal to begin movement was passed down the line. The soldiers maintained a skirmish line, staying parallel with each other, as they advanced forward on ZANLA's headquarters. Thick clouds of black smoke spiraled up into the clear blue sky, dozens of bombing runs having flattened large portions of the base.

As Sean stepped over a body he could see the front lines coming into view. When the assaulters grew near, several machine guns opened up from the trench line. Hitting the ground, streams of automatic fire cut above his head. Zeroing in on the closest machine gunner, his entire half of the skirmish line fixated in on the terrorist with precision fire.

With a stunted final gasp of fire, both machine guns went silent, the operators dead or dying. Getting back on line with each other, the troops quickly took the trench line. Dropping hand grenades into the trench, SAS troops chased the twin blasts and began taking the dug in fortifications. Warm bodies occupied the muddy bottoms, weapons scattered about by those who had bomb shelled into the bush before the Rhodesians had arrived.

Calling it in, Captain Du Plessis reported in to the command aircraft circling overhead that they had established a foothold inside the Chimoio camp. Sporadic gunfire sounded from the SAS men, taking targets as they spotted them.

Receiving permission to move on to secondary targets, the Troop of SAS soldiers split into two elements. The base camp housed thousands of terrorists, spread out across barracks, firing ranges, chow halls, and a motor pool as well as small structures. There was no way that the small Rhodesian contingent could clear the entire base. Instead, they had to prioritize.

Captain Du Plessis moved on the headquarters with his element, leaving his senior Sergeant to capture the intelligence building. Alan took Sean, James, Robin, and twelve other soldiers, leading them deeper into the Chimoio complex.

Thick smoke wafted through the trees, resting at about knee level as the patrol cleared their way through the hard site. Sean's head moved on a swivel,

wary of enemy combatants as the smoke grew thicker and hung in the air like a fog.

Creeping forward, a giant scaffolding revealed itself not twenty meters to their front. Thick cross beams aided wooden struts as thick as oil drums. Perched on the top platform were the twin barrels of a ZPU-2 anti-aircraft gun surrounded by split opened sandbags.

Alan crouched down, his men mimicking their leader's movement. Several wide-eyed enemy could be seen standing guard at the bottom of the tower, several more moved around up top, manning the oversized machine gun. If they managed to turn such a weapon on the SAS troops, they'd be slaughtered in seconds.

“Here it is,” Alan began. “Robin and James are the best marksmen we have, you two take the gunners on the top of the platform. Sean, you are with me as we take down the security team at the bottom. I initiate the ambush, got it?”

The SAS men nodded, prepared for the task at hand.

Getting down in the prone, they crawled forward on their bellies to find positions that offered cover and concealment. Sean kept his thumb on the safety selector on his rifle as he squirmed forward, knowing all to well that an accidental discharge would compromise their patrol. Nearing a rock he planned to use as cover, the anti-aircraft gun suddenly opened up, blasting a storm of green tracer fire into the sky as a couple Vampire fighter jets screamed overhead.

Sean Deckard set in behind the boulder, wiggling his elbows into the dirt to make little divots where he could rest them and take up a steady firing position. The smoke from the burning motor pool had begun to dissipate, but still obscured the view.

Gaining target acquisition, the American began to slow his breathing, waiting for their Sergeant to initiate.

A lone crack echoed across the camp and one of the terrorists on the ground was yanked backwards, struck by a giant invisible hammer. Sean milked the trigger on his FAL, his target going down in the same fashion as the two ZPU-2 gunners on top of the watch tower flopped over in a spray of gray white matter, Robin and James' shots so close together as to sound as one.

Picking back up, the patrol moved to the tower and began setting charges once they had established a security perimeter. The SAS men worked hard

and fast, strapping plastic explosives against two of the heavy timbers that supported the gun tower. They would be destroyed the same way trees were commonly cleared out of the way, often felled across roads to impede enemy vehicle movement.

On the perimeter, Sean panned the barrel of his rifle from side to side, forcing himself to stay alert. It was clear that the heavy fighting was already over and that most of the enemy had fled. Only the brave and foolhardy had elected to fight it out with the Rhodesians. He was all to aware of the adrenaline dump his body was going through, making him sleepy. Watching for enemy stragglers, he knew the mission wasn't over until they set foot back at the bar in Cranborne.

Minutes later they were back on the move. Time fuse sparked behind them, giving the soldiers a few minutes lead time before the detonation. Several hundred meters away the men found cover and waited. They needed to keep guns trained on the tower until the explosives went off, just in case one of the floppies got a wild hair up his ass and decided to pull the fuses out of them.

A violent flash and puff of smoke announced the explosion seconds before the overpressure washed over the SAS men, momentarily making them feel as if they were underwater. The tower toppled over into a cloud of dust.

Navigating their way through the rest of the compound, the patrol sorted out another dozen or so terrorists. Lone gunshots sounded from their 7.62 rifles, flushing any hold outs into the open before gunning them down. It wasn't long before the point man, Sean who as the most junior member of the team had been put forward as sniper bait, identified their objective.

A series of fifteen huts were strewn about the open forest surrounded by trenches and foxholes long since vacated, the entire intelligence complex had simply been abandoned in place. Moving to the closest structure, James kicked the door and swept in with his RPD machine gun leading the way. Sean moved on his heels, each moving in the opposite direction as he cleared through the doorway.

Papers were strewn across the floor, some of them smoldering, a half-assed job having been done at sanitizing the ZANLA intelligence station. Two warm cups of tea sat on a table, someone having left in a hurry. A large map was pinned to the far wall with colored pins stuck in strategic locations.

James nodded to Sean. So far so good.

The truth was that Sean had been scared to death of screwing up again. After the first incident, soon followed by bouncing James' head off the bar, and an unfortunate accident with a Rugby trophy, Du Plessis had made the two hot heads bunk mates until they were prepared to work together in a civilized fashion.

The Captain had warned Sean that he was on thin ice. One more foul up and he would be getting a Section Eight and a armed escort back to the airport in order to buy a one way ticket home. Returning to the United States terrified him more than a hundred combat jumps into enemy territory. Thankfully, he was getting his second wind. Since Vietnam, he had hoped that he hadn't lost his edge.

Outside the rest of the SAS soldiers were fanning out into two man teams. They systematically entered and cleared the entire compound, no doubt finding similar intelligence treasure troves. Alan coordinated the search, directing the men to fill canvas bags he had found with the papers, notebooks, photography equipment, and anything else that might reveal the size, strength, or disposition of Rhodesia's enemies.

Minutes later they were preparing to move to follow on objectives deeper in the compound.

“What the hell is that?” Alan asked, pointing to a briefcase in Deckard's hand.

“Don't know,” he responded. “I found it in with a pile a propaganda pamphlets. You know the ones with little Mao's face all over them?”

“Open it,” the Senior NCO said, curiosity getting the better of him.

Deckard shrugged before setting the briefcase down and pulling his Ka-Bar fighting knife from its sheath. Shoving the knife into the seams, Sean wiggled in back and forth until he popped both of the cheaply made latches open.

The two SAS men looked at each other, eyes as wide as saucers, as the briefcase snapped open and spilled a pile of gold watches at their feet.

* * *

Sean and James grimaced as Robin ordered a second round of drinks for the patrons of Club Tomorrow. Rhodesia was at war, every man, and some

women, were expected to do their part. It was well known what the base pay salary for a Corporal in the Army was, and it wasn't enough to order rounds of beer for the entire disco.

After Chimoio, Intelligence Officers had poured over the bags of paper litter the SAS had brought back from Mozambique, quickly compiling it and identifying another important guerrilla stronghold. Less than twenty-four hours after the largest and most complex military operation in Rhodesian history and the SAS was once again loaded into the breech, parachuting into their next objective a day later.

The Central Intelligence Office as well as Military Intelligence was still shifting through all the information they had brought back, but at least for the moment, the men of C Squadron were able to enjoy some much needed downtime.

The problem was that Robin was enjoying the spoils of war a little to much, threatening to blow their cover. After a good nights sleep and conducting an after action review, the Special Air Service troops were given a few days leave. They quickly fanned out, selling the horde of gold watches to shops in and around Salisbury, netting a tidy sum for the troops to fund their extracurricular activities.

Robin slammed a half empty can of Lion Lager down on the table. He was now swaying on his feet like a marionette. Closing in, the younger man grabbed Sean by the collar and drunk whispered into his ear. He thought he was being discrete while nearly yelling at the top of his lungs over the music coming from the juke box.

“You see that girl over there?” he asked Sean, motioning to a group of girls dancing on the other side of the club.

“Which one?”

“The one with the tits!” Robin slurred.

“Oh,” Sean remarked. “Yeah, I see her.”

“Okay,” Robin said. He was now holding onto Sean, using his body to steady himself as he swayed one way and the other. “Here is what is going to happen.”

“What?”

“I'm going in under the radar.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, like a sexy submarine, I'm going to sink her with my pink torpedo.”

Sean coughed into his beer, the bubbles burning his sinuses as he tried to contain himself.

“Good luck,” Sean said, struggling to breathe.

Robin took off, zigzagging erratically across the dance floor as he made his way to his target.

“Jesus,” Sean muttered as he took another sip of beer. The comment was directed as much towards himself as he had been in the young man's shoes not so long ago.

“Speaking of which,” James said chuckling. “I think that lass over there might fancy you.”

Deckard looked over to the corner of the bar where the Australian was motioning towards. A small group of girls talked amongst themselves, Sean having turned around just in time to catch one staring at him. She was a few years younger than he was, probably having graduated from the university less than a year ago. She carried on with her friends as if nothing had happened. She was beautiful.

“What would a girl like that want with me,” he said turning back to James.

“I don't know,” he answered truthfully. “Maybe she heard about your pink torpedo.”

“Bullshit,” Sean said before finishing his beer. Stepping away from the table he strode over to the group of girls. The pretty one's eyes went wide as she saw him approaching, her cheeks suddenly flashing red.

Sean was about to say something stupid when something crashed into a wall. Looking over his shoulder he saw that Robin had thrown a bar stool at someone.

Club Tomorrow suddenly went quite as a church for a single moment that seemed to stretch on into forever. Then reality set in and the disco erupted into the biggest bar brawl anyone had seen in years.

04SEP78

Sean Deckard slammed the car door and ran for the airfield, sweat already beading on his forehead.

The props on the C-47 spun at full speed as the aircraft turned on it's wheels and prepared for takeoff. James held fast to the open aft door, waving

Sean forward. Looking back for a moment, the girl had gotten out of her car and waved to him before blowing a kiss. Smiling, he waved back and than took off, sprinting at full speed for the open door.

“How was she?” James asked, yelling above the prop wash.

“A gentleman never tells,” he answered, pulling himself inside the aircraft.

“What about you?”

Accepting the parachute that Robin handed him, he sat down on one of the mesh benches, shrugging into the shoulder straps. He had woken up next to Bianca with a vicious hangover, the phone ringing off the hook. Du Plessis said he needed to be at the Salisbury airfield and needed to be there ten minutes ago. Robin and James were already on their way. The three of them were the closest to the Air Force owned Dakota airplane sitting on the tarmac, other aircraft and personnel were currently conducting external operations.

“What the hell is going on?” Sean asked his teammates.

The SAS commander had refused to discuss operational details over the phone.

“We lost a Viscount last night,” Robin informed him. “They suspect a surface to air missile, but the crash site is a ways out in the bush and they want someone to clear out any gooks before the rescue squad arrives by ground convoy.”

“Holy shit,” Sean cursed under his breath. He had flown in the civilian Viscount passenger aircraft before and knew that it seated fifty-some-odd people inside.

“It got hit while flying from Kariba to Salisbury,” James elaborated as he prepared his own parachute. The aircraft suddenly lurched forward and shot down the runway. Seconds later they were airborne, the pilots quickly guiding the Dakota upwards to gain altitude.

“The flight captain managed to radio in a distress call to air traffic control,” he continued. “We think he dumped the Viscount somewhere near Whamira Hills, but we won't know for sure until we can identify the wreckage from the air.”

“Flight time?”

“Not long,” Robin said. “I scrounged whatever kit I could, acting on emergency orders, from the local security forces.”

“It'll do,” Sean remarked as he secured a FAL rifle and an ammunition bandoleer from the pile of equipment the SAS soldier had collected. Before

buckling up his parachute, he secured the bandoleer and rifle underneath the harness. Thankfully, it wasn't difficult to obtain the free fall chutes. Special Air Service troops sky dived recreationally at the Salisbury airfield nearly every weekend.

Without uniforms, they'd be jumping in wearing civilians. Sean wore a simple white t-shirt and American blue jeans. He'd made do with worse in the past.

Securing the final buckle on his parachute, Sean turned to look out one of the port windows. They flew under a cloudless blue sky, a gorgeous day in the African bush country. Below he could see a cluster of gray trailing a plume of dust. It was a herd of elephants on the move from one watering hole to the next.

