

PEGASUS CHRONICLES



Blood and Valor



PEGASUS CHRONICLES

Book Four — BLOOD and VALOR.

By DC Storm

THE PEGASUS CHRONICLES.

By DC Storm

Book Four -- Blood and Valor.

- Chapter 1. [Cetin NATO Base.](#)
- Chapter 2. [Hangar Four.](#)
- Chapter 3. [Test Flight.](#)
- Chapter 4. [Secret Training Flights.](#)
- Chapter 5. [Transferred.](#)
- Chapter 6. [Basic Training Redux.](#)
- Chapter 7. [The Boss!](#)
- Chapter 8. [The Score Keeper.](#)
- Chapter 9. [Capture the Flag.](#)
- Chapter 10. [Mr. Kelso.](#)
- Chapter 11. [Bad News.](#)
- Chapter 12. [New Sergeant.](#)
- Chapter 13. [Assistant Platoon Sergeant.](#)
- Chapter 14. [Mission to Ladapur.](#)
- Chapter 15. [BUSTED!](#)
- Chapter 16. [From Bad to Worst!](#)
- Chapter 17. [Medical Emergency.](#)
- Chapter 18. [A Lonely XMAS.](#)
- Chapter 19. [Return to Ladapur.](#)
- Chapter 20. [New Assignments.](#)
- Chapter 21. [Hospital Tribulation.](#)
- Chapter 22. [EXR Recovery Mission.](#)
- Chapter 23. [MIA.](#)
- Chapter 24. [Sheila.](#)
- Chapter 25. [The Soldier and Tiger.](#)
- Chapter 26. [An Ace.](#)

Copyright 2016

First Edition 2016

First Revision 2020

CHAPTER 1 -- Cetin NATO Base

Finally, the long noisy eight-hour flight was nearing its end; the huge cargo plane banked, and then Mike could hear landing gear lower out of its place in the belly of the large Airplane.

A few minutes later came a large bump followed by screeching tires, as the pre-spinning tires tried to match the groundspeed of the aircraft.

Next, the loud sound of reversing thrusters and breaks being applied.

For the next few minutes, Mike felt the Airplane slowly taxi to some unloading location.

Finally with a jerk, the aircraft had stopped and the engines whined down; they had arrived at Cetin NATO Military Base in Turkey.

With the need to take care of nature's business, Mike and the rest of the men couldn't wait to disembark.

Walking from the front of the plane, Sergeant Thorsen tells everyone, "You can unbuckle, stand up and work out any cramps you might have, but you're to remain where you are. In a few minutes the rear doors are going to open and you'll be able to disembark. And gentlemen—welcome to Cetin NATO Military Base, in the beautiful and friendly country of Turkey," he giggles and walks back to the front of the plane.

Fifteen minutes later with a loud whine, the large rear doors begin to part.

With a initial sliver of light starting to show in the center, the clamshell doors slowly swing open exposing more light until the entire interior is flooded with sunlight.

A staff Sergeant comes walking up to the open doors and commands, "Alright you fresh sand fleas and wood nymphs what ya' doin' in there? Get your sweet ass's out of there—on the double."

Mike gets up and hurries out of the back of the plane with his gear, thinking, "No—not basic again!"

The Sergeant, who was standing outside of the Airplane's open doors, commands, "Form up out here in four rows."

After Mike and the rest of the men from the Airplane have formed up into a Platoon, the Sergeant calls them to attention.

"Ok—FO O RWARD—MARCH," the Sergeant commands, and they start marching away from the aircraft; the Sergeant brings them to a halt in front of a big gray steel hangar.

The airport is rather large with fighters taking off and landing. Then two EXR Helicopters fly over and one of them lands next to another large gray steel hangar some distance away; a minute or so later the other one lands next to it.

Mike smiles to Brent, who's standing to Mike's right; Jerry is standing to Mike's left.

There are two more cargo planes parked on the tarmac; one is being unloaded with cargo on pallets by a forklift.

Then everyone's attention is turned to a procession of flagged draped coffins, each being carried by four soldiers dressed in class A uniforms; several are accompanied by an Officer.

The Sergeant noticing the men watching the funeral procession informs them, "Get a good look gentlemen, for that's one of three ways you'll be leaving this tour of duty."

"What's the other two ways Sarge?" Someone in the front row asked.

"One is when you complete your two year tour and walk out, and the other is being carried out on a stretcher and if you're really lucky, a wheelchair or crutches—any more questions?"

"Yeah Sarge. It was a long flight—I need to use the latrine," someone in the second row requested.

"There's a latrine in that hangar," said the Sergeant pointing to the nearby hangar, "Starting with the first row fall out—when they return the next row can go."

When the row, Mike was in, turn came, they hurried into the hangar; the inside of the hangar was huge, with two F30 Fighters parked side by side, on each side of a huge overhead door.

The latrine was on the other side of the Airplanes, and for Mike and the men, none to soon!

While Mike and his two friends waited for their turn, Brent asked, "I though Jerry and me were going to Incirlik—what's up with this?"

Both Mike and Jerry shrugged their shoulders, and then Mike said, "Maybe there's been a change in orders and you guys are stayin' here—wouldn't that be great?"

Jerry and Brent nodding, and then it was their turn to use the latrine.

When Mike's row returned to the Platoon, several soldiers using an aircraft-tug was unloading one of the Helicopters from the cargo plane they had arrived in.

As the cargo plane, now loaded with the coffins began to taxi out to the runway; Mike watched a bus pull up and stop.

“At ease,” the Sergeant commanded, “now listen up. In a few minutes, those of you who have orders for Incirlik NATO Military Base will re-board the aircraft in which you’ve just arrived. The rest of you start boarding that bus over there,” he turns and points to the waiting bus.

“Those boarding the bus—A T T E N N T I O N—F A L L O U T,” the Sergeant commands.

Mike grabs his duffle, whispers good-bye to his two friends and slings his duffle over his shoulder, grabs his civilian bag and leaves the Platoon along with several others and heads for the bus.

After finding a seat, Mike settles down and waits for the bus to start moving, and as he does, he looks over to the remaining men in the Platoon and sees them starting to march back to the cargo plane.

The doors on the bus finally close, and then the driver starts driving.

As the bus leaves the airport flight area, Mike looks back one last time and sees the men entering the Airplane in two columns.

The bus is now driving in the main part of the NATO Military Base and after a few more turns, the bus is moving down between large four story concrete buildings, which are barracks just like the ones at Fort Rucker; the bus slows and turns at a sign which reads, ‘19th Combat Brigade, 1st Battalion’.

The bus pulls onto a large asphalt parking lot and assembly area and stops in front of a building with a sign in front which reads, ‘127th HQ Company’.

The doors open and the Driver announced, “The One Twenty Seventh Headquarters Company.”

Mike gets up, grabs his duffle and civilian bags and steps off the bus; the doors close behind him.

Mike momentarily glances over his shoulder and sees he’s the only one getting off.

As the bus starts up and begins to pull away, Mike walks up to the large building and climbs the eight steps to the main double steel doors; opening the right door he enters.

Inside, Mike is in a stairwell and just ahead is another set of steel double doors; the left door is blocked open.

After passing through the doorway, Mike finds himself in a large corridor that runs to his left and right; in front of him is another set of double doors.

Just to the left of the doors is a bulletin board inside a glass case with a door; a placard at the top reads, '127 HQ MESS HALL'.

Inside the case attached to the bulletin board are three sheets of paper listing the menus for the day.

Another sign just to the left of the glass enclosed bulletin board is a directory.

Reading the directory, Mike learns the orderly room is in the corridor to his left and is the first door on his left.

Mike whispers with a sigh, "Well, that was easy," and walks over and into the orderly room.

The office has four desks with soldiers in neatly pressed green class 'B' uniforms (AFU's, Army Fatigue Uniform), working on computers.

A small hallway leads off from the back of the office; Mike notices four doors in that hallway.

Mike steps up to the desk with a placard that reads, 'SP5 STEVEN MEYERS, COMPANY CLERK', and reaches into his duffle bag and removes a sheet of paper containing his orders.

He clears his throat and announces, "Ahem—I'm Specialist Mike Troff," and hands him the sheet of paper.

Specialist Meyers looks up and sees Mike standing in front of him with extended hand holding the sheet of paper, he takes the paper and looks at it.

After quickly reading it he looks up and says, "Specialist Troff—welcome to the One Twenty-seventh," Mike nods.

Specialist Meyers starts typing on his keyboard, and when the monitors screen refreshes he says, "Your DD201 data disk please."

Mike retrieves the disk from its pocket on the duffle bag and hands it to him.

Taking the disk, Specialist Meyers inserts the disk into his computer and types some more, after more information is displayed, he types again.

This time a printer spits out a small card, Specialist Meyers grabs it and places in on the desk in front of Mike and tells him, "Here—sign it—this is your mess card. It authorizes you to eat in the mess hall—so, don't lose it."

Mike signs the card and puts it into his wallet.

Then Specialist Meyers types some more and the printer spits out two more cards, Specialist Meyers grabs them and hands them to Mike telling him, "These are for the front of your wall lockers."

Specialist Meyers types one last time, and then tells Mike, "You're assigned to the Second Platoon—Staff Sergeant Berkner is your Platoon

Sergeant and Second Lieutenant Grier is your Platoon Leader. The Company Commander is Major Higgins, the Executive Officer is Captain Freese and the First Sergeant is Fred Decker. Sergeant Berkner should be here in a few minutes to show you to your quarters. In the mean time you may have a seat over there,” he points to several chairs lined up against the wall behind Mike.

“Thanks,” says Mike and grabs his duffle and civilian bags, goes over and sits down to wait.