A knot twisted in his stomach that had nothing to do with his hangover. Something didn't feel right.

A gush of cold air washed over him as James opened the aft door. Planting his feet firmly in the door frame, James peered out into the void to conduct his pre-jump checks. Robin sat on the deck, wearing a headset that allowed him to communicate with the pilots. It took several more minutes before they located the smoldering crash site.

Standing next to James in the door, Sean could see a lazy wisp of smoke trailing up from the forest. There was nothing down there that resembled an airplane. The Viscount had been torn to pieces as the pilot had attempted a belly land in what looked like a cotton field. Several small fires still burnt around the crash site. They were unable to spot any signs of movement, or any signs of life, below.

The Aussie signaled to Robin who then asked the pilots to climb in altitude once more and circle back around.

Sean compulsively checked and rechecked his equipment. Reaching into a bag secured to the fuselage of the aircraft, James handed out altimeters. Strapping one onto his wrist, Sean watched the needle steadily climb. It was like watching a watch tick away time but in fast forward.

James was back in the door, eyes fixated on the drop zone. The crash site itself would be the release point where they were exit the aircraft. If they had their usual kit they might have dropped a streamer and calculated wind drift but as things stood, they would just have to wing it instead.

Looking back at Robin and Sean, their impromptu jump master motioned them towards the door. One last glance down at the crash site and James

propelled himself out of the aircraft with the other two SAS men following him out.

As the jumpers exited the door they had to carefully position their hands and use their left leg to turn themselves around to face into the slipstream.

Sean felt the heat off of the Dakota's engines as he rode the ramp of air resistance down into free fall. Pivoting his hips downward, he canted his arms and legs to take up a stable body position as he rocketed down toward the ground. At 10,000 feet, the surface of the earth looked like a painting but quickly became very real as the needle on his altimeter spun towards zero.

Coming up on 4,000 feet, Sean looked around, clearing his air space before waving off. As he reached for his ripcord grip, he saw the mushrooming of two other parachutes catching in the wind. Pulling the rip chord free, his pilot chute caught the wind and yanked the deployment bag out of the harness he wore. The pilot chute continued produce drag and help yank the main parachute out of the deployment bag.

Straps dug into his thighs as the parachute inflated, leaving him dangling underneath by his main lift straps and suspension lines. Drifting peacefully as his altimeter needle snaked under 4,000 feet, Sean inspected his canopy. He immediately checked for the three S's, Square, Stable, and pulling on his main lift straps he confirmed that his parachute was also Steerable.

Reaching up, the Vietnam veteran retrieved the toggles used to steer the parachute, pulling down on each to turn left and right, ensuring that they functioned properly.

The three parachutists quickly located each other in the air and lined up in a stack for a landing pattern. James was first in the stack, the lowest jumper, due to him being the heaviest of the three SAS troops. The Australian was an experienced free fall jumper and took them in long, wide switch back turns as not to overshoot their drop zone.

He didn't want the wind to blow them to far away from the crash site, nor did he want to get over the crash itself. If they got caught in the thermals coming up off of the wreckage they could be suspended in the air for a prolonged period of time, with the possibility of floppies on the ground taking pot shots at them.

After making the wide S-turns for several more minutes, James brought the stack around on final approach, facing into the wind as to slow the forward drive of their parachutes. Sean was stacked behind the Aussie, with Robin bringing up the rear. The ground was now rushing up to meet them.

Other than the gentle whistle of wind in his ears, everything was perfectly quiet.

Sean's guts balled up on him again.

Maneuvering the stack between the trees, James found them a nice empty patch of grass to set down in. Just before Sean's boots made contact with the ground, he pulled down on his toggles, breaking his fall before landing on his feet and stumbling forward.

Releasing one toggle, he reeled in the other, collapsing his parachute.

Sean recoiled as Robin flashed right by his side, pulling on his own toggles and landing on top of Deckard's deflated parachute. The native Rhodesian turned to him as he collapsed his chute and smiled.

The American ignored it; the kid too ballsy for his own good.

Unbuckling his parachute, he cast it aside and racked the charging handle on his FN FAL, ready for whatever might be waiting for them at the crash site. Normally, the parachutes would have to be cached somewhere; buried or sunk in a body of water, but this mission was hardly covert to begin with. Leaving the parachutes behind, Sean assumed his position as point man for the short trek to the crash.

The smell of burning fuel invaded his nose along with another familiar smell that he didn't care to dwell on. It was a stench permanently etched into his conscienceness. It was the smell of burning flesh.

Stalking through the forest, he spotted the trail of aluminum, charred papers, and other pieces of the aircraft that had burst everywhere during the explosion. Grim reality set in as he stepped over the first body part. It was an arm with a silver watch still attached to the wrist, the limb splotched with dark red stains from being torn from the passenger's body.

The trio of SAS men emerged into the clearing created by the Viscount as it came come apart on impact. The fuselage had cracked into several pieces, lumps of hot metal still smoking. Leather suitcases, many still intact, were strewn all across the crash site. Others looked to have burned up in the crash. Still others appeared like they had been emptied. Robin knelt down, confirming that one of the pieces of luggage had been shimmed open, the contents looted.

While the three men knew a bit about explosives, they were not engineers or forensic experts. From the disaster before them, they couldn't tell if the plane had been brought down by a bomb, a missile, or some kind of mechanical failure.

“Alright,” James began. “Secure the crash site. The authorities should be here in a few hours so be prepared to link up and guide them in.”

His orders were cold, emotionless.

“What the hell is that?” Robin said pointing to the edge of the forest where a small fire was still burning.

The SAS soldiers fanned out, closing in on the area that he had pointed to. With his FAL leading the way, Deckard moved closer. Now there no doubt left in his mind as to why he had a pit in the bottom of his stomach.

The naked bodies were lined up in a row on the forest floor. Men, women, children. Even babies were cast into the pile of corpses, their little bodies punctured with bayonet wounds. The passengers had survived the crash only to be executed by gunshot, being bayoneted or to have their skulls crushed with rocks.

Sean's blood ran cold.

The lifeless faces stared at the sky, unblinking as flies circled over them. Birds chirped to each other in the trees above, unaware of the scene on the ground. Putrid smoke from the crash drifted over the SAS men as the clouds in the sky temporarily blotted out the sun. Nature carried on around them, blissfully ignorant to the atrocity that had been committed.

Robin looked as if he were going to be ill. James remained stone faced.

Turning away, Sean knew it would be a lifetime before he could erase the horrific image from his memory.

* * *

When red light flashed to green Sean chased the bundle out the door and into the darkness beyond. Getting small in the air, he brought in his arms and legs in to create less surface tension against the air, racing down to the bundle as it tumbled through the night.

A black wraith swept down alongside him.

James cut a path across from Sean. His FAL barrel hung out of his harness and a rucksack bobbed up and down as it hung across his legs.

The door bundle spinning below them contained additional food, water, and specially made explosive charges that would carry the two man team through the duration of their mission. A length of time fuse had been measured and cut to burn down until they reached the desired altitude. Once

it burned down to the bottom it would slice through the thin nylon string that held in the spring loaded pilot chute contained inside the larger parachute that was strapped to the bundle.

At fifteen thousand feet, the chill cut the two soldiers to their bones despite the heavy overalls they wore.

Falling through the darkness, they were only aware of their decent by keeping a careful eye on the illuminated dials of the altimeters on their wrists. At 2,500 feet they snatched at rip cords, pins out, and parachutes inflating by the time they bled off another few hundred feet.

The GQ Dominator parachutes were designed specifically for use by the British SAS and were just one of the many military items that Rhodesia had bought by side stepping UN imposed sanctions.

Sean breathed a sigh of relief on seeing the bundle suspended under its parachute. He had seen more than one explode on the drop zone after a catastrophic malfunction.

Under silk, they steered with their toggles, chasing after the door bundle as it tracked across the drop zone. Watching it crash to the ground, the dual parachutes that had carried it suddenly inverted, turning inside out as they deflated.

Guided by moonlight alone, the SAS soldiers swept in and set down to one side of the bundle.

Another dusty landing in Mozambique.

Acting fast, they buried their parachutes and broke down the bundle, burying the additional food and water in a separate cache before moving on. They carried the explosives on their backs after loading them onto the top of their rucksacks.

The terrain was damn flat, stretching out to the horizon in every direction. It was only by climbing a tree that Sean could identify a road in the distance. Using it as a marker, they eventually figured out where they were on a map before continuing on azimuth towards their destination.

Aligning his compass to point in the proper direction, Sean stepped it out. They walked across fields of small trees and light shrubbery, their senses probing the darkness for signs of the enemy. The packs they carried were heavy but having landed almost exactly where they had intended helped make for a short walk to the objective.

Following alongside a lonely pair of telephone lines, the SAS men moved from one wooden pole to the next until they came upon the train tracks they

were looking for. Setting up a hasty admin site, the soldiers began prepping the explosives and other equipment.

Back tracking to the telephone lines, James pulled security while Sean shimmied up the pole and attached two insulated leads to the wires. The American had made some modifications to the electronic eavesdropping apparatus to prevent enemy forces from detecting and back tracing the origin of the tap. When the SAS commanders looked at him funny as he had explained it during the mission brief, he had told them that he had had some experience with such devices in Vietnam.

They would leave the tap in place until they blew the train tracks and prepped for exfiltration by calling in a G-Car troopship with a K-Car gunship escort.

The train tracks led to the border town of Malvernia where Mozambique met Rhodesia. Malvernia had acquired colorful nicknames by Rhodesian forces, such as Little Russia and Fuck City. With the Soviets providing supplies and logistics, ZANLA would pound the small village of Salazar on the Rhodesian side of the border with mortars, Katusha rockets, and damned near everything else they could throw at it.

Both the Special Air Service and the Selous Scouts were involved in attempts to cut off, subvert, and otherwise destroy the communist forces stationed at Malvernia. The destruction of the train tracks leading into the town would cut off a vital supply line to the enemy.

At the tracks, they moved quickly, hurrying to finish before dawn. Stringing out a line main consisting of cordex, they began tying in blocks of TNT. The charges were than secured in place against the underside of the metal tracks. Sean began inserting the blasting caps while James worked on the detonation system.

In past missions, SAS operators had failed to use enough explosives. When the charges blew they tore out only a small section of the track. Then, when the locomotive passed over, the train was so heavy and moving so fast that it sped right over the gap and continued down the track without the passengers even noticing. Since those early missions, the SAS had been applying *P* for plenty to every demolition formula. The twenty kilograms of TNT would be enough to slice through several meters of track like a hot knife through butter.

Once James had the pressure plates set up, they retreated back to the wood line to take cover behind the largest tree they could find while they

waited for their query. Intel had suggested that several trains rolled into Malvernia each day. With the sun cresting above the horizon, it was now a waiting game.

Pulling security meant facing out and watching for the enemy. Keeping yourself alert throughout the long hours could become difficult. Sometimes you would be staring at a tree or a rock for hours, days even, mind drifting, twittling a blade of grass between your fingers or tracing outlines in the dirt. Despite the misconceptions of many, in and out of uniform, such situations were far more common than firefights with enemy forces.

As experienced soldiers, they knew the deal. After a long night behind enemy lines, they could both easily drift off to sleep while laying in the prone and watching the unending wilderness.

Luckily, they had put any differences between them aside weeks ago. Du Plessis had a solution for personnel problems such as theirs. After the unfortunate incident with the Captain's rugby trophy, he had refused any requests for reassignment to other Troops in the Squadron and the two had been ordered to become bunk mates until they were able to get along.

“You ever do anything like this over there?” James asked as they watched the sun rise into the sky.

“What, like in 'Nam?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn't have many trains running down the Ho Chi Minh trail but it was the same basic idea. We set up wire taps, conducted ambushes, that sort of thing. You?”

“Not at all, mate,” James said, his eyes looking distant. “I went from Borneo to Papua New Guinea while I was with the Aussie SAS, only later was I at Nui Dat in Vietnam along with Kiwi SAS. We were mostly running recon and ambushing the enemy when and where we could.”

“I had some buddies down that way. Mostly, I was farther north.”

“Let me ask you something, Yank,” James turned to him. “We heard rumors about some unit up north called CCN.”

“Command and Control North,” Deckard confirmed. “CCN was part of a larger effort called SOG created to hit the enemy hard where he lived. We did some good work even if it was all for nothing in the end,” he finished bitterly.

“SOG was like the SAS, doing external operations?”

“Yeah, but even then our efforts never struck as hard or as deep as the Rhodesians are determined to,” he said, quickly changing the subject. “The

Rhodie SAS is serious about winning this thing. I wish I could have said the same for our experience in Vietnam. As we found out down the line, our headquarters in Saigon was hopelessly compromised with communist moles. God only knows how many men we lost because our missions were blown from the get go."