Ten minutes later, a short burly Staff Sergeant walks in and up to the Clerk’s desk and asks, “You paged?”

“Yes Sergeant Berkner—a new EXR Tech for ya’,” replies the Clerk and hands the sergeant a copy of Mike’s orders, and then points to Mike.

Sergeant Berkner takes the paper, looks at the page, turns and looks at Mike asking, “You Michael Troff?”

Mike gets up nodding with, “Yes Sergeant.”

“Ok then—follow me Specialist Troff and I’ll show you to your quarters.”

Mike grabs his duffle and civilian bags and follows the sergeant out of the office.

Once in the corridor, Sergeant Berkner tells Mike, pointing to his left, “At the far end is an Auditorium for company lectures and training. The rest of the corridor at this end is dedicated to S1 to S4 for the One Twenty-seventh and the One Twenty-sixth Support Companies.”

Turning to point down the opposite end, Sergeant Berkner says, “That end of the corridor houses the Quartermaster at the end, a small infirmary on the left and a small library on the right; there’s also a reading room in the basement along with a game room, laundry room, computer room, exercise room, snack bar, video theater and a social room—now follow me.”

Mike shook his head in disbelief at the number of available activities and follows the sergeant to the stairwell; once in the stairwell, the sergeant starts up the steps.

Upon reaching the first floor landing, they leave the stairwell, go through a set of double steel doors, and are in another long corridor with closed doors lining both sides except for two, which are open; there are two latrines, next to each other.

Sergeant Berkner points to his left and tells him, “That side belongs to the First Platoon—our Platoon is this way,” and he leads Mike down the

right side.

As the sergeant is walking, he says, “The first and second squad rooms are on the left and the third and fourth squad rooms are on the right. You already saw where the latrine is. I’m assigning you to the second squad, so—your room is near the far end of the corridor.”

Mike couldn’t believe it; this place was more like a college dorm than a barracks.

As Mike follows the sergeant, he counts nine doors on one side and eight on the other side.

Finally arriving at the second door from the far end, Sergeant Berkner announced, “Here we are—your new home,” getting a key from his pocket, he inserts it into the door and opens it.

Motioning with his hand for Mike to enter, Mike enters followed by Sergeant Berkner.

Mike finds the room rather spacious with a window covered by Venetian blinds; a table and two chairs are just below.

There are two bunks on the same side of the room with two nightstands with lamps separating them.

Two large steel wall lockers with two doors, similar to those Mike had at Fort Rucker, are located on the wall opposite the beds; a mirror and sink with hot and cold running water is located behind a wall next to where they entered the room.

Sergeant Berkner tells Mike as he hands him the key, “Here—don’t lose it or you’ll be spending the night in the hallway. One last thing before I take you down to get your bedding and that is, reveille is at o-five-hundred, mess hall opens at o-six-hundred, first formation of the day is at o-eight-hundred, there’s a second formation at thirteen-hundred. Ok—follow me and I’ll take you down to the Quartermaster.”

Mike leaves his two bags next to the first bunk nearest the door; that one was vacant, and then he follows the sergeant out of the room.

Mike followed Sergeant Berkner into the Quartermaster Supply Room and up to the counter; a Buck Sergeant was sitting at a desk typing on a computer terminal and an Sp4 was at the counter typing on another terminal.

Sergeant Berkner laid Mike’s orders on the countertop saying, “Sergeant Derrick—a new man for ya’—he need’s bedding.”

“Does he now—what’s your name Specialist?” Sergeant Derrick asked, getting up from his chair and walking over to where Mike and Sergeant

Berkner are standing.

“Troff—Sergeant,” Mike replies looking down at his uniform nametag and thinking, “like Duh!”

“I can see that,” Sergeant Derrick gruffly says, turning the page around so he can read it, “your full name—Specialist.”

“Michael Anthony Troff—Sergeant,” Mike tells him, snappy like.

As Sergeant Derrick slides the sheet of paper containing Mike orders to the Sp4, Sergeant Berkner tells Mike, “I’ve got business elsewhere—you know the way back to your room. So, I’ll be seeing you later.”

Looking at Sergeant Derrick, Sergeant Berkner kindly tells him, “Catch ya’ later Lester,” and walks out of the Supply Room.

Meanwhile the Sp4 reads Mike’s orders and types on the terminal, and then a printer issues a page.

Sergeant Derrick goes over and grabs the printed sheet while the Sp4 walks to the back room.

Sergeant Derrick places the page on the countertop in front of Mike and tells him, “Sign here for the bedding.”

As Mike is signing the form, the Sp4 arrives with an armload of sheets, a blanket, and a pillow with a pillowcase on top and places them on the countertop next to Mike.

“Linen exchange is Monday morning at o-seven-hundred—any questions?” Sergeant Derrick asked, eyeing Mike.

“Yeah—will I need to stop here when I process in?”

Sergeant Derrick shook his head telling him, “Nope—already taken care of—you’re part of the family now until you leave...”

“Yeah—I know—by either walking out or get carried out in a box or on a stretcher—I heard it before,” said Mike interrupting.

“Are you being smart with me—Specialist?” Sergeant Berrick asked in a threatening tone.

“No—sorry Sergeant,” Mike quickly apologizing, grabs his bedding and walks out.

Back in his room, Mike fills out the two cards for his wall lockers and inserts them into the nameplate holders on both wall locker doors; he then makes his bed, flipping a quarter to be sure its tight to pass muster.

Noticing a small alarm clock on the other nightstand is indicating ten to five in the afternoon, and feeling famished, Mike decides to head to the mess hall; after all, it has been a while since he had that MRE on the flight over here.

When Mike arrives at the mess hall doors, he finds the doors are still closed and a line has already formed outside along the wall.

Mike steps in behind the last man, and soon another man steps in behind him.

Within the next five minutes, the line has grown to extend all the way to the Quartermaster's door; then at five o'clock the doors to the mess hall open and everyone starts filing in.

When Mike reaches the mess doors, he hears the sound of a bus pulling up and stopping, a minute or two later large groups of men hurriedly enter the building; some take the stairs to the upper floors, and others get into the mess line.

Noticing the procedure to enter the mess hall is the same as that of Fort Rucker, Mike gets his mess card out, and when he arrives where ID's are checked, he shows his mess card and is allowed to enter.

Grabbing a tray and placing it on the serving line, he then slides it to where the knives, forks and spoons are located; he takes one of each and finally a large round white china plate.

Reaching the first serving station, Mike receives a large thick slice of ham with thick pineapple sauce containing large chunks of pineapple being poured over it.

The next station was a large scoop of au gratin potatoes, followed by a dark warm bun.

At the desert station, Mike selects a large slice of chocolate pie with a dollop of whip cream.

At the end of the serving line, Mike takes several pads of butter and moves to the milk and water dispensers, where he takes two glasses; one he fills with cold milk, and the other with ice and water.

With tray in hand, Mike walks over to a table with four chairs at the back of the room; setting the tray on the table, he slides onto the chair and pauses rubbing his stomach as he looks at the feast before him, and then he's ready to dig in.

As Mike eats, he observes the mess hall filling with talkative men and women; soon the mess hall is a loud noisy place.

Then a couple of men walk up and ask if they can sit, Mike nods and they seat themselves.

The two men, Sp5's, began talking between themselves, ignoring Mike as he silently finishes his meal; after drinking the last of his milk and taking a last swig of water, Mike gets up and heads to the disposal window where he slides the tray through.

Alone, Mike walks out of the mess hall, stomach full and heads for the stairwell.

When Mike enters his room, the other wall locker door is open, but no one is there.

Mike begins unloading his duffle and setting up his military wall locker. About forty minutes later, the door opens and in walks two men laughing and talking.

When they see Mike, they both stop laughing and stare, with Mike staring back.

As both men look at each other, wondering who this guy is, Mike extends his hand and introduces himself, "I'm Mike Troff—I just arrived and you guys are?"

"I'm Kurt Bolland from next door," says the taller of the two, pointing to the room on the other side of the wall, and then he takes Mike's out held hand and shakes.

"Harry Derry—I'm your room mate," says the other raising both hands, and then he also shakes Mike's hand.

After shaking Mike's hand, Harry goes over to his wall locker closes the door to his military locker and opens the civilian side.

When the door is wide open, Mike notices he doesn't have much for civilian clothes.

Harry grabs his laptop computer and goes over and puts it on the table.

Mike asks, pointing to Derry's civilian wall locker, "You sure don't have much for civilian clothes—aren't we allowed to wear em'?"

"Sure—but what's the point," Harry replies, "you're not allowed to wear em' off the Base. The only place they let you wear civvies is in the barracks and to Base Mall."

Harry opens the computer and sits down in front of it and begins typing.

"Any emails?" Kurt asks.

"I'm checkin' now," Harry replies.

"We're allowed to have computers?" Mike asks.

"Yeah—most of the guys in the outfit own em'," Harry replies looking at Mike, "it's the only way to keep from going insane around here.

"How so?" Mike asks.

"I use mine for entertainment and to keep in contact with my family and friends back home," says Harry smiling and Kurt nodding.

"So—you can connect to the internet here?" Mike asked.

“Yeah—the whole barracks is a hot spot,” Harry tells him, “there’s a server with movies and music in the computer room down in the basement and the main file and email servers are in S2 and they’re connected to the main data center on the Base. Both require passwords and ID’s to use. But watch what you type or where you go on the Internet, because Army Intelligence is monitoring the connections. Excuse me I’ve got a couple of emails from home.”

“You have one too?” Mike asks Kurt.

“Naaa—not yet,” Kurt replied shaking his head, “but, as soon as my parents send me the cash, I’m going to buy one. Got my eyes on a HP in the Commissary on Base Mall.”