"It is because the Rhodies are literally fighting for their country. Where will they go if the communists take over?"

"They are all in," Deckard said nodding his head. "I respect that."

"What about you, are you all in?"

The American's eyes scanned up and down the train tracks before answering.

"For me it was my first ambush. Before I was with SOG I belonged to a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol unit. We were our division's eyes and ears out in the jungle, but sometimes we were able to slip our leash. That first ambush convinced me that I could never go back and have a normal life."

"Haven't been able to shake it out of your system?"

"No," Sean paused. "No, I haven't. It was just the five of us on the ambush line and a couple dozen North Vietnamese troops were coming down the trail. I was scared to death. Shaking like a leaf and absolutely convinced that I was going to die."

"But you didn't."

"When we heard them coming the fear suddenly went away. I pulled my rifle into my shoulder and got ready, didn't care if I lived or died anymore. For some reason I survived. I've been chasing that feeling ever since, you know, not giving a shit anymore. There is nothing else like going all in. Succeed or die trying."

"I think Robin is the same way," James added. "This is his country so he is more committed than any of us, but did you know that he dropped out of his university to join the Army?"

"No, although I'm not surprised."

"I asked him about it because I would always see him reading books written in Latin. He doesn't have to be here. His family is one of the largest land owners in the country. That kid could have gotten a deferment and gone on to do whatever he wanted."

"He is smart enough to see the writing on the wall. The future that ZANLA has planned for Rhodesia is nothing short of a living hell."

"What about you?" Sean asked. "What brought you into this war?"

“Long story, mate.”

“You got somewhere else to be?”

“I haven't really told anyone this before-”

“Told anyone what?”

“Well,” James hesitated. “I'm not what you think I am. I'm not *who* you think I am.”

The iron rail tracks started to ring as a train approached in the distance.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“James Dempsey is the name of a baby that died of polio in 1945 in northern Queensland,” the Aussie confessed.

“Who does that make you? James fucking Bond?” Deckard said incredulously.

“I am ashamed to say that I had to buy a new name from some rather shady characters.”

“What for?”

“So that I could do something useful with my life after I was released from a mental institution in Melbourne. I wanted to escape my past.”

“You were institutionalized?”

“For psychopathy.”

“What?”

“I killed people. More then one. I did some really bad things Sean.”

The American frowned.

Nice time to share, he thought. *And I'm stuck out here alone with you.*

“It took years for me to recover,” James continued. “But eventually I came to realize that I was a psychopath and I would never be able to empathize with other people. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't feel anything, not even when I wanted to.”

The sound of the locomotive grew closer, the steam engine hissing down the tracks. Sean's eyes darted from his teammate to the tracks. He swallowed hard.

“I was discharged after my stint in Vietnam but they never discovered my secret. In 1968 I was fighting under contract in Portuguese Guinea when I came to know several Rhodesians. When I heard about what was going on here with farmers under siege by gooks, I knew I had to come.”

The locomotive blew it's air horn, rattling Sean's teeth as it was nearly on top of them.

“So you see Sean,” James grinned. “I've got nothing to go home to. I'm

all in as well."

"Lovely story, James. Thanks for that," Sean found himself screaming over the sound of the incoming train.

"You are about to get your wish. I was listening to Du Plessis talk to Major Spiers in the canteen. The government isn't fucking around with the terrs anymore. Not after that shit we saw out in the cotton field. Things have changed since the Viscount was shot down. We're going after Joshua Nkomo next week."

"Bullshit," Sean's attention was now thoroughly drawn away from the train tracks.

"The planning and logistics are already completed. The mission is so secret that they are not going to tell any of the operators involved until the mission is green lighted."

"Shit-"

Sean's words were cut off as the train locomotive powered down the tracks and rolled over the contact plates the SAS men had put in place. With the leads connected to each other the explosive charge exploded, wrought iron bending under the force of the blast.

The soldiers laughed as the locomotive derailed, wide smiles suddenly flashing between them, the previous conversation momentarily brushed off and forgotten.

Individual cars being towed behind the engine ran into the gravel and dirt, kicking up a viscous dust storm before capsizing, flopping onto their sides and rolling over. With the massive inertial forces carrying the train cars along, their chuckles suddenly turned to looks of terror as the storm of twisted metal came hurtling towards them.

They bolted, running back into the forest. Behind them the train cars separated and burrowed through the earth, leaving long trenches in their wake as they moved with unstoppable force. Sprinting deeper into the bush, Sean stole a glance over his shoulder in time to see the run away train uprooting trees and pushing them aside as if they were toothpicks.

Trees were falling like dominoes as they ran at full speed, the train quickly gaining on them.

Both men knew they had to make something happen or they would be dead in seconds. James was the first to cast away his rifle and begin pumping his arms to pick up some more speed. Deckard followed suit, acting against years of training, flinging his AK into the bush.

Time slowed down.

Sean's legs were like pistons, driving him forward, his muscles full of battery acid. He was getting tunnel vision, everything was a green blur except for the ground to his immediate front.

Then he felt something slam into his back and everything faded to dark.

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Sean rubbed his forehead.

“You look like you've been hit by a train,” Alan quipped as he walked by, noting Deckard's disposition.

“Fuck off.”

A round of laughter went up among the veteran Special Air Service soldiers and the support personnel standing around the barges moored near Kariba dam. Sean still looked a little hung over from the beating he had taken in Mozambique several days prior.

Receiving medical treatment when he and James arrived back in Rhodesia, the SAS men had been quickly ushered into a top-secret briefing. James' information had been spot on, the Nkomo assassination had been in the planning phase for over a month and was now being given the go-ahead.

Sean had nearly been yanked off the mission several times. First because of his uncertain medical status, he had a slight concussion, but otherwise felt fine. The second was due to his insistence on raiding a secondary target, deep inside Zambia.

In addition to the assault on Joshua Nkomo's mansion they were also hitting the so-called Liberation Center that acted as a joint headquarters for the African National Congress, SWAPO, and ZIPRA. Sean wouldn't let it drop during the briefing, insisting that secondary target should be shifted to the cultural exchange center in the capital, where the Soviet advisers were being hosted.

The Army brass at COMOPS, and maybe the Prime Minister himself, had issued a decree against striking out at Russian and Chinese military advisers operating in adjacent countries. The argument was that such assassinations would be counter productive, causing an international incident that a tiny nation like Rhodesia probably wouldn't withstand. They were already a

pariah state in the court of public opinion as it was.

The American had been asked to leave the briefing room while the officers continued. He'd only been allowed to participate in the operation as the insistence of Captain Du Plessis, lobbying on his behalf to the SAS commander himself.

In the distance, the sun was sinking below the treetops, signaling the beginning of another operation, turning the sky a brilliant orange and red. A radio crackled, static sounding over the receiver as the operator knelt, fiddling with the antenna. It wouldn't be long now.

The Sabre Land Rovers had been mothballed, recently brought out of retirement and painted in a camouflage scheme that mimicked that of Zambian Forces. The SAS operators were disguised as well, wearing olive drab uniforms captured from dead enemy soldiers. The Land Rovers were strapped down to Sea Lion transport barges, nestled into a small alcove near the dam.

They were joined by two members of the Selous Scouts to help with the mission. One of the Scouts, as well as one of their black interpreters, knew the enemy area, in this case Lusaka, like the back of their hands.

Sean turned as the radio operator spoke into the microphone for several second.

“Warthog is in the air,” the radio man announced.

Everyone froze, eyes drilling into him and waiting for confirmation. The downing of the Viscount had been a turning point for the Rhodesian government. The Soviet backed Nkomo and his stooges were now famous, and not in a good way.

Warthog was the name of the military's Dakota aircraft that specialized in intelligence gathering. Packed to the gills with antennas and transmitters, Warthog filled the same role as the Moonbeam aircraft that had kept Sean company during long nights deep inside Laos, checking in with his patrol in the middle of the night. In addition to being outfitted for FM, UHF, HF, and VHF radio transmitters, it was also staffed by several teleprinters who could communicate with headquarters elements back at COMOPS.

“Its a go,” the radio man shouted. “Its a go!”

Several dozen soldiers hefted their kit over their shoulders and slung rifles as they climbed onto the Sea Lions. The darkness of twilight was setting in as anchor lines were cast aside and the low rumble of gurgling engines began, powering the barges across the lake towards Zambia. In order

to be successful the SAS men would have to exploit a full period of darkness.

While en route the white members of the assault team applied face cream, donning a *black is beautiful* look as they joked amongst themselves. To get close to Nkomo's mansion they'd need every advantage they could get and the black face paint might buy them a critical few seconds when the time came.

As darkness set in, the soldiers sat next to their vehicles as the barges were piloted across the water. Everything was eery calm. The lake water looked like glass, faint ripples across the surface were all the was left in their wake. The bush was alive with the sounds of chirping insects. To experienced soldiers, the quiet was almost a premonition of the chaos that would come.

Making landfall, the soldiers slid down into the knee deep water and silently lowered the ramps while others undid the thick straps that had tethered the Land Rovers in place during the water crossing. Starting their engines, the drivers of the seven trucks took their vehicles down the planks and lined themselves up as best they could.

A long disused dirt road had been identified that cut through the bush from the lake to one of the main roads inside Zambia. It afforded a quiet place to unload the vehicles while remaining unseen by prying eyes. The downside was that the going was rugged to say the least.

Loading into the Land Rovers the SAS men had their off road driving skills tested as they bounced over thick tree roots and sloshed through muddy ditches while weaving between trees. Behind them the Sea Lions were already one their way back to Rhodesia where they would wait for their return.

Sitting in the back seat, Sean braced himself as he was launched upwards in his seat, his head making painful contact with the roof of the vehicle.

“Son of a-”

Hitting another bump his face nearly smashed into the seat in front of him.

The assault force had to stop several times to make a hasty recovery as trucks became trapped in the muck several times, eating precious minutes into their mission time line. Finally, they cleared the bush country and turned onto the tar road to begin driving for the Zambian capital city.

Deckard sat next to Robin in the back of his Land Rover, the younger man cradling a sub-machine gun in his hands. The Rhodesian made Rhuzi was manufactured under license from Israel, the latter country allowing them to build the little chatter box based on the original design from the gun's

namesake and inventor, Uziel Gal.

Chambered for the 9mm cartridge, it was fed from a 32 round box magazine. Fitted with a suppressor, Robin would keep it out of sight until he needed it. Riding in the lead vehicle, it would be his responsibility to silently eliminate any sentries who got suspicious as they drove through check points.

James was at the wheel, wearing a tattered communist uniform that he had modified before the mission. Ninety-pound communists from Tanzania or Zambia didn't wear his size. In between the seats rested his AK-47. Other than the few suppressed weapons, all three assault teams carried indigenous weaponry.

Riding shotgun was Charlie Mutota, their interpreter who spoke the local Zambian language and a half dozen others. As they passed through enemy check points, he'd do the talking if any was required. The Selous Scouts had captured Charlie a number of years prior when he was running with ZIPRA, but now he played for the home team as a trusted member. He carried a loaded Kalashnikov just like the white members of the assault force.

Holding their breath, the convoy approached the Kafue bridge. Throughout the planning phase of the operation, figuring out how to mitigate the risk involved in crossing the bridge took up as much time as planning the assault on Nkomo's mansion, or so Deckard had been told after he'd been kicked out of the briefing. Kafue was expected to be fortified with upwards to a platoon's worth of guards.

As they approached the bridge a single sentry spotted their vehicles, recognizing them as Zambian and simply waved them through.

Once safely on the other side the team breathed a sigh of relief and settled in for the long drive to Lusaka. Watching his side of the road, Sean kept an eye out for potential ambushes.

The Sabre Land Rovers drove deep into the night getting waved through several more checkpoints by tired guards who were easily fooled by the SAS's deception. Radio silence was maintained as much as possible. Occasional updates from Warthog, circling somewhere over head, were acknowledged by tapping the radio's transmit button for a half second, just long enough to break squelch. Sean kept track of their progress, noting each turn on the map he had resting on his knee. He estimated that they were approximately two thirds of the way to their objective when Captain Du Plessis' voice came over the radio and ordered them to pull over to the side of the road.

Doors slamming, Sean and Robin got out of their vehicle to pull security. Du Plessis moved up to the head of the convoy and began flashing a red tinted flashlight into the bush. Sean thought the Captain was losing his mind until several red flashes suddenly answered back.

Asking James for his handmic, the SAS ground force commander spoke into the radio, informing the rest of the patrol to hold their fire as branches and grass began to shuffle and part way as someone approached from the darkness.

The American looked on, his AK at the ready as well dressed man suddenly emerged from the bush wearing a pair of freshly pressed khakis. Du Plessis strode forward extending his hand. The stranger took it with a smile.

“Bloody well wondered when you'd show,” the khaki clad man said.

“Hardly a nip of trouble on the way,” Du Plessis answered as if he were talking to an old friend.

Sean looked back at James who was still sitting in the driver's seat of their Land Rover. The Aussie's facial expression said it all. *Shut the fuck up.*

The two Brits continued their conversation as they headed back to Du Plessis' vehicle. Sean watched as the new comer pulled a balaclava over his head and took a seat next to the Captain. Getting back on the radio their commander announced that his vehicle would be taking the lead.

Sean and Robin were back in their truck heading down the road as the Du Plessis' driver sped up to the front of the convoy.

“What the hell is going on?” Sean asked.

“You would know if you hadn't been kicked out of the brief for misbehavior,” Robin quipped.

“Don't know his name,” James answered. “He is a CIO operative. Deep undercover you understand. He knows the area and the people well. Apparently, they have used him to carry out a number of assassinations.”

“I think we have enough guns as it is,” Sean said puzzled. “What do we need some wannabe for?”

“He's going to lead us straight into the target on the best route to avoid contact with the Zambian military.”

“Let's hope so,” Sean grumbled, bitter about being left out of the loop.

Half an hour later the convoy split up, four vehicles continuing on to Nkomo's mansion with the remaining three Land Rovers being guided by the Selous Scout they had brought along. He'd take them to the secondary target, the Liberation Center that served as a terrorist headquarters.

As the convoy snaked across back roads and double backed on its own path more than once, Sean began to wonder if they weren't getting a run around from their new guide. By two in the morning they were already running late into their time line. Finally, after sneaking passed multiple layers of security checkpoints, Du Plessis' voice came over the radio to announce that they were turning onto the target road.

Under handing the charging handle on his Kalashnikov, Sean drew the bolt back a half inch to make sure that a round was properly seated in the chamber. It was an action he had repeated at least a dozen times since they had arrived in Zambia.

Nkomo lived just outside the capital in one very exclusive and luxurious neighborhood that catered to government bureaucrats and the business men who had sucked up to them. Thankfully, the large estates made for a somewhat isolated target that would cut down on complications once the shooting kicked off.

As it turned out, the shooting was going to start sooner rather than later.

Pulling into Nkomo's driveway, two sentries walked up to Sean's vehicle and began asking questions. The interpreter sitting in the shotgun seat shouted something, buying an extra fraction of a second as Robin flipped the selector on his Rhuzi from the safe position to automatic.

Suppressed auto fire stitched a line across the two guards horizontally, dropping them both to the ground in a heap.

James floored the accelerator and the Land Rover lurched forward, leaving a cloud of dust in it's wake. The other vehicles struggled to catch up as they raced down the driveway. Nkomo's mansion appeared from behind one of the hedge rows and the convoy divided itself once more.

Two vehicles stopped in front of the house, the two others plowed over a garden and up onto the lawn, flinging loose earth from under their tires. With the one story hacienda surrounded in a loose L-shaped formation, the SAS men jumped from the trucks.

Gunfire rained down like a crescendo, muzzle flashes lighting up from every window in the mansion. One of the SAS men, a Sergeant originally hailing from France, was dropped instantly by enemy fire. Sean quickly pulled Robin behind the Land Rover as bullets kicked up cloud of dust at their feet.

The enemy had clearly been laying in wait, the initial burst of gunfire overwhelming the Rhodesian commandos.

Both groups of Rhodesians returned fire, AK-47's chattering on both sides as Nkomo's mansion became a kill zone. The Land Rovers were quickly being turned into sieves as Soviet-made ammunition chipped through the paint, punching through and creating miniature divots along the doors and hoods as the enemy concentrated their fire.

Peering down his sights he fired short controlled bursts into the shattered windows, attempting to zero in when he saw the flash of a enemy gunshot.

Robin reached into the back of their truck and retrieved one of the RPG-7 launchers that they had brought along. Screwing the booster into the rocket he pulled the pin on the nose cap and efficiently slammed the projectile into the launcher. He was the fastest and most accurate shot in their Troop when it came to Rocket Propelled Grenades.

First looking over a shoulder to clear his back blast area, Robin aimed and triggered the RPG, putting the first rocket through the nearest window. Leaving a faint trail as the anti-tank round blasted into the mansion, the rocket detonated inside with a hollow *thump* that shook the building to it's foundation.

Sean had already assembled the second rocket, handing it off to the young Rhodie just as the second group of SAS men got their own RPG into the fight. Rockets were now fired into both sides of Nkomo's residence, streaking through window after window, one just a second or two after the other as if they RPG gunners were actually coordinating their shots.

“-fire, cease fire!”

It was Du Plessis' voice coming over the radio.

Robin, full of piss and vinegar let another rocket rip anyway. It slammed into the corner of the building, uprooting the roof and throwing clay shingles into the air in a thousand broken pieces.

“*Cease fire!*” the Captain said exasperated.

Great, Sean thought of the Captain, *maybe that will keep him off my balls for a few minutes*.

Before their commander could give the order to advance, Sean was charging forward with Robin and James close at his heels, the latter cursing his name and ordering him to wait for them. The front door splintered under the heel of his combat boot, the hinges already loosened by the blast over pressure.

In the open lobby area a ZIPRA terrorist looked up at Sean with blood shot eyes. Crimson stained his lips as he coughed, his olive drab fatigues

drenched in the same color from his wounds. He made a half hearted attempted to bring his Kalashnikov into action. Sean point shot him from a distance of just two meters, drilling the terrorist in the chest and saving him the trouble.

The three SAS men continued to clear the mansion, taking a open doorway to their left while the rest of the Rhodesian contingent began to flow in behind them. They found themselves in a large room with the wreckage of what had been fine wood furniture and dinnerware, porcelain plates now broken across the carpet.

Despite having seen multiple muzzle flashes emanating from what had been Nkomo's dining room, they couldn't find any bodies. They searched back across the room, confused for a moment before Robin pointed to something in the corner.

It looked like two heaps of laundry that had been cast aside by a maid or cleaning lady. Strangely, these heaps wore ZIPRA uniforms and had human scalps. The repeated exposure to multiple RPG blasts had created massive amounts of pressure in the confined space of the dining area, reducing the terrorist's bodies to jelly.

Robin nudged one of the soupy corpses with his boot, looking as if he were about to be ill. James chuckled somewhere in the background at the sight. Blobs of ZIPRA goons.

The commandos cleared the rest of the mansion, stepping over body parts, treading carefully through pools of blood, and leaving red stained foot prints behind as they flipped over beds and searched inside closets for their query. Minutes passed, the tension in the air stronger than it had been even during the fire fight as they turned the mansion upside down.

They were in the process of tapping on the walls, looking for false panels that might lead to secret compartments when Captain Du Plessis announced that their objective was a dry hole. They had searched the entire compound from top to bottom without finding a single sign of the target. Alan, Sean, and some of the other Sergeants wanted to keep looking despite it seeming like a lost cause.

Finally, the SAS commander ordered them to begin a withdraw. They were quickly burning through their time line and needed to make it back for extraction before dawn, otherwise they'd be overwhelmed by the Zambian military in short order.

Two of the Land Rovers were shot up beyond repair so Nkomo's garage

was raided for several brand new black Mercedes sedans for the ride home. Finally, charges were set and time fuse lit before pulling off the objective and heading on an alternate route back to Rhodesia.

Even though everyone knew it was coming, they still jumped when the P4 explosives blew Nkomo's mansion sky high. They were a little jittery and would remain so until they were safely across the border.

Sean slammed the butt of his AK-47 against the floor of the truck he rode in.

The Brit, the source who had led them into the objective, had stood shoulder to shoulder with them when they'd been ambushed by the ZIPRA forces who had been laying in wait. He had seen the man with a Browning Hi-Power firing several frantic, if ineffective, shots at the enemy alongside the SAS men. He wasn't to blame for the failed mission.

The American gritted his teeth.

Someone had sold them out.

* * *

The rooster crowed at a unreasonably early hour in the morning.

Sean rubbed his eyes with one hand, the other grasping a warm mug of coffee as he sat at the kitchen table. It had been almost a day since they finished the debrief for the Nkomo hit, a complete cock up in Deckard's opinion. It was an opinion that got him thrown out of the briefing room once again.

Sipping his coffee, the rooster called, loud enough to wake the dead.

The dead. Sometimes he felt like they had a lot in common.

He'd hardly gotten any sleep since being put on leave for several days. Bianca barely let him out of her sight, and rarely let him sleep when they were home alone.

Worse ways to die, he thought with a shrug.

The double edged sword was that in this kind of war you got to go home at the end of the day, unlike in Vietnam. The sharp edge was that you got to go home. Your professional life as a soldier easily bled into your personal life as some girl's lover.

Darker thoughts haunted him. They'd lost in 'Nam. No matter how hard

he and his boys had fought, no matter how many times they had defied the odds, his government had sold them all down the river and sacrificed victory. Their tactical victories led to nothing and finally South Vietnam was absorbed by the communist menace. If they lost in Rhodesia, his adopted home, Bianca's country would fall in the same manner.

The two had been going serious since they had first met at Club Tomorrow. She'd wave goodbye to him every time the phone rang, Du Plessis calling his Troop in for one mission after the next. The moment he arrived back on her front stoop, Bianca was ready to take advantage of him being worn down and unable to resist her charms. It was that kind of relationship.

Bianca strode into the kitchen wearing her white cotton panties and nothing else. It was a tease and a taunt all at the same time.

Pouring herself a cup of coffee she leaned against the counter, bracing herself with one hand against the edge while she drank. Raven black hair framed her face, her green eyes were a mixture of something that Sean didn't understand. At times she seemed very naive about the world they lived in, much less the wars he fought in. Other times she could go cold, those eyes sizing him up in a heartbeat.

After all, most people felt uncomfortable around him, and lately that included several superior officers. He never really had any place in so-called civilization. When stuck in a place like that the Vietnam vet found himself wondering how ordinary people didn't just die of boredom. War was the only time life seemed to make sense to Sean.

Bianca wasn't intimidated by him. She knew that she would always be safe with him nearby. It was that mixture of innocence and intensity that Sean could never fathom.

Maybe that was why he felt himself falling in love with her.

“Sean-”

“Sorry, hun,” Sean said still blinking what little sleep he had had out of his eyes. “Really, not now.”

“Seriously, Sean. We-”

“No, I'm serious. You kept me awake all night, not that I'm complaining, but I can't even think straight right-”

“Sean!”

Startled, he looked up at her. Now she had turned into the intense Bianca, the nice home town Rhodesian girl was long gone.

“I'm pregnant.”
A long pause.
“Holy shit.”
Then the phone rang and almost gave them both a heart attack.

* * *

A mortar shell screamed overhead and exploded somewhere behind them.

Fuck City wasn't nearly as welcoming as the type of red light district that Sean had imagined when he had first heard the name.

The three SAS soldiers had been deployed together enough times that the other members of the squadron were beginning to call them The Three Musketeers. These days they went out to the bars as a team and fought as a team, Robin's black eye and James' crooked nose the result of the latest flare up. Together with the Rhodie and the Aussie, Sean thought of them as his reconstituted Recon Team from Vietnam. Specializing in deep penetrations behind enemy lines, they were Rhodesia's eyes and ears as often as it's teeth and claws.

After the latest phone call from Du Plessis they arrived at Cranborne Barracks to receive their operations order before testing firing weapons on the thirty meter range. A lone Alouette helicopter had delivered them into their new operational area by mid-morning.

The policemen and the mortar section from the Rhodesian African Rifles stationed in the area looked at the three SAS men with a mixture of awe, suspicion, and perhaps fear. They wore fatigues taken from dead enemy, carried Eastern bloc weapons, with other non-standard guns and equipment carried, such as the Colt 1911 that Sean carried on his hip. From the moment they stepped off the helicopter the locals knew some shit was about to go down.

The small village on the Rhodesian side of the border had been named Vila Salazar after the Portuguese dictator way back in the 1950's. Engaging in a bit of grab ass, the Portuguese just across the border in Mozambique had named their town Malvernia after the then Prime Minister of Rhodesia, Lord Malvern. Of course since the bush war went hot, with the Portuguese long gone, the Rhodies had taken to calling Malvernia Fuck City because of the

amount of enemy activity there. The old rail town was now crisscrossed with trench lines, foxholes, sandbags, and other enemy fortifications, the construction of which was all overseen by East German and Soviet advisers. This also led to Fuck City's other nickname, Little Russia.

Despite Sean and James having blasted the main rail line that supplied Malvernia, it hadn't stopped the Russians from flying transport aircraft in and out from the small airstrip just outside the town both day and night. Otherwise, Fuck City was isolated, manned by a lonely garrison of FRELIMO guerrillas.