“Don’t you guys go into Diyarbakir or do some sight seeing?” Mike asks with a smile, both Harry and Kurt stared expressionless at Mike!

“No one leaves the Base without being armed and in groups of four, unless you want to go home in a box,” Kurt bluntly tells Mike matter-of-factly; Mike just looks back aghast.

“So—if one doesn’t have a computer, where can one go to send or receive a email?” Mike asks.

“Down in the computer room—but there’s only eight stations, so it’s first come, first serve,” Kurt replies, and then he announces, “speaking of email—I need to go down and check mine—I’ll catch you two later—tut-ta,” and he walks out of the room; Mike goes back to unpacking and setting up his wall lockers.

After reading his email, Harry writes a reply to each and when he had finished, he starts surfing the web.

It was after nine when Mike finished with his wall lockers and inquired, “So—what do you do for excitement around here if you can’t go off Base?”

Harry looked up from the computer screen and replied, “Well—you can go down in the basement. There’s a Game Room, Snack Bar, Video Theater, and a Social Room or—you can go to the Base Mall. There’s an arcade, and a amusement park along with a Wendy’s, McDonalds and a theater. On weekends there’s the USO—if you’re into that.”

“All the comforts of home—huh,” Mike remarked; Harry just looked at Mike expressionless.

“So—where’s the shop where we fix the Helicopters?” Mike asks.

“In hangar four,” came the reply.

“Hangar four—where’s that?”

“Tomorrow you’ll find out,” says Harry.

“Tomorrow I’ll be processing in,” Mike tells him.

“You already have.”

“I have—when?” Mike asked, confused.

“When you handed your data disk to the company clerk,” Harry tells him.

“Huh—no forms to sign—nothing to update?” Mike asked looking non-plussed.

“Nope—unless you’re needed to update something, like a signature, shots, get uniforms or gear. Then you’ll be call out at the morning formation,” Harry explaining.

“I’m getting some more uniforms?” Mike asked looking surprised; Harry glances at Mike’s still open military wall locker and says, “Nope—you’re fine.”

“By the way—if no one told you,” says Harry, “green AFU’s are the uniform we wear in the shop—unless you’re going out with a Pilot for a test flight—then its flight suit and helmet. But, don’t leave the Base—if you do—you’ll need to wear the desert ACU’s (Army Combat Uniform) with full combat gear.”

“What time is lights out around here?”

“There isn’t any official time per se,” Harry replies, “but with reveille at o-five-hundred its best to hit the sack by twenty-two-hundred.”

Mike nods with, “Yeah, sure—fine with me.”

Mike goes and closes his wall lockers and announces, “Think I’ll go down and check out the basement.”

Harry glances up from the laptop and nods.

Mike walks out of the room and down the hallway to the stairwell.

Taking the stairs all the way to the bottom, Mike finds the hallway down here noisy and busy; there are men and women walking up and down the hall, popping in and out of rooms on either side.

Mike turns to his right and walks down the hall to the door with a blue sign that reads, ‘GAME ROOM’, opens the door and enters; inside, he finds ping-pong and pool tables in the center of the room.

Arranged around the perimeter are pinball and arcade machines.

The place is crowded with every machine being played; all four pool tables and both ping-pong tables have players, so Mike leaves and walks over to the card and chess tables, and off to one side there’s a roulette wheel.

Mike walks around the room observing men and women playing poker, blackjack, cribbage, and hearts.

After spending ten minutes watching two men playing chess, Mike heads over to the roulette wheel and watches several men and two women placing bets with poker chips and spinning the wheel.

After getting bored, Mike walks out of the Game Room, heads to his right and the next door; this room's sign reads, 'LAUNDRY ROOM'.

In this room, which smelled of chlorine bleach and detergent, Mike found six washing machines along one wall, and six large dryers on the other wall.

At the far wall were detergent and bleach dispensers; two long tables were in the center of the room for folding clothes.

Two women and three men were busy doing their laundry.

Satisfied with having found where to do his laundry, Mike exits and goes to the door across the hall with the sign that reads, 'EXERCISE ROOM'.

After opening the door, Mike discovers the room is filled with exercise bikes, treadmills and weight lifting equipment.

Not spending anytime in here, Mike quickly leaves mumbling to himself, "That's the last thing I need," and heads back down the hall to the doors leading to the stairwell.

Going to the door just beyond the Social Room with a sign that reads, 'READING ROOM', he opens the door and goes inside.

In this room, Mike finds a bookcase filled with paperback books.

Right next to the bookcase was a case with lots of magazines.

Tables with padded chairs and lamps were neatly arranged about the room; several of the tables were occupied with men reading or studying; Mike quietly walked over to look at the magazines.

After spending some time paging through several interesting ones, he quietly walked out of the room.

The sign on the door across the hall told him it was the Latrine.

Not needing to go there, Mike turned and headed back down the hall to room he previously skipped, the company's Social Room; out of curiosity, Mike entered.

In here, Mike found men and women sitting on sofas and recliners watching a large screen TV and talking in whispers, the program was in a foreign language with English subtitles; Mike shook his head and walked out of the room.

With three doors left to explore, Mike chose the one next to the reading room, which its sign read, 'COMPUTER ROOM'.

With a smile gracing his face and with expectation, Mike enters and finds eight enclosed workstations; all but one of the workstations was occupied.

Mike walked over to the one unoccupied workstation, sat down and quickly found he needed to supply a log-on Id and a password of which he had neither, so in disgust, he got up and was mumbling to himself as he walked out of the room, "First thing tomorrow, gotta' find out how to get on the network."

With two doors remaining, Mike pointed at the door across the hall, and walked over and reached for the handle; the sign on this door read, 'VIDEO THEATER'.

When Mike opened the door, he found the room dimly lit; a huge light gray screen almost covered the far wall and in front, there were several rows of padded seats.

Mike closed the door, turned, and headed for the remaining door which was already open; it was the snack room.

This room was filled with all sorts of vending machines along both sides of the room; on the back wall, there was a counter with drawers beneath, and on top, several microwave ovens for heating food.

Three round tables with five chairs were staggered in the middle of the room for eating the food from the machines; one of the tables had two men eating ice cream.

Mike walked over and examined what the machines had to offer and found one had a large cheeseburger, the sight of which made him hungry.

After buying the cheeseburger and a soda, Mike put the cheeseburger into the microwave; a minute or two later, he was seated at one of the tables enjoying himself.

Now with a full stomach and being nearly eleven o' clock, Mike headed back to his room on the first floor.

When Mike entered his room, the only light that was on was the small florescent above the sink and mirror which cast a dim shadow into the room.

Mike's roommate was already in bed, lying on his side under his blanket with his back towards the dim light, his head buried deep in his pillow and snoring softly.

Mike quietly went over to his bed, turned down the covers and begun to undress.

Finally, in only his under garments Mike crawls into his bed, pulls the

covers over him, lays his head onto the pillow and closes his eyes; shortly Mike is asleep.

CHAPTER 2 -- Hanger Four.

Mike awoke with a startle to the sound of very loud bugle playing reveille and thinking he was back in Basic Training.

A minute later, someone opens his door, reached in, and flips the light switch on next to the door; Mike's room becomes brilliantly lit.

Forgetting where he is, Mike pulls the blanket over his head and grumpily mumbles, "I thought I took care of that!"

"Took care of what?" Came the question from Mike's right; Mike's lying on his back with his head covered by the blanket is surprised and opens his eyes at the sound of the strange voice.

Then it dawns on him, he's in Turkey and replies, "Nothing."

Harry throws his blanket off, slides over and sits on the edge of his bed, slips into his shower sandals, goes over to his wall locker and opens the civilian side.

Grabbing a bath towel and shaving kit he closes the locker door and starts for the door, saying, "Troff—you better get your butt in gear there's lots to do and the mess hall opens at six."

"Yeah, yeah—I hear you," Mike replies in a grumpy tone.

Harry walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Mike throws the blanket off, slides over and sits on the edge of his bed and slips into his shower sandals.

Mike stretches and yawns, gets up, goes over to his roommate's nightstand and looks at the clock sitting there; it indicates 5:10 am.

Mike shakes his head, walks over to his wall locker, opens the civilian side, grabs a bath towel, his shaving bag and heads for the door.

Twenty minutes later, Mike walks back into the room; his roommate is already there in green AFU's making his bed.

Mike puts his shaving kit in his civilian locker and stuffs the used towel in his laundry bag.

Mike opens his military locker, grabs a set of green AFU's and puts them on.

After putting on his boot's he begins to make his bed while Harry starts getting their room in order.

Just as Mike finishes with his bed, a knock on the door, Harry tells whom ever it is to enter.

A SP5 enters and says, “I’ve been told I’ve got a new squad member in here,” he spots Mike, as Mike straightens up from making his bed.

The SP5 walks over to Mike with hand extended and introducing himself, “I’m Greg Coffman—your Squad Leader—Hi.”

Mike takes his hand and returns the introduction, “I’m Mike Troff,” and they shake.

“When you get back from chow, our squad has the hallway to clean--up to the stairwell. Each week we rotate with the other squads to get the place in shape. Next week we’ll have the latrine. Of all the details—that’s the worst, outside of the laundry room in the basement. The rooms in the basement are divided between all four platoons and each platoon sends two squads. Our Platoon has the Social and Reading rooms plus the Stairwell from the ground all the way to the top floor,” says Coffman.

“Why do we get the stairwell?” Mike asked.

“Because we got the two easiest rooms, so they gave us the stairwell.

I imagine you were informed about linen change on Mondays—any questions?” Coffman asks; Mike shook his head.