With the border stand off looking like a World War I reenactment, the Generals had tasked both the Selous Scouts and the SAS to launch intermittent harassment campaigns to wear down FRELIMO and their communist advisers. The enemy positions were packed with 12.7 and 14.5 heavy machine guns, 122mm Katusha rockets, 75mm recoiless rifles, tons of RPG and B10 rockets, in addition to the 60mm and 82mm mortar systems laid on with a trajectory that pounded Vila Salazar on a regular basis.

Du Plessis had told them in the brief that there had been a change in the status quo down at Fuck City. The Rhodesians were used to being on the offensive, conducting cross border shoot and scoot missions but over the last few days a dozen policemen and several Army soldiers had been killed, felled with a single shot each.

Intercepts suggested that the Russians had imported someone specifically for the job of turning the tables in Malvernia. A Soviet sniper had flown in on one of the over night military flights and the brass wanted him taken out.

After getting a brief on the current situation from the local police chief, the trio of SAS men left just after dusk, slipping through a hole in the chain link fence that stood between the two countries.

They traveled light, moving behind what sparse cover existed on the Mozambique side of the border before having to get down on hands and knees as they advanced towards Fuck City. In the distance they could hear the enemy talking amongst themselves. Occasionally a flare went up and the SAS men held their breath for tense seconds until the light flickered and died.

Negotiating the low ground, they exploited every micro-terrain feature they could find, leopard crawling the rest of the way through shallow depressions, mortar craters, and abandoned trench lines full of mud and debris. Careful to mind the angles, as not to be spotted by the enemy under an overcast night, James found a suitable position while Sean and Robin

continued forward.

Settling in behind a tree that had been over turned by some combination of rocket and mortar fire, the Australian unwrapped his rifle from the canvas he kept tied around it to protect the precision instrument from the elements while they infiltrated.

He'd purchased the level-action Marlin .444 rifle while on leave back in Melbourne. Working together, he and Sean were both skilled gunsmiths, affixing a six power scope onto the rifle with a little improvisation. Rhodesia fielded extremely talented riflemen but had no sniper program to speak of. Having had some experience with long range marksmanship in wars past, James volunteered for the task.

* * *

After crawling on bloodied knees and elbows into the early morning hours, Sean and Robin began unpacking the canvas bag they had taken turns dragging along behind them all night.

After receiving the operations order the three man team was pretty much left to their own devices as to how to accomplish the task at hand. Such was the life of a Special Air Service soldier. They were expected to be able to carry out their missions with a minimum of guidance and supervision. Thinking on your feet was a pre-requisite in their line of work.

Sean held a broom stick while Robin slid a hastily made mannequin onto the wooden pole. Constructed from foam padding torn from several couch cushions, they had tied the foam down into a lumpy form that vaguely resembled a person's head and shoulders. Next, they slipped a Rhodesian camouflage jacket over the shoulders and a bush cap on his head.

The sun was just beginning to crest of horizon.

Robin was about to add the *piece de resistance*, a burning cigarette held over where the mannequin's lips would have been when a shot rang out. Both soldiers flinched as thick muck was kicked up on the embankment they were taking cover behind.

They'd been spotted.

Another piece of hot metal thwacked into the mud, spraying Sean with wet dirt. The shots were disembodied, mysterious in the early dawn light,

impossible to tell where they were coming from other than a general cardinal direction.

“Bloody hell,” Robin muttered under his breath. “The bastard is set on shooting our arses off.”

Sean gave their decoy a final inspection. A white sheet had been tied over the blob of foam that served as a head and a face drawn in. The cartoonish eyes, nose, and mouth wouldn't stand under the scrutiny of a sniper's high powered scope but the deception need only last long enough to draw their enemy out.

Pulling the camouflage cap down over the decoy's face, Sean hoisted the broomstick into the air, displaying the mannequin above the trench line.

Almost immediately the wooden rod was torn from Sean's grip as a bullet slammed into the dummy's head in an explosion of yellow foam.

* * *

With the first light of dawn rising behind him, James vectored in on the sniper's muzzle flash.

His opponent was holed up in one of the bombed out wooden structures deep inside Malvernia. What was left of the structure looked like it may have been a maintenance shed used to make repairs of the trains that used to pass through before he and Sean had blown the tracks. The white paint was peeling on the walls up to the point that they were cut off, ending in charred black stumps, the scars left from one of many artillery bombardments.

He estimated the range to the shed to be nearly 800 meters and came up twelve clicks on his scope to compensate for the bullet drop off.

Another flash.

In his peripheral vision he was aware of a miniature geyser of dirt ejected into the air next to his comrade's foxhole, approximately one hundred meters to his front.

James cursed himself.

He'd missed pin pointing exactly where the enemy sniper was as he had blinked exactly when he had fired. One blink of the eye and an opportunity was lost.

Long ago, the Australian had been taught to fire with both eyes open. As

a shooter it helped him maintain depth perception and situational awareness. With his right eye staring down the Marlin's scope he noticed Sean hoist their decoy above the lip of the trench he was hiding in with Robin.

A third flash, the second window in from the right hand side of the building. A heartbeat later the decoy's head exploded.

The communist sniper was well trained. His rifle barrel didn't extend out from the windowsill, no, he had taken a position deeper in the house expertly using the shadows to his advantage. James wasn't even able to make out the silhouette of the shooter.

Shifting his rifle, he vectored in on the exact position he had seen the muzzle flash from and used his cross hairs to divide the space into quadrants. Breathing evenly, he paused midway through exhaling, waiting a split second for a the lull between gusts of wind.

When the tree branches down range stopped swaying, James squeezed the trigger.

The .444 bucked hard into his shoulder, his hand reflexively working the level action to chamber a fresh round.

He was well concealed, firing through a loop hole he found under the down tree but he still couldn't help but feel like the enemy was zeroing in on him.

Watching through his scope he saw several FRELIMO soldiers run around like their hair had suddenly caught on fire. One pointed inside the burnt out shed and before long an entire squad's worth of guerrillas had gathered to gawk.

James was holding his breath until he saw one of the guerrillas come walking out of the shack with what was clearly a Russian SVD sniper rifle in his hands, the PSO-1 scope and distinctive butt stock making it easy to identify. Seconds later, the FRELIMO terrorists carried a body out of the shed. Limp in their hands, one terrorist carried the corpse by the boots while the other struggled to hook his hands under the dead man's arm pits.

Grinning at his confirmed kill, James took aim on the one trying to find a way to grasp the dead body's torso. Gently stroking the trigger, he took pleasure in watching the bullet smash through the man's side, instantly deflating both lungs and probably taking a chuck of his heart at the same time.

The guerrilla fighter was dead before he hit the ground, his compatriot left holding the sniper's boots, finding himself looking at two corpses instead

of one.

Working the rifle's lever, the Australian SAS soldier shot him dead before he had a chance to react.

A fourth guerrilla went down with a gut shot before the others finally realized what was going on and took cover.

Moments later the mortars and artillery fire began pounding the front lines as Fuck City shot back at Rhodesia in retaliation. 122mm rockets, nicknamed Stalin's Organ, soared overhead.

Coming off the scope, James noticed Sean and Robin crouched in their fox hole laughing to themselves. They were both flipping him the bird as mortar bombs rained down all around them.

* * *

Sean slammed his foot down on the break peddle, his Peugeot skidding off to the side of the road. He had the door flung open before the wheels came to a halt, his Colt 1911 appearing in his hand as he stepped out into the dark.

A single vehicle sat idling in the middle of the road, it's headlights flipped on as he had approached, just in time to prevent a head on collision. Insurgents were known to cross the border and ambush civilians in increasingly deep incursions into Rhodesia but something felt out of place. The car was parked in the middle of the road, it's engine purring softly while the surrounding bush lay quiet.

The combat veteran thumbed the 1911's safety off and took the pistol in a two handed grip while taking cover behind his rusted out Peugeot.

“Sergeant Deckard,” a voice came from down the road. Whoever the voice belonged to remained obscured, standing somewhere behind the glare of the headlights. Frowning, he poked his head out from behind the car. The terrorists didn't know him by name, not that he knew of anyway.

“Sergeant Deckard, if I might have a moment of your time?”

“Who the hell are you?” he called back.

“Dobson. Sheldon Dobson with Special Branch.”

“Sean Deckard, SAS. What the hell do you want?” he fired back.

“Sergeant,” Dobson sighed. “If we may?”

Getting to his feet, the American flicked the safety back into place before tucking his .45 into his pants. He was filthy and smelled like an outhouse. The SAS trooper was on his way to Bianca's place after arriving back at Craneborne barracks. Once the debrief was over he hadn't even stopped long enough for a shower. He and Robin had spent the entire day hiding in their foxhole from enemy fire until darkness set in and they were able to scurry back across the Rhodesian border.

"What does Special Branch want with me?" Sean asked as he squinted in front of the headlights. Finally Dobson reached inside his car and turned them off, leaving them both standing in the dark.

"We've been checking up on you Sergeant and have heard about your particular expertise. You see, we have a problem."

"We?"

"Yes, all of us. We have also been informed that you've been quite vocal with your opinions regarding the Nkomo raid to numerous superior officers. Do you really think that it was a set up? Was there a leak in the system somewhere?"

"Of course, there is a mole somewhere in the command structure. Nkomo wasn't the only one that has gotten early warning. We've had recces confirm activity at several terrorist camps only to commit to a raid and find out that they had been abandoned since we sent the information up the chain of command."

"Quite right, Sergeant. We concur with that assessment and feel that now is our chance to find out who is leaking our operational details to the enemy."

The crickets chirping in the background spoke volumes.

"Don't you have your own counter-intelligence people for this kind of thing?"

"Yes, but I must admit, we have no idea who is compromised and who isn't," Dobson said lighting a cigarette. "We suspect that we've been penetrated not only by the KGB but also by Mossad, the CIA, and MI-6. Things are quite bad."

"That's an understatement," Sean snorted.

"Yes, an American would think so."

"A Rhodesian would think so too," he shot back. "This shit repeats itself. Just like in Saigon."

"Excuse me?"

"Why me?" he changed the subject.

“We know you are in the clear, old boy. The mole wouldn't be making a scene in formal military briefings surrounded by officers, telling everyone in earshot that there is a enemy spy somewhere in the works.”

“How do you know? It's completely counter-intuitive.”

“Uh, well, yes, I suppose so. I have also heard that you have no small amount of talent when it comes to electronic eavesdropping.”

“I picked up a thing or two over the years.”

“Which is what makes you a perfect fit for this job. The SAS is preparing to brief the CIO on your next mission in the coming days,” Dobson said referring to the Central Intelligence Office, Rhodesia's foremost intelligence service. “Special Branch has arranged with your Captain Du Plessis to ensure that you are the one carrying out the brief at the CIO offices.”

“I suppose you have a device you expect me to find a way to install while I'm there?”

Dobson reached into his car and produced a shoe box, handing it over to Sean.

“State of the art.”

“And how exactly am I supposed to attach the tap on their phones?”

“Surely you will think of something,” the Special Branch agent said, patting Sean on the shoulder. “Improvise. Isn't that what you people do out in the bush?”

* * *

“Our three main objectives are to sever the electrical lines running into Beira,” Sean said using a wooden pointer to indicate the miniature pylons on the sand table mock up, “destroy the petroleum tanks here,” he motioned to the fuel yard, “and blast the the main transfer fuel line at this junction,” he finished pointing towards the docks.

The scale model looked like something that a Japanese actor would trample over in a big rubber monster suit in a disaster movie. Jokes aside, visual aides were vital to the briefing process when pitching a mission to higher military elements.

“We have several options for infiltration,” Sean continued. “A small SAS team can parachute into Mozambique and link up with RENAMO rebels

before making the rest of the trip overland."

Sean recited the entire pitch from memory, detailing every aspect of the operation to include communications and signals plans as well as contingencies. While taking up the entire forty five minutes he had been allotted to brief the operations order, the head of the Central Intelligence Office, Kent Foulkes leered at him.

Foulkes' scowl had grown by the minute, his brow furrowed over eyes that were set deep in his face.

"With fuel tanks two and three set ablaze, we estimate that it will take five to six days before the proper fire fighting equipment can be brought into Beira from abroad before they can begin to put out a fire this size," Sean began wrapping up.

"I will be happy to field any questions, otherwise I can forward them to my commander at Craneborne for more details."

"Thank you Sergeant Deckard," General Farrell said. Seated next to Foulkes the two were said to be like peas in a pod when it came to walking the party line. "I can say that I remain unconvinced of the feasibility of this operation but a good brief nonetheless."

"Indeed," Foulkes said coughing into his hand. "I certainly won't be the authorizing agent for this catastrophe. We need to exercise some caution when it comes to our international relationships, after all."

"But we have communist forces pouring across the border and into Rhodesia everyday. Mozambique is hardly neutral in this war-"

"That's quite enough Sergeant," Foulkes held up a hand. "It's bad enough that the SAS was unprofessional enough to send a Sergeant down here in the first place, we've heard enough."

Sharing a lighter, the military officer and the intelligence officer lit up their cigarettes before waddling out the door, chuckling to themselves.