“Fine—I’ll see you at the o-eight-hundred formation,” Coffman told him with a grin, and then he walked out of the room with Mike standing there watching him leave.

Mike and Harry spend the next twenty minutes getting their room in order.

At six o’ clock they head for the mess hall on the main floor for breakfast.

Returning from the mess-line with loaded trays, Mike and Harry locate a table, sit down and start eating.

A few minutes later, two more SP4’s walk up and say, “Hey Derry—can we join you?”

“Sure—be my guest.”

“Who’s the new troop?” One of the new arrivals asks as he sits down.

“Hi—I’m Mike Troff,” Mike introducing himself.

“He’s rooming with me,” says Harry, “he’s replacing Goodman.”

“I’m Kurt Bolland and...”

“Hi--I’m Travis Rozman,” said the second new arrival, breaking in with a big grin and offering his hand across the table to Mike; Mike takes his hand and they shake.

“So—you’re the one replacing Goodman—too bad about Goodman,” said Bolland with a sigh.

“How so?” Mike asked looking at Kurt with an inquisitive expression.

“Never made it back from his test flight,” Kurt solemnly replied.

“Pilot never made it back either,” Travis added, and then forked a piece of syrup soaked hotcake into his mouth.

Mike looked at the two men with a stunned expression, and then he asked, “What—they’re both dead?”

All three men nod, and then Kurt explained, “We’ve been loosing Helicopters and men south of here near Mardin and Viranshir. They’re not after the Helicopters per se, but when we get there, the aircraft is stripped of armaments and our guy’s are dead—killed. Funny thing—nothing else is removed—no avionics or Helicopter electronics, like the main computer. The only thing they take is the guns, rocket launchers and the ammo. And get this—they don’t even destroy the Helicopter—it’s still intact! Talk about a bunch of stupid sand fleas.”

Mike looks at them with credulous curiosity and asks, “So, what do we do--haul the Helicopters back?”

“Yeah—and looks like you’re going to be the one putting it back together,” says Harry giggling; Mike gives him an incredulous stare.

They finish breakfast and after disposing the trays, they head back upstairs to their barracks.

It was nearly eight o’clock when Mike and his squad finished cleaning the hallway to the stairwell; a squad from the First Platoon cleaned the other end of the hallway.

Mike sat in a chair at the table in his room talking to Harry until it was time to fall out.

At eight sharp, a loud bell rang in the hallway, Mike and Harry got up, slid the chairs neatly next to the table and hurried out of their room; Harry closing and locking the door as he left.

The entire company stood in formation as roll was taken and daily information given.

As Mike stood at attention he heard a bus pull in behind them with the sounds of air breaks being applied as the bus stopped.

Finally, command was handed down to the Platoon Sergeants to take charge and carryout the day’s assignments.

As each Platoon dispersed to their duty stations, Mike’s Platoon started to board the waiting bus.

Mike followed his Squad onto the bus, finding a seat next to Travis, he sits down; the Platoon Sergeant sits in the seat reserved for him, behind the driver.

Once the bus starts moving, Mike asked Travis, “Where are we going?”
“To work—where else would we be heading?”

“Where’s that?” Mike asked.

“Across base to the airfield and our repair shops,” Travis replied.

“Shops?” Said Mike with a questioning expression.

“Yeah—Hangars four and five,” said Travis, as the bus turns a corner and pulls up to a large building with three large over head doors and a regular door off to one side.

A high fence topped with barbed wire ran from one side of the building and enclosed a large parking lot filled with an assortment of cars, utility vehicles, and trucks.

The bus stops in front of the large building and the doors open; eight men disembark and enter the building.

Mike notices a large sign on the side of the building next to the door where the men entered; it reads, ‘12th NATO MOTOR SUPPORT UNIT’.

Mike turns to Travis while pointing to the building and is about to speak, when Travis tells him, “Yeah—our motor heads. The outfit is made up of US Air Force mechanics; our guys, a few Brits, and some French supply guys. They fix the bases trucks, cars and such,” Mike nods as the bus starts moving again.

A few minutes later, the bus pulls up to large building complex of two very tall wide gray hangars with a large single story blue building between them; the large building adjoins both hangars.

As the air breaks hiss and the bus comes to a halt, Travis grabs the back of the seat in front of him and says, “Here we are—time to get off,” and gets up; Mike also gets up as well as everyone remaining on the bus.

The doors open and everyone disembarks and heads to the door in the center of the single story blue building.

As Mike walks to the building he notices a sign mounted to the building which reads, ‘127th EXR & CXA HELICOPTER SUPPORT UNIT. 19th Combat Brigade, 1st Battalion’.

Mike points to the sign and is about to speak, when Travis says, “Yeah—both EXR’s and CXA’s are repaired here, EXR’s in hangar 4 on your left and CXA’s in hangar 5 on your right. C’m—let’s go inside.”

Platoon Sergeant Berkner was waiting for Mike as he entered the blue building; he pulled Mike aside as Travis and the rest of the Platoon went over to a large badge rack and removed their badges.

Then after they pin the badge to their uniform pocket, they separated; some of the men walked through the door with the sign, 'HANGAR 5', and the rest entering the door with the sign, 'HANGAR 4'.

As Travis walked through the Hangar 4 door, Sergeant Berkner said, "This is a secured area and no one is allowed beyond this room without proper identification—an ID badge," he goes over and gets his badge, and shows it to Mike; Mike nods saying, "Just like in school—huh."

"Yeah—right Kid—just like when you went through training," said Sergeant Berkner, "so—until you get your own—in a few days—you need to get temporary access and we'll do that now—so follow me."

Then Sergeant Berkner leads Mike to a door next to the Hangar 4 door; this door had a sign on it that read, 'HANGAR 4 SECURITY'.

Sergeant Berkner pushes a red button next to the door, several seconds later a click is heard, and then Sergeant Berkner opens the door.

Upon entering, Mike finds two desks with a Buck Sergeant wearing a white MP armband sitting at one desk and a Corporal wearing a white MP armband sitting at the second desk, watching a wall full of monitors displaying the inside of the hangar and the tarmac outside; the Buck Sergeant was at a computer terminal.

Mike and Sergeant Berkner walk up and stop in front of the desk with the seated Buck Sergeant.

"Sergeant—I have a new man and he needs access to the shop," says Sergeant Berkner, the Buck Sergeant takes his eyes from the monitor and looks at both men standing in front of him; eyeing first Sergeant Berkner and then fixing his gaze on Mike.

"Your full name Specialist?" The Buck Sergeant asked.

"Michael Anthony Troff."

"Your service number?"

"US09999981253," said Mike. After the Buck Sergeant had entered all of the information, he waits for the monitor to refresh with Mike's profile; after examining the displayed information, he opens a drawer and extracts a blue badge with a large 'T' and small 'C'.

Inserting it into a slot on a small machine next to the computer, he types on the keyboard and then waits until a message is displayed on the monitor; once the message appears, he removes the badge and hands it to Mike telling him, "This is your temporary access keycard until yours arrives in a few days. To enter the service area, just swipe the card through the reader at the door. That card will give you access to any authorize area."

Mike takes the badge and clips it to his uniform shirt pocket, and then he and Sergeant Berkner walks out of the security office.

At the 'HANGAR 4' door, Sergeant Berkner swipes his card through a small card reader mounted next to the door; a metallic click was heard and Sergeant Berkner opens the door and walks through.

Now it was Mike's turn, he repeated the same procedure that he'd just saw Sergeant Berkner do; Mike heard another metallic click and he opens the door and walks through.

When Mike entered the service area, it was huge with a very high steel roof with banks of suspended fluorescent fixtures illuminating the entire area.

Along one wall, there were six repair bays with EXR Helicopters in each and at different stages of repair; a single man worked in each of the bays.

An enclosed tool room was next to the entry door and extended to another door; a sign on the door indicated it was a locker room and a latrine.

Just beyond the locker room door were two rows of document lockers with a large blue sign mounted to the end of each row which read, 'CONFIDENTIAL' in big blue bold letters; Mike figured this is where the manuals are kept.

On the other side of the confidential document lockers, there was yet another door, and the sign on this door read, 'PARTS ROOM'; two more repair bays extended from the parts room door to the back of the service area.

At the far end of the service, area there was a huge overhead door.

Sergeant Berkner was waiting when Mike entered the service area and ordered, "Follow me Troff and I'll show you around," and walks into the service area, motioning with his finger for Mike to follow.

So, Mike follows Sergeant Berkner as he proceeds down the center of the service area; pointing to the Tool Room first and telling Mike he'll need his keycard to gain access, and he must sign for any power tools or test instruments he removes.

Arriving at the locker room Sergeant Berkner leads Mike inside, where he shows Mike the lockers.

"This is where you change into your flight suit and clean up—you'll get a flight suit when you go on your first test flight. Now select anyone of the unused lockers with a yellow light," said Sergeant Berkner pointing to several lockers with yellow lights on card readers mounted to one side of the doors.

When Mike opens one of the unused lockers with the small yellow light Sergeant Berkner tells him, “The yellow light means that locker doesn’t have a code to secure it. To set your code, close the door and swipe your keycard through the reader, that will install your keycard code and lock the door. To unlock the door you must use your keycard, and you must use your keycard to lock the door. So, before you leave, make sure your locker door is locked and the red light is on—just closing it will not lock it—you must use your keycard to lock it—so don’t forget and never leave with the green light on. Ok—now set your key-code into your locker.”

Mike closed the door and then he swiped his keycard through the reader, the yellow light turned red; Mike tried to open the door and found it securely locked.

“Now try your keycard and see if it will unlock,” Sergeant Berkner told him.

Mike swiped the keycard y through the reader and the red light turned green.

Mike tried to open the door and it opened; the green light went out.

“Good—now close the door and re-lock it,” Sergeant Berkner told him.

Mike closed the door and the green light came back on.

Mike swiped his keycard through the reader and the red light came back on, and when he tried to open it, he couldn’t.

“Now the only other way to open your locker or erase the code is to use an administrators keycard,” says Sergeant Berkner.

After pointing to where the latrine is, they leave the locker room and were now next to the confidential document lockers.

Sergeant Berkner leads Mike down between the two rows of confidential document lockers and stops at the last set.

Mike noticed these lockers also had card readers with colored lights on them as well.

Sergeant Berkner pointed to a document locker with a large black numeral 7 on it and said, “This will be your document locker and it corresponds to the repair bay you’ll be working in. Like you just did in the locker room, swipe your keycard and set your key-code into your document locker.”

Mike does as he’s told and the yellow light goes out, but when Mike tried to open it, he couldn’t.

Looking at Sergeant Berkner, Mike said shrugging his shoulders, “It didn’t work—now what do I do?”

“You just set your key-code in it—stupid!” Sergeant Berkner exclaimed, “Now swipe your keycard again.”

So, Mike swiped his keycard a second time the light turned green and he was able to open the document locker; when he looked inside, he found several manuals similar to the ones he’d used in the EXR tech-school.

Satisfied, he closed the locker door and before he had a chance to swipe his keycard to lock the locker, Sergeant Berkner pointed at the reader and issued a warning, “Now swipe your keycard and lock the document locker. Don’t ever get caught with your document locker being left open and unattended, otherwise it’s an article fifteen and loss of your security clearance, and then you’ll be transfer to a combat company—you get my drift?”

Mike nods and swipes his keycard and the green light turns red; Mike tries the door to be sure it’s locked, just to be on the safe side, followed by a big grin from Sergeant Berkner.

As they start walking, Sergeant Berkner points to yet another door and tells Mike, “Parts Room. Don’t need to take you in there, because the only time you need to go in there is to pickup parts you’ve ordered.”

There also was a sign on the door that read, ‘PARTS ROOM’.

Sergeant Berkner led Mike past two more repair bays and stopped at the huge overhead door which was closed.

Pointing to a control box on the wall next to the door with two large black buttons with an up and down arrows molded into them, he said, “There’s three ways to open this door. One way is in here by pushing either of these two buttons. The second way is by using your keycard and pushing similar buttons from the other side, and the third way, is by using the intercom on the other side and having the security person on duty, in the room we were earlier, open the door for you. And—oh yeah—the big red button is for stopping the door—there’s one on the other side as well--any questions?”

Mike shook his head, and then Sergeant Berkner led him into the nearby repair bay; there was an EXR Helicopter sitting there waiting to be repaired.

They stopped in front of a computer workstation sitting on end of the workbench; a printer sat next to it.

“This is bay 7 and where you’re going be working,” said Sergeant Berkner.

Mike quickly glanced around and noticed the clean workbench, with a row of drawers and below them several sets of doors; a stool was stored in one of two openings between the sets of doors.

An air hose was hanging from a big red reel above the light fixture just above the Helicopter.

A set of tanks and hoses for gas welding was setting next to the wall at the far end of the workbench.

Sergeant Berkner said, “You’ll find hand tools and jigs for working on the aircraft in the drawers and behind the doors. Any power tools and test equipment you’ll need must be obtained from the Tool Room. Ok—now let’s get you logged onto the workstation.”

Mike got the stool, placed it in front of the workstation, sat down and asked, “Ok—now what?”

“I’ve already set up an account for you and your log-on Id is, ‘MAT7’ and your temporary password is your service number, which you’ll be asked to change before you can continue. You’ll be required to change your password every thirty days—Ok, go ahead and login,” Mike logged in and when told to change his password, he did.

Sergeant Berkner then told Mike, “Time you spend working on a Helicopter and the parts you replace are all entered on this workstation—you can even order parts as well, but you must pick those parts up in the Parts Room. The system is simple and menu-driven. You can spend the rest of the day getting familiar with the workstation, if you need any help—ask one of the other techs. Your first job is the Helicopter behind you—see ya’ later,” he pats Mike on the shoulder, smiles and walks out of the repair bay and heads towards the other end of the hangar.

Mike spent the next hour learning his way around the workstation; with his expertise with computers, it didn’t take long to figure out how the system functioned.

At 10:00 AM a loud horn sounded taking Mike by surprise, he logged off and when he walked pass the Helicopter, he saw everyone sitting down with cups of coffee at a long table in front of the document lockers; Mike walked over and found a seat and sat down next to Harry, his roommate. Travis sat across from Mike and Wade Harris settled down on Mike’s left.

After taking a sip of coffee he turns to Mike and says, “So, you’re Goodman’s replacement?”

“Yeah—I guess. Say, what is this—social hour?”

“Yeah—we get a fifteen minute brake at ten and another at three,” Wade replies, “mess is from twelve to one—of course you knew that,” Mike nods his head.

“Say—if you want a cup of Joe,” said Travis, “the pot is over there so help yourself,” pointing to the coffeepot sitting on the counter next to Tool Room.

“Thanks, but I’m not much of a coffee drinker,” says Mike.

“There’s a pop and snack machine out where we came in,” said Greg Coffman their Squad Leader; Mike nods again.

“Well—after break I’ve got a test flight,” Matt Monty tells everyone with a sigh, “wish me luck—I hope I make it back—I don’t wanta’ end up like Goodman. Going home in a box is a real bummer.”

“You’ll be fine—you’ve got the best EXR Pilot in Squadron flying. Just be sure she’s fully armed before you takeoff,” Greg reassuring him; Mike looks at Matt with a pondering expression.

“Speaking of Goodman—I hear you’ve got his aircraft to put back together,” said Greg turning to look at Mike.

“Yeah—she’s a real mess—all chopped up—good luck with that one,” Travis remarking.

“If you need any help or advice, —don’t be afraid to ask,” Greg tells Mike.

“Thanks—I just might do that if she’s in that bad of shape,” says Mike with a nod.

“At least you won’t have to worry about going out for awhile, but don’t take to long—your judged by how well and how quickly you can complete the job,” Matt told Mike matter-of-factly.

“How do you mean?” Mike asked looking perplexed.

“It’s this way,” Matt starts explaining, “that aircraft you’re taking your old sweet time on is assigned to a Pilot, and if its being repaired he’s grounded and not racking up kills towards becoming an Ace. So, the quicker you can get him back in the air the happier he’ll be and he’ll want you to do all of his repairs—thus guaranteeing you a permanent spot in the shop. If you’re causing him to lie around a lot—he’ll be looking for another tech, and you’ll be headin’ down the road.”

Mike stared at him with a worried expression.

Wade patted Mike on the back telling him in a effort to relieve his anxiety, “Don’t worry—you just arrived and the Helicopter you’re working on isn’t assigned to anyone—at least not yet,” then the horn blew and everyone got up.

After disposing of the used coffee cups, everyone except Matt walked back to their repair bays; he went into the locker room to change into his flight suit.

While he was changing, the huge overhead door slowly opened, and when it was fully opened, an electric aircraft tug came in, pulled the repaired Helicopter out of the hangar and out onto tarmac.

Once the electric tug was disconnected from the Helicopter it started to move away, then a big truck pulled up and several men got out; on the side of the truck was stenciled a ball with a flame emanating from the top.

Above the decal were the words, '105th ORDNANCE'.

Matt walked out of the locker room wearing flight gear and carrying a helmet; he then goes into the Parts Room. A few minutes later, he walks out with a sidearm and continues out to the waiting Helicopter; an Officer meets him, they salute and enter the Helicopter, and then the overhead door closes.

As Mike begins to examine the Helicopter he's been assigned to repair, he hears the EXR Helicopter lift off and a few minutes later, he hears it fly away.

As Matt and his Pilot fly away, Mike says to himself, "I hope he'll make it back—this shit's getting dangerous, and I thought working on Helicopters would be safe—smart thinking Mike!"

Mike makes a walk around inspection of the Helicopter he's to repair and after seeing some of the damage; he's beginning to think it will be an impossible task!

Mike notices the missing parts wasn't just removed, they were cut and ripped off.

Where the rocket lunch tubes once were, now there are ripped jagged metal and torn wires.

As Mike shakes his head in discuss, the horn sounds, and then he sees men walking towards the front of the hangar.

As Wade leaves his repair bay he looks back and sees Mike still standing there watching in confusion and tells him, "Watcha' doin' standing there—it's lunch time. Better be movin' else you're goin' to miss the bus."

Mike looks at the large clock at the far end of the hangar and its indicating 12:00 noon, so Mike heads after the others, catching up to Wade as he exits through the security door.

After depositing his ID badge in his newly assigned slot in the badge rack, Mike hurries out and boards the bus; sliding in next to Wade, he waits for the bus to start moving.

Finally, after the last man had boarded, the bus starts moving.

After picking up the men at the Motor Support Unit, the bus arrives at the company building and stops.

Mike, along with the other men from the 127th, hurry into the building, lineup in the hallway outside of the mess hall and wait until they can enter.

With a full tray of food, Mike locates an empty place at a table with Randy, Travis, and Greg; he sits down and starts to eat.

As Mike eats in silence, he's having deep concerns about repairing that wreck of a Helicopter.

Greg notices Mike hasn't spoken and asks, "You've hadn't said a word so far—something botherin' you?"

Mike looks at him and replies, "It's that Helicopter I'm supposta' fix."

"So—what about it?" Greg asked.

"It's a wreck—you don't really believe it can be repaired and made air-worthy?" Mike asked; Greg nods.