Sean had to literally bite his tongue. Thankfully, he had been able to keep his anger in check, unlike a certain briefing he had given a different General back in Vietnam.

COMOPS was the headquarters that coordinated the entire war effort for the Rhodesian government. Plenty of high ranking brass wandering the hallowed halls, Sean thought. The briefing had just been an excuse to get him inside, now it was time to go to work.

Dobson, his new friend in Special Branch, had helped facilitate the brief, making sure that the CIO chief was booked for another just minutes after

Sean's concluded. It would give him a short window of opportunity to act.

Slipping out into the hall, Sean walked casually, stopping in front of Foulkes office door. The CIO agent was suspected public enemy number one according to Dobson. A number of military officers who worked where the rubber meets the asphalt had suspected him for years, but thus far, no one had any proof of any wrong doing.

Reaching into a pocket in his fatigue pants he retrieved a key that Dobson had given him the night before. It was clear that Special Branch had been planning this sting operation for a long time and were just waiting to find the right man for the job. Inserting the key into the lock, he twisted the knob and stepped inside before shutting the door behind him.

The American's eyes quickly scanned across the contents of the office. One wall was lined with file cabinets, a desk sat in the center of the room with a telephone, a IBM typewriter, and a ashtray on it. A steel safe was tucked into one corner of the office. With more time on his hands, Sean could probably have cracked it, but he had to act fast before Foulkes returned.

His activities had been specially timed by Special Branch observers. Not only had the back to back briefings been arranged for the CIO chief but they also timed the planting of the bug around the weekly sweeps that counter-intelligence technicians conducted. The latest sweep had taken place just hours prior, giving them and entire week before someone had to sneak back into the office and remove the transmitter before it was discovered.

Unplugging the telephone, Sean grunted to himself as he reflected on the entire situation. He was no fool. If a bug installation had actually been approved through the proper channels than Special Branch would have needed the Prime Minister's signature and the tap would be set in place at the telephone exchange. Instead, they had placed a lone SAS Sergeant in COMOPS to surreptitiously plant the bug by hand.

It stank to high hell.

In the end, he had no idea who he could trust outside his increasingly small circle of friends.

Working quickly, Sean disassembled the plastic housing of the telephone and spliced the tap into the wiring. It would transmit to a small tape recorder he had already rigged inside a crawlspace on the other side of the building. Once installed, the recorder would only activate when someone was talking over the phone itself. Special Branch had assured him that they already had plan to get him back into the building for a follow on brief which would serve

as an excuse to retrieve the tape and the phone tap.

Putting the phone back together Sean hurried out the door, making sure it was locked before turning away.

Heading for the exit, he glanced over his shoulder as voices echoed down the corridor.

Time will tell, he thought, shaking his head.

In the mean time Du Plessis was chomping at the bit to start mission rehearsals for the Beira operation.

23MAR79
23h21
Eight kilometers off the coast of Mozambique

They were silent as storm clouds gathered overhead, the seasonal winds that blasted across the Indian ocean bringing trouble with them.

The Mark-4 Zodiac rocked gently as the South African crew member guided them towards the shore. After several revisions to the plan, a deal had been struck with high level members of the South African government. The last thing the apartheid-state wanted was for Rhodesia's insurgency to become a South African insurgency if they lost the war.

In the end, a twenty-man strong SAS contingent was flown into South Africa under the cover of darkness and quickly driven to the Navy's hydrographic survey ship, the SAS Protea. Casting off, they set out to sea, underway throughout the night and the following day. Finally, with the sun slipping below the horizon, the South African ship began to close the distance to Mozambique's shore. Operating from the Protea as a mother ship, it was South Africa's own 4-Recce detachment that piloted the smaller Zodiacs and provided a small security element for the twenty Rhodesian SAS operatives.

The inflatable military rafts glided across the sea, the ocean waters calm, if only for the time being.

Sergeant Marius, the Recce Zodiac pilot cut the engine as they neared the shore. Marius was huge even by Afrikaner standards, he almost looked like a refrigerator with a head attached on top. He also looked like he'd be able to fire a Mag 58 machine gun one handed, but even so, he'd be left behind with the security force at the boats. His government didn't want any direct South African involvement in the dirty deed.

The second Zodiac's engine switched off a moment later as they were distributing paddles. The boat leader, another South African, had the rowers marking time in order to get them rowing in unison. Meanwhile, he watched the shore through one of the very few night vision goggles that his unit was able to field.

Sean Deckard rowed alongside his team mates, careful not to upset the rhythm.

“Row, row, row, left side pick it up, row,” the boat leader whispered.

Sean's forearms burned as he dug deeper and harder into the water. He became aware that they were closing the distance quickly when he was able to hear the crashing waves lapping up on the beach.

Things had take a turn for the worse in December of the previous year when ZIPRA terrorists rocketed the industrial fuel tank farm in Salisbury. Since then, the SAS had been planning a retaliation strike against Mozambique's own fuel tanks at the Munhava oil storage depot in Beira.

With a final heave, the SAS men pulled their paddles out of the water just as a wave swept under the boat and washed them up on shore, sand grinding beneath their keel as they came to a halt on the beach.

Jungle boots splashed into the water, everyone grabbing a handhold and hoisting the Zodiac up to waist height. Shuffling forward, the soldiers carried the raft up the shore and into the wood line as the South Africans bounded forward to establish a hasty security perimeter.

Setting the boat down, the Rhodesians left Marius and his men to guard the two boats while the rest continued on with the mission. Sean reckoned he must have finally gained some measure of respect from his Captain as he had been made a team leader for the Beira operation. With Robin and two new SAS recruits under his command, it would be their responsibility to sabotage the main fuel transfer line.

Even with scant amounts of moonlight, they could make out the hulking fuel tanks above the treeline. A few naked bulbs lit up the industrial facility here and there, the sound of a generator purring somewhere deeper in the compound, reminding them that there was a human presence somewhere in the night.

Crawling up to the fence, Sean kept his head low, his Kalashnikov held tightly in the palm of his hand. Robin slowly crept up beside him, watching for sentries with his suppressed Ruzi at the ready.

Reaching into his kit, Sean grabbed a pair of wire cutters and began

snipping through the chain link fence while Robin covered him. The other SAS teams would be breaching their way into the compound from separate attack points, careful to avoid the anti-aircraft guns located through the facility.

Cutting through several feet of fence, he held it open for Robin and the other two SAS soldiers on his team to crawl through. One of the new guys, Burt, was from West Germany. The other, Ducroix, came to the Rhodesian military by way of France. Sean sometimes marveled out how much of a foreign legion they had become.

Sliding through the gap he had made, the American joined his team just as Robin's Ruzi spat several stunted bursts of fire. Rushing forward he saw his three troopers with grins of their faces. Several feet away was a bloody corpse, the late soldier's penis sticking out from his Soviet supplied uniform. The enemy soldier had approached the bush to take a piss when he stumbled right onto Robin's position.

Staying in the shadows the four-man unit scurried between the massive fuel tanks, their footsteps creating echoes as they strode between them. Robin walked point, stalking towards the center of the oil depot. The place was huge. Before the war the depot had been built up to accommodate both Mozambique and landlocked Rhodesia. With the war on, it made for an extremely important logistical hub for the military of Mozambique and the Soviet trained terrorist forces that acted as their proxies.

“That's it right there,” Sean whispered to his point man. “That's the main transfer line.”

Robin nodded and began heading for their target.

The transfer line joined the entire tank farm together from which they could be filled by the Russian and Eastern European resupply ships. So thick was the pipe that a grown man could have crawled through it.

Robin, Burt, and Ducroix fanned out in a tight perimeter to maintain security while Sean went to work. As team leader, setting the explosives correctly was a task that landed on his shoulders. Setting down his satchel, he removed an explosive charge that those in the SAS had nicknamed, the *Wreck*. It was a little over kill but better safe than sorry, especially when it came to a mission this important.

The shaped charge was built inside a piece of plastic piping that had been cut to the appropriate length before being packed with Pentolite explosives inside a copper sleeve. Setting the charge on the top of the pipe, right next to

the junction that connected to the various oil tanks, he then climbed up and straddled the pipe with his legs.

Positioning the explosive with both hands he maneuvered it into position on the center of the pipe before motioning Burt to come and assist him. Working together, they tied a rope around the pipe and over the *Wreck* to ensure that it maintained good contact when it detonated.

Sean was prepping two chemical pencils when they suddenly heard a series of sharp explosive blasts deeper into the oil depot. His eyes immediately went to his watch, it was just after one in the morning. One of the other teams had jumped the gun.

Working quickly, Sean jammed the chemical pencils into the explosives and snapped them, initiating the countdown.

Sliding off the pipe, he rallied his team for extraction.

“We've got five minutes,” Sean told the his men. “Let's dee-dee the fuck out of here.”

“Do you hear that?” Robin asked, cocking his head towards a sound.

“Hear what?”

“Vunning vater,” Burt explained.

“*Vunning vater*?”

“Running water,” Robin translated.

“I don't hear any god damned running water,” Sean growled. “Quit fucking around, we've-”

At that moment, Sean finally looked down to see the black liquid creeping around his jungle boots. To his horror he realized that it was crude oil spilling from the fuel tanks that the other SAS team had prematurely detonated.

“Oh, shit.”

The wall of rushing oil slammed into the SAS men, washing them towards the docks as they tumbled end over end through the viscous mess.

* * *

“No sign of Sean's team,” James told Captain Du Plessis. “I think we've lost them”

The British officer hissed through his teeth.

Behind them the Beira fuel depot was lit ablaze, tongues of flame whipping high into the sky, turning night into day. The orange glow illuminated their faces as they spoke to each other.

“Damned fine men,” Du Plessis remarked. “We won't be the same without them.”

“To bad about the new recruits,” James said dryly. “I guess we will have to call down to the selection course and ask them to make us some new ones.”

The sun would be peeking above the treetops in minutes rather than hours. They couldn't wait at the rally point much longer. If the SAS Protea was spotted during hours of daylight than the South African involvement would be exposed. The Captain wasn't sure whether or not the mother ship would care enough to bother waiting for them after their rendezvous time expired.

“Tell the Recces that we are ready to get the boats in the water and head out,” the officer said, resignation hanging in his voice. “We lost some damn fine men today but they knew the risk that this mission entailed.”

The two Zodiacs were in the center of their security perimeter, the Recces and the three SAS teams standing by for further orders now that their mission had been completed.

“Yes, sir,” James nodded.

“I will have them break down-”

Just then a sudden thrashing came from the ocean, like a shark caught in a fish net. Then screams sounded above the crashing surf.

“YOU FUCKING ASSHOLES BLEW THE CHARGES TO EARLY!”

“What in the blazes,” Du Plessis snorted.

Four figures emerged from the ocean depths looking like creatures from the black lagoon.

“Looks like we found us some tar babies,” one of the troops quipped from the perimeter creating a outbreak of stifled laughter.

James and the Captain stood with jaws hanging open as the four forms stumbled out of the water and into perimeter. They were covered in crude oil from head to toe. Darker than midnight, all any of them could see was Sean's blue eyes as he spoke.

“THREE MINUTES EARLY CHEESE DICK!”

With the oil depot burning high into the early morning sky, the entire patrol burst out laughing.

Finally, getting himself under control, Du Plessis ordered the Zodiacs into the ocean and ordered Sean's team back into the water to wash themselves off before departing. Only later was it established that several time fuses had been improperly cut resulting in the tanks being ruptured ahead of schedule. The oil burst from the ragged hole created by the explosives and rushed down to the main terminal junction, washing Sean's team off the docks and into the ocean.

It was a long, bitter ride back to South Africa for four Special Air Service men that day.

* * *

“Can't you see I'm busy here?” Sean asked irritably, shaking Bianca off him.

Sliding his tape into a cassette player, Sean donned a pair of headphones and plugged them in before pressing the play button.

“Someone had a bad day at the office,” his fiance muttered. Her steps were awkward as she left him to his own devices. The swell of the baby growing inside her sometimes made it uncomfortable for her to walk.

“I will be done in a minute, honey,” he shouted after her.

Sitting alone at the kitchen table, Sean held the ear phones close and listened as the tape began to roll. He'd retrieved the tape from COMOPS, removing the tap on the phone just minutes before the counter-intelligence sweepers were due to make their rounds. Rushing home, he threw the tape into the player before he was supposed to hand it off to Special Branch in less than a hour.

“Hello?”

It was Kent Foulkes' voice, answering the phone and prompting the tap to begin recording.

“*Good afternoon old chap, wanted to check in.”*

Sean frowned, not recognizing the voice on the other end.

“*Yes, yes of course. Good to hear from you as always.”*

“I saw the news. You were unable to stop the Beira operation.”

“Well, one can only do so much. I can't shut every mission down. Those bastards in the Scouts and in the Special Air Service are zealots. They act like

they actually have a chance of winning this war."