"You can't be serious."

"Yep—dead serious—every EXR Helicopter we can save is one we don't have to replace, and that saves taxpayers money," Greg explains.

"That's fine and I'm all for that, but seriously, for the amount of time and parts to put it back into the air—it will cost as much as a new one," Mike pointedly tells him.

"No matter—your job is to repair what's brought into your repair bay, and to do it in a timely and quality manner," said Greg in an authoritative tone.

"Seriously—that Helicopter is a wreck. You just can't weld and rivet sheet metal back and expect it to fly at the mach speeds and 'G' forces experienced in combat, and expect it to hold together. Maybe in the old days it could be done, but not today—for God sake's—men's lives are at stake," Mike heatedly argues.

Greg shakes his head, lays his fork next to his plate, looks directly at Mike and firmly tells him, "No matter—do whatever it takes to make it air-worthy—or you can find another job—I'm sure the Army has room for another gun toting grunt. Once you've got all the parts—you've got about two weeks," Mike looks back smitten.

Finished eating, Greg gets up and tells everyone at the table, "Time to catch a short nap before the one o'clock formation," he picks up his tray and heads for the disposal window.

Mike looks at the remaining men at his table and says, "He's crazy—it can't be done without replacing entire subassemblies."

"Well—if that's what it takes—then do it—but just get it repaired," Randy tells Mike.

“Have you ever had to fix something like what I’ve got?”

“No—I can’t say I have,” Randy replies shaking his head, and then he gets up and heads to the disposal window.

When Mike looks to Travis, he shrugs his shoulders and gets up; Mike gets up and they both head to the disposal window.

At the one o’clock formation, everyone but Matt, was standing at attention in Mike’s squad; he hadn’t returned from his test flight and everyone is worried.

After the formation is over, Mike and his Platoon is back on the bus and heading back to their workstations.

When Mike walks by the Locker Room, on the way to his repair bay, Matt walks out wearing his green AFU’s.

“You made it back,” says Mike with a happily greeting.

“Yeah—we got a clearance to do the test flight to the north.

And would you believe, we flew over the Black Sea,” says Matt with a big smile as he hurries to the front of the hangar.

“Where you goin’?” Mike asks.

“Missed lunch so, the Captain is taking me to the BX for lunch—and he’s buyin’,” Matt replies while rapidly walking backwards with a big grin, and then he turns and runs for the security door.

Mike enters his bay, looks at the chopped and mangled Helicopter sitting in front of him, shakes his head, and mumbles, “Make this piece of shit air-worthy—Ok, if that’s what he wants then it’s his ass on the line for the repair bill—not mine. I’m only doing what I’m being told.”

So, Mike walks over to the Parts Room and up to the counter.

A Sergeant gets up from a desk with a computer terminal, walks over to Mike and asks, “What can I help you with?”

“I need a legal pad, box of hi-liters, and a couple of pens.”

“A legal pad—hi-liters and pens,” the Sergeant repeated; Mike nodded.

“And what would you be needing those for?” The Sergeant asked.

“To write with,” said Mike being a bit sarcastic.

“Are you being smart with me—Specialist?” The Sergeant asked eyeing him.

“No Sergeant—I’ve got a wreck of an aircraft to put back together and I need to make notes of what I’ll need for parts and where things need to go.”

“Ok—just a minute,” said the Sergeant and he went into the stock room; a few minutes later he returned with a box containing the requested materials.

Mike looks in the box and sees everything is there and politely says, “Thanks Sarge—I sure appreciate this,” and walks out of the Parts Room.

Mike spends the rest of the day looking the aircraft over and taking notes; by the time it was quitting time he had four pages full of what is needed to get the aircraft back together, and that didn’t include the engine—who knows what’s wrong with it?

At a quarter to five Greg came by to inform Mike it’s time to clean up his repair bay, so Mike gets his area in shape and takes the notepad, which now contains sensitive information, over to his document locker and locks it up.

At five o’clock the horn sounded the end of the day and Mike headed out to the waiting bus.

Finding an empty seat, Mike slides in next to the window, no more had he settled in when Kurt settles in beside him.

After the bus gets underway, Kurt asks, “How did your first day go?”

Mike looks at him, still thinking about that mess he was given to fix, and then he shakes his head.

“What—you don’t know!” Kurt exclaimed.

“Yeah—no—I mean the day went fine I guess—its just this job I was given to fix—I’m not to sure if it can be. She’s chopped up pretty bad—like both pylons are totally gone and the under lying airframe is so bent it needs to be cut out and replaced—I’m not sure if I can weld that good,” said Mike explaining the predicament.

The bus stops in front of the Motor Support building and eight men enter the bus and after they’re seated, the bus starts up.

“That bad—huh?”

“Yeah—and I’m expected to have it airworthy in a week or two,” said Mike feeling distraught.

“Phew—only two weeks huh?” said Kurt looking at Mike with a sympathetic expression, Mike nodding back.

“If you need a hand for the tough stuff, just give me a call,” Kurt told Mike.

“Thanks Bolland—I just might do that when I get to the welding,” said Mike with a smile, and then the bus pulled into the company area and stopped in front of the building.

After entering the building, Mike gets in the chow line.

After filling his tray, Mike finds an empty table and sits down to eat, Harry, Kurt and Randy soon joins him.

Randy breaks the silence inquiring, “Well Troff, have you started on that Helicopter?”

“Yeah—and like I told Coffman—it’s a wreck. I made a list of parts and assemblies that needs to be replaced and it’s a lot—like four pages of a legal pad, and that doesn’t account for the engines.”

“Wow—four pages you say,” Kurt repeated in disbelief.

“Yeah—and it’s going to take more then two weeks to get it done,” Mike tells them pointedly.

Randy shakes his fork at Mike, telling him, “Before you write up the parts order, be sure you have Sergeant Berkner and Coffman sign off—I’m sure they both want to look the aircraft over before you’re given the green light to begin.”

Mike nods and returns to his meal, and now thinking after they see how bad the Helicopter is and the amount of work involved, they’ll scrap it.

After Mike and Harry return to their room, Mike tells Harry, “I’m going to the Computer Room in the basement and see if I can get on the Internet.”

“You’ll need a user name and password—which you don’t have,” says Harry.

“After I got logged on at the shop—I’ve got some ideas I want to try,” says Mike with a grin and out the door, he goes.

Entering the Computer Room, Mike finds two of the terminals not being used, so he sits down at one of them.

The monitor displays the log-on prompt, to which Mike enters, ‘MAT7’, followed by his service number.

The monitor comes back with, ‘INVALID USERNAME OR PASSWORD’.

Expecting it to work Mike is shaken, and sits there staring at the monitor wondering what to try next.

Then Mike wonders, maybe MAT7 is now unavailable, and then he enters, ‘MAT’, followed by his service number after hitting the enter key, the monitor again comes back with, ‘INVALID USERNAME OR PASSWORD’.

Now Mike is stumped and figures he’ll have to go to the Orderly Room to get his log-on information, when a idea pops into his head; he remembers when he was at Edwards his name was the log-on Id so, Mike enters, ‘Michael Troff’, followed by his service number.

When he hit the enter-key the screen went dark; Mike smiled, because he knew this was a good sign.

After about five long seconds, the screen refreshed with, ‘WELCOME MICHAEL TROFF’, and just below was an entry box for a new username.

Mike with all smiles rubs his hands together and snickers with, “Will they ever learn—security—huh! Now for my Username and I know just what it’s going to be,” and he types Pegasus, but just after he pushes the enter key, he gets an error message: ‘INVALID USERNAME ENTERED. USERNAME: PEGASUS IS RESERVED.’

“What!” Mike exclaimed in shock, “Reserved—how can it be reserved! That’s my call for Pete’s sake’s—that’s me!”

“Shhhh!” Was heard and when Mike turned to look, the other users were looking at him.

Mike says, “Sorry,” turns back to his monitor and sits there looking at the message feeling irritably upset.

Mike acknowledges the error message with a click of the mouse; it disappears and is replaced by the prompt requesting a new username.

Mike sits there irritably tapping his fingers on the desk next to the keyboard grumbling to himself, “How dare they reserve my call for someone else—its mine—I chose it first—they can’t do this!”

After sitting there irritably staring at the monitor for several minutes, Mike hits on a solution and types, ‘PEGA5U5’ and softly says as he hits the enter key, “That’ll fix em’ and it better damn well work,” and it did.

Now he’s prompted for a new password and he entered the serial number from the M20 he had in Basic Training; after hitting the enter key, Mike was presented with a screen full of icons; Mike chose the Internet and soon was browsing the net.

It was after eleven when Mike entered his room, the lights were off and his roommate was in bed; Mike quietly undresses and crawls into bed, soon he too is asleep.

CHAPTER 3 -- Test Flight.

Mike awoke with a startle to the sound of that very loud bugle playing reveille and thinking he's never going to get used to it; and boy what an echo it makes in the hallway.

Just as Mike threw the blanket off a hand reached in and switched the light on.

Harry cheerfully got up and went over to look out of the window remarking, "Looks like its going to be a great day—don't see any clouds only stars—great day for a test flight."

"You've got a test flight today?" Mike asked surprised, "You never mentioned anything about a test flight last evening."

"Didn't think I had to—its not important, just routine business," Harry replied with a smile, and then he grabbed his shaving kit, bath towel, slipped into his shower sandals and headed for the door; his sandals making a clapping sound as he went out the door and all the way to the latrine.

At the o-eight-hundred formation, several names were call and those men formed into a Squad off to one side; no one from Mike's Platoon, were among those called.

While riding on the bus to the Hangar, Mike wondered why are those particular men being selected, and for what reason?

When Mike's Squad entered the Hangar, the big overhead door was open and an electric aircraft tug was already pulling Harry's repaired aircraft out of the Hangar.

Mike and Harry walk together towards locker room and document lockers.

Mike said to Harry, as he was about to enter the locker room, "Good luck—hope you got the problem fixed."

"Yeah thanks—I hope so too," Harry replied and entered the locker room, Mike goes to his document locker and retrieves the legal pad of notes, he made the day before.

With notepad in hand, Mike heads for the front office to see Sergeant Berkner.

When Mike enters the office he finds two desks, one occupied by Sergeant Berkner and the other by 2nd Lieutenant Paul Grier; file cabinets and bookshelves fill one wall and two chairs sit next to the wall near the door.

Mike walks up to Sergeant Berkner's desk and interrupts, "Ahem—Sergeant Berkner, I need to have a word with you about my assigned repair job."

"Yes, what about it—Specialist?" Sergeant Berkner gruffly asked looking up.

"Here's a list of what it would take to make the airframe airworthy—this doesn't include the engines and electronics," Mike telling Sergeant Berkner as he hands him the notepad, "I don't feel I have the authority to order the amount of parts required to complete the repair."

Sergeant Berkner receives the notepad and reads it, his face begins to change from commanding to concerned, and then he asks, "Have you discussed this with your Squad Leader Greg Coffman, and have you shown him what you've found?"

"I haven't shown him the exact details of the damage—per se. But I have discussed the nature of the aircraft with him and he more or less ordered me to repair it."

Sergeant Berkner smacked his lips with deep concern, and then he rapped the notepad with back of his hand and tells Mike as he hands the pad back to him, "I suggest you take this and show it to Specialist Coffman and let him do an assessment of what he thinks it will require to put the aircraft back into the air—and include everything this time. Have him sign it and bring it to me. Specialist Troff—you need to learn in the Army we have a thing called chain-of-command, and I suggest you use it—you're dismissed."

Feeling degraded by the reprimand, Mike takes the notepad and leaves the office.

Mike walks back to his repair bay, stopping at the document lockers to obtain the needed manuals and now wishing he had his notes from school; Mike asked himself, "Where are they and why is it taking so long to get here?"

As Mike enters his repair bay, Harry, in his flight suit and carrying his helmet, walks by and out the door to the waiting Pilot and Helicopter; they both get in and the big overhead door closes.

As Mike begins inspecting the jet turbine engine, Harry's Helicopter takes off.

Mike spends the rest of the morning going over every inch of the Helicopter, noting every major thing wrong; Mike learned this Helicopter wasn't shot down with gunfire, it was taken down by a PL9 missile, because both jet engines were clogged with the agent from the missile; now Mike is beginning to comprehend the reason for the missing missile launch tubes

and PL9 missiles.

After adding another two pages of bad parts, Mike was ready to approach Greg Coffman.

When the horn blew at noon and Harry hadn't returned from his test flight, Mike thought that was kind of odd; test flights normally take an hour or two, very seldom taking four.

With the way his repair job was brought down bugged Mike, especially now with Harry overdue.

After lunch, as Mike boarded the bus, he was getting very concerned about his roommate.

When Mike entered the shop, he went to his document locker and retrieved the notepad with the parts list.

After closing the document locker, Mike walks over to Sp5 Coffman's repair bay and up to Coffman; handing him the notepad, Mike said, "Specialist Coffman--here's the list of part's required to repair my Helicopter to airworthy and combat spec's. I need you to approve this so I can get the parts ordered."

Coffman grabs a towel and wipes his hands, and then he takes the notepad saying, "Let's see what you've got."

After looking at it, he shakes his head, and then raps the pad with the back of his hand and asks, "Are you sure you need all of this?"

Mike nods and tells him, "Yeah—like I told you, she's a wreck. If you want me to return that aircraft to combat spec's, then I need those parts, so—what's it going to be? Are you approving it or not?"

"Come with me Specialist," Coffman ordered and walked out of his repair bay with Mike following.

Entering Mike's repair bay, Coffman orders, "Get your repair manual and let's take another look at this bird."

Mike went and got the manual and opened it to the exploded assembly view; together they began to re-inspect the Helicopter, going over everything Mike had written down.

It was getting close to quitting time, Coffman had verified almost all the parts that Mike had on the list; only five parts were scratched and they were wrinkled sheet metal panels that Coffman figured Mike should be able to pound out.

At quarter to five, Coffman signed the bottom of the notepad telling Mike, "Here—tomorrow you can initiate the order. When you've got everything put together, print out the order and bring it to me, so I can sign it. While your waiting for the paperwork to go through, you can began by straitening out those sheet metal panels and overhaul the engines. It's

almost time to quite, so get your area cleaned up and your manuals secured.” Mike nods and as Coffman leaves Mike’s repair bay and heads back to his, Mike gathers up his manuals and notepad and takes them over to his document locker and locks them up, and then he returns to his repair bay and begins putting things away.

At five o’clock, the horn blew and everyone started towards the exit when Sergeant Berkner and Lieutenant Grier came through the door; Sergeant Berkner raised his hand to halt everyone and commanded, “At ease—the Lieutenant has an announcement.”

“Men—I just learned that Specialist Derry and First Lieutenant Dowdy have been killed this morning at around eleven hundred when the Helicopter they were flight testing, was fired upon and downed to the south of here near Mardin,” murmurs are heard coming from the Squad.

Mike was in shock!

He couldn’t believe his roommate is dead!

He only met him a couple days ago.

“You’re still at ease,” Sergeant Berkner barked; everyone quieted down with eyes on the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant then told them, “It appears the same thing that happened to Goodman, happened to Dowdy and Derry. Look’s as if we’ll be having another Helicopter to put back together. That’s all I have—you’re dismissed.”

Sergeant Berkner and Lieutenant Grier turned and walked back out of the shop, leaving the men stunned and slowly heading for the door.

As the bus made its way to the Company building, Mike looking out of the window recalls the funeral procession at the airfield when he arrived and the comment about how one leaves this tour of duty.

Mike now begins to wonder is he going home in a box too!

The bus pulls up in front of the Company building and stops; after the door opens, everyone gets off the bus and hurries to the building, because it was dinnertime and everyone is hungry.

That afternoon, Mike sat and ate his dinner quietly, reflecting on how quickly his roommate had died; later when he got back to his room, two men were emptying Harry’s wall lockers and packing his things into a box, including the alarm clock and laptop.

Mike sat there watching and feeling a bit lonely, knowing Harry won’t be nagging him in the morning to hurry up.

The next morning when the light came on, Mike threw the covers off, slid over to the side of his bunk, and sat there.

Looking over to Harry's bunk, Mike sees an empty bunk with the mattress rolled up at the foot of the bed, just as it was in Basic Training and in tech school.

For a moment, Mike is surprised by the empty bunk, and then he recalls the tragic news the Lieutenant told them yesterday.

Mike gives a sigh, looks over to the Harry's bunk once more and gets up, slips on his shower slippers and after grabbing his shaving kit, he heads out the door.

When Mike enters the shop, he goes straight to the document locker and obtains his notepad and manuals; returning to his repair bay, he sits down at his computer terminal and begins entering the parts from his notepad.

He was well into generating a parts order form when the horn blew break time; Mike saved what he had done and walked over to the break area got himself a hot cup of coco and sat down next to Travis.

Everyone sat quietly sipping coffee and hot coco feeling melancholy about the loss of their Squad member; Kurt was nervous and fidgety, because today it was his turn to go and test fly his repaired Helicopter.

No one talked about Harry or the test flights, because they knew that maybe Kurt wouldn't be coming back.

Then Sergeant Berkner sat down at the head of the table with a hot cup of coffee.

After taking a sip from his coffee, Sergeant Berkner announced, "Until we figure out how the EXR Helicopters are being brought down, all test flights to the south have been canceled," to Kurt's delight.

Mike looked at him puzzled and said, "That's easy Sarge—PL9's" "PL9's?" Sergeant Berkner repeated looking surprised, and then he asked, "What makes you think that?"

"The jet engines in my repair job are clogged with the chemical from a PL9 missile," Mike told him, now everyone sitting there looked at Mike.

"Now, just where would the Syrians be getting PL9 missiles?" Sergeant Berkner asked in a skeptical tone of voice.

"From our EXR Helicopters," Mike replied, and then in an angry tone of voice, he pointedly asked, "for what damn reason are we armed with PL9 missiles—this is no training mission and I don't think we want to capture any enemy aircraft—or do we? Sarge—they're using our own weapons against us."

“And for what purpose?” Lieutenant Grier asked approaching the break table.

“To prevent us from controlling the airspace--Sir,” Mike firmly replied.

“And just how would they do that without sufficient aircraft?” Lieutenant Grier asked with a hint of skepticism.

“Sir—with vehicle mounted PL9 launchers, they can control any airspace over a battlefield and they’d be darn near impossible to take out,” said Mike portentously.

“I don’t think so,” Lieutenant Grier argued. “They would need hundreds of missiles with tracking capabilities.”

“No they wouldn’t,” Mike, retorted, “you don’t need to be accurate with using PL9’s. All you would have to do is detonate eight or nine PL9 missiles in the vicinity of a battle, like the way flack was used in World War Two, and any jet aircraft flying through it would go down. One characteristic of the chemical cloud is, it doesn’t dissipate very fast. I think that’s why the Syrians are targeting the EXR Helicopters, because they’re planning something big.”

“Then, why are they taking the chain-guns?” Lieutenant Grier argued, “I think they’re targeting the EXR Helicopters, because they’re flying to low and to slow to miss. I believe we need to execute our test flights at ten thousand or higher or at a faster airspace.”