"Blessed are the naive."

"I hoped that what we talked about last time is proceeding on schedule."

"Lord Larrington is facilitating the deal, we have assurances from Secretary Kammler as well."

"Wire my fee to my Nugan-Hand account in Australia."

"The Nigerians are practically chomping at the bit here."

"With the amount of light body they are sitting on it's no wonder. The West can't slash Rhodesia's throat fast enough if it means certain interests get those kind of oil concessions."

"All you have to do is make the transition as painless as possible."

"That won't be a problem, the occasional cross border strike is inevitable but also irrelevant. I am curious about how they intend to find the rest of the oil, those reserves must be in deep water."

"Some are, but the Yanks have been testing a new system. Apparently it was put to use to great effect in the Pacific just recently."

"What system?"

"Apparently it uses some kind of predictive algorithms to find hidden caches and missing assets. I've been told they used it to find a Soviet submarine that went down. They even launched some kind of clandestine salvage operation afterwords."

Deckard's jaw nearly hit the ground. He'd been around the block too many times to think that it was just a coincidence that they were discussing a program exactly like one he had encountered while serving in Vietnam.

"What is it?"

"It's a computer program of some kind. They call it PROMIS."

07SEP79

Sean's eyes fluttered open. Ears ringing, he was oblivious to the gunfire raging around him.

"Wake up, dammit!"

Someone was screaming in his ear.

One by one his senses switched back on. The black faded and he saw Robin looking down at him. Sean's ears heard nothing but monotone, only the

crump of mortars in the background and the whoosh of rockets passing overhead getting through, their crisscrossing white streaks hanging in the air. Finally, he gagged on the smell of sulfur that invaded his nose, remnants from the explosives raining down all around them.

"What happened?" Sean asked, attempting to sit up on his elbow.

Robin quickly pushed him back to the ground.

"You got knocked out when a RPG went off next to you."

"Shit."

"You know where you are, right?"

"On a op?"

"Yeah, and we're gonna go rev some terrs, right?"

"Yeah," Sean said between a rash of coughing fits.

"We're taking fire from all sides, just stay with me."

Rolling over, Robin held his rifle in front of him as he crawled forward. The terrain was almost completely flat in all directions, nothing but light jesse grass to conceal their movement. Getting on his stomach, Sean found his own FN FAL laying by his side before crawling after his team mate.

His head pounded and he struggled to comprehend his surroundings while simultaneously attempting to recover his recently lost memory. For the moment, he could remember that he was a soldier and that he was in combat. That had to be enough for now.

Robin scooted up alongside Du Plessis and a dozen other SAS troops who had found a shallow depression in the otherwise flat open field to take cover in. Autofire raced over their heads, the occasional enemy gunshot closing in and spraying them with dirt at they impacted the earth in front of them.

Moving hand over hand, Sean crept up beside the SAS Captain who now eyed him warily. To their front, they could see heads bobbing up in down in a zigzag patterned trench line that extended to their left flank as well. The enemy had also been able to sneak a few guerrillas to their rear, setting the arid jesse grass on fire behind them. The smoke billowed into the sky as the flames grew near, pushing them into the jaws of the beast.

His chest tightened as it all hit him in a single rush. Unlike Laos, there wouldn't be any Huey's or King Bees coming in to extract him and his team. Not this time.

Deckard blinked, recognizing the tench lay out. They had been studying photographs of the enemy fortifications for weeks now. They were in Mozambique once more, this time they were calling it Operation Uric, an

assault on one of the largest terrorist strongholds facing Rhodesia.

White smoke from the bush fire was now towering over them.

They were running out of time and had to make a decision.

“Alan, James, Burt, David,” Du Plessis began. “I want you to lay down a base of fire.”

Thankfully, almost every second man in the patrol was carrying an automatic weapon, Mag 58 machine guns.

“The rest of you lot stays with me as we make for trench.”

The machine gunners quickly positioned themselves where they would be able to fire obliquely into the trench line while the others made ready, loading fresh magazines into their weapons before what was sure to be a suicidal frontal assault.

It was a three hour turn around for Rhodesia's fleet of aging bombers to return back to the airfield to rearm, get back into the air, and come back on station. The Captain's radioman, or RTO, was yelling into his handmic as he communicated with the pilots. The SAS soldiers simply couldn't wait any longer.

A recoiless rifle roared, the shell impacting somewhere behind their position.

With his mind finally brushing off the last of his battle haze, Sean pulled himself together just as they began to shake out into a hasty skirmish line. Du Plessis gave the command and their four machine gunners opened up, raking the trenches to their front.

Sean bounded with his maneuver element, Robin still at his side. They quickly stood up and dashed forward while the Mag 58 gunners laid down a suppressive fire. It wasn't much breathing room Sean noted as he threw himself forward and into the prone position. Gunfire burst inches over his head as he began returning fire.

Sweat ran down Sean's face, stinging his eyes as he struggled to align the front sight post on his FAL rifle with the rear aperture. The barrel of his rifle slowly tracked from side to side as he followed targets running up and down the trench in front of him. Squeezing off a shot, he watched a human head rock backwards in a spray of crimson.

Behind him, the second maneuver element bounded up alongside them as the machine guns continued to chatter, picking up the slack.

Struggling against the heat and humidity, the American picked himself up and made one final bound. He and Robin hosed down the edge of the trench

with rapid bursts before laying down next to it, feet to feet.

As he reached into his chest harness for a grenade, Sean spotted Captain Du Plessis laying face down in the jesse grass. Yanking the pin, Sean lobbed his grenade into the earthen canal at the same time as Robin. The explosions sounded almost simultaneously. Chasing the blasts, the soldiers rolled into the trench with rifles at the ready.

Both commandos fired on targets as they marched forward, establishing a foothold for the other soldiers who quickly piled in behind them. Deckard point shot one terrorist in close proximity, the 7.62 rounds striking him high under the collar bone and spinning him around, depositing him on the ground as so much dead weight. Reaching the first joint in the trench, Sean took a knee and sent a second volley of fire deeper into the enemy fortifications while his team mates consolidated behind him.

Sergeant Major Alan, now the senior man on the ground, dragged Du Plessis' body into the trench behind them. The men descended on the body out of necessity rather than disrespect, stripping their late commander of loaded magazines and grenades.

By now Sean was engaging and trading fire with another half dozen enemy combatants, their AK-47 rifles cycling hard and fast, chewing up the ground at Deckard's feet every time be bent back behind the earth wall.

Priming hand grenades, several Rhodie troopers lobbed the bombs into the air, sending them in a high arc that crossed the open ground and into the other side of the trench where the enemy was massing their forces. The grenades exploded, their efforts rewarded with the screams of the wounded.

In the narrow confines of the trench there was precious little maneuver room. Once the Mag 58 gunners made their way into the maze of canals, one of them took point, stepping in front of Sean and spraying a belt of ammo towards the enemy. Under sustained fire, the terrorists were temporarily out gunned, attempting to take refuge anywhere they could in futile attempts before they were cut down.

Reaching a t-intersection in the trench, the SAS men split in half, refusing to give up their forward momentum. The enemy was going down in droves under a hail of lead, falling on top of each other, stacked like chord wood. Sean blinked sweat from his eyes and quickly reloaded his FAL. He wouldn't have believed the level of carnage if he hadn't seen it for himself.

Stalking deeper into the complex, the enemy was finally caught with their guard down. The Rhodesian forces had been backed into the corner and had

no where to fight to except straight forward. The cordite was now thick in the air, nearly obscuring their vision. Their Mag 58 gunner slammed down his feed tray cover and racked the bolt to the rear to load a fresh belt.

Snap shooting a target that appeared from a adjoining trench, Sean saw the Mag gunner go down. Robin moved up to claim his machine gun and get it back into the fight, letting a steady stream of gunfire rip. A quick assessment told Sean that the gunner was dead, his eyes staring up and into nothing.

Reaching another joint in the trench, Sean loosed another grenade and waited for the blast before preceding. With four of them left in their group it was apparent that they had to do something decisive and fast before their numbers were completely whittled away.

Receiving large amounts of effective gunfire, the fire team took refuge inside a crumbling bunker. It was little more than a dug out pit with some logs and sandbags over the top, the branches crumbling and caving in under the weight of the sand and earth piled on top.

All to aware that they were getting penned in, Sean quickly glanced out through a hole in the bunker's roof, checking for more fortifications outside. The trench line appeared to double back on itself in a lazy u-turn. Now that the Rhodesian soldiers were down inside the trenches, the enemy had fixated on their flanks, ignoring the open ground in between.

“We can run across the dead space between trenches and get behind them,” Sean advised.

“You must be mad,” Walter, a young Sergeant, said shaking his head.

“Continuing forward down the trench is a numbers game and we don't have them,” the American responded, yelling over the gunfire that continued to search for them.

“He's right,” Robin said, locking the bolt on his Mag 58 to the rear before loading a fresh belt.

“We're out of options,” Corporal Black said, heavy bags hanging under his young eyes.

“Shit.”

Walter had just been overruled in the kind of direct democracy that only exists among soldiers in combat.

Reaching up, Black tore at the branches, caving in a large section of the bunker's ceiling.

“Now or never,” Robin remarked. The shouts of the enemy were growing

near as they closed in on the SAS men.

One by one, the soldiers scrambled through the gaping hole and out into daylight. Deckard was the last man out of the bunker, his heart pounding as he sprinted across twenty meters of open ground. His boots thudded over dry grass, several things happening at once. Robin slid into the trench at the far side of the clearing and opened up with the Mag. A single gunshot rang out and snapped just over Sean's shoulder causing him to trip.

Somersaulting end over end he fell into the trench between Walter and Black who quickly helped him to his feet.

Firing from the hip, Robin went cyclic, running a steady stream of automatic fire into the backs of the terrorists who were preparing for a final assault on the bunker they believed their opponents to be hiding in.

Sean aimed at several of the wounded terrs still flopping on the ground and delivered multiple mercy shots. Ripping into his chest harness for his final magazine, the team got hit from the rear, more enemy attempting to over run them.

Black tossed a phosphorous grenade that went off in a flash of sizzling white. Screaming enemy ran towards them, their clothes lit ablaze. Dispatching them was another mercy kill.

Executing a rear face, the former SOG One-Zero fired again and again, the enemy falling over their own dead as they attempted to advance. In his peripheral vision he saw Walter go down just as a shot tore at his own uniform, taking a piece of his shoulder with it in a spray of blood.

Pushed along by adrenaline, he ignored the wound, knowing that the pain would come later. The Mag 58 locked back on an empty chamber. Sean took a knee as another round whizzed past his face. Suddenly a fresh wave of heavy fire rained down from behind them as that Mag came back online.

The barrage of gunfire slammed into the enemy to his front, permanently stopping them in their tracks. Spun around by the 7.62 fire, the terrs spun in a bizarre dance of death before falling and laying still.

Sean dropped his now empty rifle, his hand grabbing at the 1911 pistol in the holster at his hip. Holding his .45 in a two handed grip, the American lined up his front sight post on a charging terrorist, pulling the trigger again and again. He squeezed his way through half the magazine before inertia alone carried the still moving corpse into a collision with him.

In the heat of combat, his shoulder wound was quickly forgotten.

Flinging the limp body away, he vectored in on his next target just a

enemy gunfire tore through one of the canteens he wore on his web gear. The warm water seeped down his trouser leg, Deckard taking some small solace in the knowledge that it wasn't blood or piss.

Robin was reloading the Mag with it's barrel trailing wisps of smoke into the air.

Two more enemy shooters fell before the 1911's slide locked to the rear. Loading his final magazine, Sean thumbed the slide release, chambering the first round.

Pressing himself against the wall of the trench, Robin finally got his machine gun back into operation. Next to him, Corporal Black lay dead.

Sean went into the prone, grabbing a dead enemy by his fatigue jacket and pulling him close to use as cover. The Mag spat back into action, Sean adding his .45 into the mix, careful to make each shot count as the enemy attempted to over run them.

AK-47 rounds drilled into the corpse he lay behind, wiggling the limp flesh from side to side.

Time seemed to stand still for a moment. Exhausted, Sean was resigned to staying in the fight with Robin, but morbidly a thought flashed to what would happen if his comrade was killed. He'd have to smear the corpse's blood on his face and play possum until the enemy swept across his position. Then he could shoot them in the back and try to escape.

Two more Mag 58's came online, halting the enemy advance in it's tracks as twin figure eights of automatic fire chopped through their ranks. Sean fired again and again until he emptied the pistol into the already dead bodies of those slain by a wall of 7.62 lead.

Someone was yelling as he was pulled to his feet. He saw Robin staring at him from the other side of the trench, his eyes vacant, the side of his face splashed in blood. His Mag 58 rested with it's feed tray cover open.

It was Sergeant Major Alan who had grabbed him by the collar and yanked him up.

“We're leaving,” he shouted in Sean's ear above the gunfire raging around them.

“What?”

“We are pulling off this objective!”

The Sergeant Major had cleared his portion of the trench and had double backed to regroup with the rest of them. Despite the number of casualties they had taken, only a small part of the overall trench complex had actually

been cleared. It was still crawling with packs of terrs who were bomb shelling out in every direction like ants from an ant hill.

Behind the Sergeant Major, Du Plessis' radio operator was shouting into his hand mic as Canberra bombers screamed overhead, dumping their ordnance on enemy positions deeper in the compound.

“We've got orders, we're withdrawing.”

“Bullshit,” Sean spat back. “We can't give up the ground we've taken.”

“Look around you Sean. There are only six of us left and at least a couple hundred floppies on the objective. We will be lucky to get out of here alive.” “If we leave now than it was all for nothing, they died for nothing.”

The Sergeant Major's grasp tightened around Deckard's shirt.

“They already died for nothing!”

The argument was interrupted by fresh salvo of gunfire, one round slicing through Sean's leg, another through the Sergeant Major's shoulder. Collapsing on top of each other, the Mag gunners opened up with a fresh stream of tracers screaming over their heads.

It couldn't be true.

Sean sat with his elbows resting on his knees, the vibrations and noises of the aircraft fazed out, his mind else where. His comrades had to have died for something or the entire war had been a waste, a waste that tied his guts in knots. A waste like the one he had found in South East Asia.

The C-130 aircraft had been packed to the ceiling with crates containing machine guns and mortar systems. Recoiless rifles and howitzers were tied down to the floor with heavy straps. With his new family packed into a car and joining a convoy destined for South Africa, Sean would be joining Bianca and his baby son shortly. For the time being, he had been assigned as a pallet rider to ensure that the arsenal arrived into the waiting hands of the South African Defense Forces after taking off from Fylde Air base.

Much of the war material had been on loan to the Rhodesians from the SADF to begin with. With Robert Mugabe's ZANU winning elections, with no shortage of intimidation of black voters at play, the South Africans justifiably wanted their guns back before they could fall into communist hands.

Deckard sat back into the mesh flip down seat, leaning his head against the cold fuselage of the aircraft.

Everything had changed after Operation Uric. Looking back, it was now clear that that was where Rhodesia had hit it's wall. No amount of professionalism or dedication could compete with the numbers of terrorists and weapons pouring across Rhodesian borders.

The world cried racist, disregarding the fact that there were more black soldiers in the Rhodesian Army than white. Facts took a backseat to political agendas and so they were abandoned to the communist menace.

The SAS had stood fast, waiting for the operational code word to come over the net to launch Operation Quartz on election day. Once transmitted over their radios, the Special Air Service was to launch a coup in Salisbury, killing off Mugabe and his henchmen once and for all. That code word never came.

In the end, all he could do was clench his fists in frustration. There had been a secret plan in place for years that none of them had been told about. Both the SAS and the Selous Scouts were to be absorbed to the South African Recces as entire units after the communists took over. With no desire to serve an enemy that they were trying to kill until literally days prior, virtually all of the Rhodesian Special Forces soldiers decided to defect.

Overnight, the CIO began watching the SAS members and their families, placing them under surveillance at their homes while they waited for the signal to begin moving across the border. War heroes turned into war criminals overnight. What came of the tape recording that he had turned over to Special Branch, Sean would probably never know.

It didn't matter any longer.

Their war was over.

Now a preview from Issue #3, PROMIS: South Africa.

12SEP83
0032hrs

Street lamps cast golden light along the main roads leading throughout the Eastern Cape, insects creating a steady buzz that filled the darkness of night with their presence. The occasional window was still illuminated, only to be dashed as the locals tossed the curtains into place and prepared to bed down for the night. Although not still, the night was calm until the blast rocked through several neighborhoods, shaking people from their beds and setting off alarm systems on several warehouses located in the area.

South Africa was having another one of those nights.

0030hrs

An aluminum ladder slammed silently against the side of the prison wall, the strips of rubber tire treads tied to the top of the ladder damping the sound as it made contact. The ladder itself has been specially cut for one very specific task, to help two black-clad men scale that specific wall. Scrambling up the rungs, the first man tossed a carpet over the barbed wire before uncoiling a rope ladder down the opposite side of the wall.

Crawling over the lip, the two operators did their best to keep a low profile as not to silhouette themselves against the moon lit skyline. Sliding down the rope ladder in a kind of controlled fall, they then slung their AK-47 rifles off their backs. The safeties slid off without the normal distinctive click, the levers wrapped in black electrical tape during mission rehearsals that had been conducted over the past week.

Finding themselves in the courtyard of Middledrift Prison they sprinted to the heavy steel door that led into the prison itself, their rifle muzzles leading the way and scanning for threats. Black ski masks concealed their features from the ever watching CCTV camera on a pivot mount above the door way.

Reaching into a satchel, the larger of the two operators produced a specialized door charge made of P4 explosives. Developed years prior during the Rhodesian Bush War, the charge was often called by its nick name, the *Gate Crasher*.

If there was anyone on the other side of the door they were in for a world

of hurt, the steel bending and giving away under the explosive force of the detonation. The charge lived up to it's name. The two assaulters stood on either side of the door as the plastic explosives blasted a shower of debris out between them, rattling windows for blocks in every direction.

Inside, the cell blocks were consisted of cinder block walls covered in peeling paint that seemed to stretch on forever. The black-clad interlopers cut right and sprinted down a side corridor, knowing exactly where they were headed. A scale mock up had been constructed with wooden planks and hessian cloth. Together they had ran rehearsals through the improvised prison again and again until they knew the layout like the palm of their hands.

Approaching the wing of the prison where the target was being held, two guards rounded around a juncture in the hallway. With AK-47 muzzles bearing down on them, one of the guards threw his hands in the air. The other reached for the revolver holstered on his hip just a second to late as one of the intruders butt stroked him across the cheek drawing blood and knocking the prison guard to the concrete floor.

“You too,” the attacker said to the remaining guard who had prudently surrendered. “On the fucking ground!”

Through the balaclava the guard could see the man's lips and edges of his eyes. He was the smaller of the two, also white, but his accent was not that of an Afrikaner. It was a strange voice like he had never heard before except maybe on television. American?

In seconds the gunmen had handcuffed the prison guards to a pipe sticking out from one of the nearby walls and were hurrying down the hall to complete their mission.

Turning another corner their boots thudded down the corridor towards the entrance to the wing that housed solitary confinement, usually reserved for those deemed to be too dangerous to be left in general population. However, there was also another type of prisoner consigned to solitary confinement. Political prisoners.

At the sliding barred metal gate that served as an entrance to solitary, a lone guard sat behind a desk half asleep. When he saw two men storming up to him with Kalashnikovs held at the ready he jolted awake, his heart rate suddenly skipping up well over a hundred beats a minute. Reaching for the pump-action shotgun laying across the desk a spray of 7.62 bullets shredded the wooden desktop, sending the shotgun spinning to the floor. The guard retracted his hand as it was now bleeding from several shrapnel wounds.

The larger assailant strode up to the guard and punched him in the face, toppling him over. No demands, just another obstacle to crush on the way to their objective.

Reaching for a key ring in his pocket, the shooter with the American accent produced a key, jammed it into the lock on the gate and turned it open. The key, and others, had been given to the operators several days prior by a guard who was currently off duty. The American had used some key impressioning techniques to make a copies before rushing the originals back to the prison before anyone noticed them missing. The door slid on it's rollers until it came to a stop with a loud *clang* that resonated throughout the solitary confinement wing.

Jogging down the hall, prisoners reached through the bars of their cells attempting to catch hold of the would be jail breakers. They screamed and shouted in a half dozen languages and dialects. The cells themselves were empty cement cubes with a lone slop bucket provided. It was no wonder that they begged to be released. Most of them looked malnourished, some looked positively sickly with boils across their skin and covered in feces.

In cell Twelve-Alpha they found their target, Josef Menzi.

Although it could be debated whether or not Josef was a psychopath, he was kept in solitary for purely political reasons. The ruling government, particularly the current President of the breakaway state of Ciskei, didn't want Josef spreading his political ideas among the other prisoners, afraid that it would lead to another coup attempt. It didn't help that the current President was also Josef's brother.

One by one, the various black ethnic groups were granted strategically located “black homelands”, Ciskei being one of them. The idea was purely Machiavellian on the part of the South African government. With black homelands granted, the rest of South Africa was reserved as a white Volkstaad by a matter of deduction. Besides, with the various black tribes split up into separate provinces it was even easier for the Apartheid-state to play them all off against each other.

With the fall of Rhodesia and the expansion of the communist menace, the South Africans weren't taking any chances. That was where Josef came in.

Frail and underweight from years of captivity, Josef looked up at the two white men as he sat with his back against the wall. Were they liberators or murderers? Hard to tell.

“Tell us your mother's name?” one of them said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. This one's accent was Australian, he was sure of it.

“You mother's name dickhead!” The other sounded American.

“Phelisa,” Josef croaked.

“Where were you born?” the American asked.

“Bisho.”

The American pulled a key ring, and quickly located the appropriate key while the larger Australian kept an eye out for armed guards. Swinging the barred door open, the para-military soldier reached in and helped Josef to his feet.

“You stay with me, you do what I do. If you so much as shit your pants without me giving you permission first and I will put a bullet in the back of your fucking head. Understand?”

Josef nodded.

What else could he do?

The next few minutes were a blur as the two black-clad gunmen half dragged, half carried Josef through the prison, shooting their way out as several guards gave a half hearted attempted to prevent them from escaping. After the quick exchange of gunfire, both guards threw down their weapons and made a run for it. Dieing was simply outside their pay-grade.

Walking right out the front door of Middledrift Prison, the three of them stood silently as police sirens sounded in the distance. Headlights flashed and a white van grinded to a halt in front of them. Flinging open the side door, the two commandos pushed Josef in and piled in behind him. Before they even had the door closed the driver stomped on the gas and accelerated down the street.

Making the first right hand turn they came to, a half dozen police cars missed them by a margin of several seconds as they skidded to a halt in front of the prison.

Josef was handcuffed, gagged, and blindfolded before being laid down on the floor of the van.

“Don't move,” Sean Deckard ordered the political dissident as he yanked off his balaclava.

“Are we clear?” Robin asked from the driver's seat.

“I think so,” James responded, tugging off his own mask. “It looks like we lost them.”

Sean dropped a half empty magazine from his AK, topping it off with a

fresh one from his chest rig. Golden light flashed through the van as Robin gunned it down a labyrinth of side streets. They had a long drive to their destination and he knew it was going to be an even longer night.

For years he'd been fighting one war after another. From Vietnam, to Laos, to Cambodia, Rhodesia, Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, and now in South Africa he plied the ancient trade of soldiering whenever and wherever he could but tonight would be different.

Tonight he was fighting to prevent a war from happening.

If he failed, the resulting genocide would make Mugabe's reign over Zimbabwe look like a walk in the park.

Holding on tight, Robin nearly balanced the van on two wheels as he rounded around a corner and sped off into the darkness.

Author's Note:

PROMIS: Rhodesia is not a historical document.

Although a huge amount of time was spent researching the material contained within, I could never hope to truly capture the sights, sounds, and smells of someone else's war. I tried to recreate the atmosphere and time period with general accuracy, however, certain dates have been adjusted for the purposes of plotting.

One of my primary goals with this novella is to introduce American readers to the Rhodesian Bush War and dispel a few myths. As recently as this year, Lord Owen spoke to the BBC making ludicrous claims that Rhodesian forces had no regard for civilian casualties. Worse yet, he continues to believe that supporting terrorist forces and their leaders such as Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo were justified because of the “racist” Rhodesian government that they were fighting against.

The Bush War was not a racial war, more blacks fought in the Rhodesian military than whites. While not perfect by the standards of modern liberal democracy, Rhodesia was perhaps Africa's best deal for both blacks and whites to this day. With political reform, the Rhodesian government could have made the transition to a multiracial government which was Prime Minister Ian Smith's policy objective to begin with.

Instead, the Western world acquiesced to communist-based terrorist groups and fed a small but vibrant democracy to the wolves. I don't have to justify this point of view, Robert Mugabe's nightmare regime is in of itself a frightening reminder that the likes of Lord Owen were, and are, simply detached from any kind of realistic political analysis.

With that, I would like to recommend some books and memoirs to those looking to read deeper into this subject matter and learn how it really was from those who where there.

Fire Force by Chris Cocks

The Bush War in Rhodesia by Dennis Croucamp
Three Cups of Gin by Tim Bax

The Silent War by Peter Stiff

Also, the forthcoming book, Viscount Down by former RhSAS member Keith Nell will finally tell the complete story of Viscount shoot downs by Nkomo's terrorist forces.