“If I had the opportunity to grab a rapid firing cannon, I’d take it,” said Mike shrewdly, “think of the advantage one of those buggers would be if it was mounted on a vehicle and charging down the battlefield. With twenty millimeter armor piercing rounds and highly maneuverable, they could disable a tank. A tank would have trouble taking one out, let alone a dozen or more.”

Lieutenant Grier eyed Mike, and then the horn blew, the break was over and everyone got up and walked back to their work areas.

Mike spent the rest of the morning putting together the parts order, and when he finished, he printed out a copy and took it over to Specialist Coffman to sign.

Mike spent the rest of the day pounding and reshaping several pieces of bent and wrinkled sheet metal.

Kurt and his Pilot flew north for the test flight and returned just before lunch; the flight went marvelously and Kurt’s repairs worked.

When Kurt returned after lunch, he was greeted by Harry’s badly damaged Helicopter waiting for him in his repair bay.

With adjoining bays, Mike pausing from his sheet metal work grinned

and told him, “Yeah—she’s in pretty bad shape huh—good luck,” Kurt looking chagrin stared back.

For the next week and a half, Mike pounded and reshaped the sheet metal panels until they were smooth and fit the Helicopter perfectly; the only thing left was to give the aircraft a paint job, that is, after a few more parts are added.

Mike’s school notes finally arrived and not too soon, as he’ll need them in the very near future when the parts arrive.

For the next two weeks, Mike overhauled the two jet turbine engines. On July 23rd, Mike turned twenty and was no longer a teenager.

Looking into the mirror that morning, Mike said pointing to himself in the mirror, “Well Mike—you’re no longer a teenager—today, you’re twenty—how about that.”

Then he got a worried look on his face and told himself, “I hope I’ll make it to twenty-one—going home as a twenty year old in a box will be a real bummer.”

When the last day in July arrived, Mike was standing in line outside of the orderly room waiting to get paid; today, Mike will be paid as an E4.

As Mike walked way counting the extra bills he’d just received, he just smiled, because now, he can get some much needed items from the BX, such as an alarm clock.

The next day was the first day of August and Mike had just finished safety wiring the mounting bolts on the jet turbine engine, that he had just reinstalled, when Coffman came by and informed him it was time to secure the manuals, notepads and clean up his repair bay; fifteen minutes later the horn blew.

The next day, just before break-time, as Mike was securing the second jet turbine engine into the Helicopter, a couple of men from the supply room unloaded three huge boxes from a pallet on a electric forklift.

By the time Mike had finished mounting the jet engine, they had finished delivering the boxes and left.

The boxes took up almost all of the available workspace in Mike’s repair bay.

Getting down from the Helicopter, Mike went over, got the manifest from the biggest box and read it; it appears all of his parts have arrived, so now the hard work begins.

The horn sounds break-time and Mike heads to the break area, gets his cup of hot coco and sits down next to Kurt.

Coffman with his cup full of coffee sits down across from Mike and Kurt.

“You pretty close to getting the parts list completed, so I can see what you’ve decided on as to what needs to be replaced?” Coffman asking Kurt over the cup from which he was taking a sip.

“Almost finished—should have the list completed by quitting time,” Kurt replied looking worried.

Coffman nods setting the cup down, and then he comments to Mike, “I see you’ve gotten the parts you ordered—now I want to see some major repairs getting done—we need to get this bird back into the air pronto,” Mike looks at him as if he’s nuts and just nods.

Fifteen minutes later the horn sounds the end of break-time, Mike walks back to his repair bay and begins opening the first of the three boxes; taking inventory, Mike begins making plans as to the order he’s going to use in the restoration of the Helicopter.

While deep into the second box, Mike hears someone clearing his throat, “Ahem...”

Mike straightens up from the box he’s bent over in, turns around and sees Lieutenant Grier standing there with a Captain.

“Sorry Sir,” says Mike apologetically, “I didn’t see you standing there.”

“Specialist Troff—this is Captain Wherley, he’s been assigned to this bird.

“So—how long before she’s ready to fly?” Captain Wherley asked offering his hand to Mike, Mike takes his hand and they shake, and then Mike tells him, “A couple of weeks—maybe three—there’s a lot of parts to install, adjust and calibrate,” pointing to the three huge boxes.

“I’ll let you two get acquainted and hash things out—I’ve got work to do in the office,” Lieutenant Grier tells them, and then he turns and walks away.

“You sure it going to take that long?” Captain Wherley asked with a hint of disappointment.

“Yes Sir—she was a wreck when I got her,” Mike told him with a shrug of his shoulders; “I’ve already repaired some sheet metal panels, which still needs painting,” Mike pointing to the unpainted patchwork of panels on the fuselage.

Captain Wherley looking to where Mike is pointing, nods and comments, “Nice work—they look like new panels.”

“I just finished overhauling both engines—so they should be good to go as soon as they’re reconnected to the control module and tested—that alone is going to take a day or two,” Mike told him, and then he said, “to bad you

got saddled with this wreck, Sir. She may not be ready until the end of the month—sorry!”

Captain Wherley with a look of melancholy nodded, and then he said, “Please do your best to hurry things along and I’ll check in periodically to see how you’re coming.”

“I’ll do my best, Sir,” said Mike and thinking, “that’s all I need is this officer looking over my shoulder.”

Captain Wherley nods, turns, and walks away; Mike shaking his head goes back to unboxing the parts.

For the next three weeks, Mike works frantically restoring the Helicopter to combat condition; Captain Wherley stopped by almost everyday to watch and to offer assistance if needed.

Mike was starting to like this Captain, because he wasn’t the arrogant smug bossy kind of guy, but reserved and inquisitive type; Mike gladly parted any knowledge of the restoration with him and soon the Captain began to place his trust in Mike’s judgment.

Finally, the day arrived that the Helicopter was ready to be test flown.

Both Mike and Captain Wherley stood and looked at and admired it.

Mike smiled at the almost impossible task he’d undertook and completed; Mike turned to Captain Wherley and smiled, Captain Wherley offered his hand to Mike and told him, “You did it—she’s awesome,” and they both shake with Mike responding, “We did it. I don’t think I could’ve finished it this soon without your help.”

“You’re coming on the test flight—I hope?” Captain Wherley asked.

“You bet—wouldn’t miss it for the world, besides, you might need me,” Mike replied.

“Great—then we’ll do it tomorrow afternoon—Ok,” said Captain Wherley, and Mike nodded with, “tomorrow afternoon it is.”

The Captain walked back to the front of the shop with a big smile on his face.

Mike stood there for a moment, thinking about the prospect of not returning alive; he then opened the door on the Pilot’s side and looked in.

After climbing into the cockpit, Mike reaches down and opens a small rectangle door near the Pilot’s seat and looks into what appears to be a tool compartment; seeing what looks like a rolled up canvas toolkit, he removes it, steps down out of the cockpit, and unrolls it on the top of his workbench.

Finding it almost empty, Mike goes to his manual and locates the page describing the toolkit.

After jotting down the part numbers of the missing tools, he adds two cans of PL9 unclogging agent; taking the list, Mike heads for the Parts Room and lays the list on the counter.

As the Staff Sergeant looks at the list, Mike says, "I hope it was ok with the way I did this without any signatures."

The Staff Sergeant looks at Mike kinda' grumpy like, grabs the list, picks up the phone, and begins talking; Mike now begins to wonder if he's going to get the tools and the two can's of the unclogging agent.

Mike stands there watching the Staff Sergeant talking and nodding several times; he glances over to Mike.

Finally, the Staff Sergeant hangs the phone up and call's a SP4 and he comes over; the Staff Sergeant hands the list to the Specialist telling him, "Fill the order Specialist."

"Yes Sarge," The Specialist replied and sat down at his computer terminal.

Twenty minutes later, Mike walks out of the Parts Room and heads back to his repair bay with all the stuff he wanted.

After replacing the missing tools, Mike rolls up the tool pouch and secures it with its ties.

Next, Mike puts an assortment of screws, nuts, washers, and electrical wire-nuts in a small plastic zip bag.

After adding a roll of electrical tape, roll of duct tape, a spool of white aircraft electrical wire, and a small roll of safety wire, he was ready to refill the tool compartment in the Helicopter.

The first thing he put in was the unclogging spray cans, because this had the highest priority and they went in at one end of the tool compartment, everything else went next; when everything was in there, Mike closed the door and secured it.

Now he was just about ready with only two small details remaining, and hopefully Captain Wherley will help with those.

The next morning when Mike walked into the shop, an electric tug was moving the Helicopter out of the shop; Mike stood and watched, as it moves out through the big hangar door.

Captain Wherley quietly walked up behind Mike and asked, "You ready for the test flight right after lunch?"

Taken by surprise, Mike turns and nods, and then he makes a request, "Sir—would you mind tellin' Ordnance not to arm her with PL9's there's no need, besides, we could use some extra stingers."

“Sure—and you’re right—if we run into any trouble the extra firepower will come in mighty handy,” Captain Wherley remarking.

“There’s one other thing, which I’ll need your help with,” said Mike hinting.

“And what would that be?” Captain Wherley asks, giving Mike a questioning look.

“Our personal firearms—I think we both should take M20’s, they pack a lot more firepower then a puny sidearm. And because the way the M20 is built, we need to be logged on to it. So—I need your help to get me one checked out of the armory and you as well,” Mike declares with firmness.

“Ok—I’ll do my best, but with army red tape I don’t know if I can get them in time,” said Captain Wherley with a skeptical expression.

Captain Wherley walks back to the front of the shop, because now he has some requests to make.

Mike walks over to his repair bay as the big hangar door closes.

For the next hour, Mike touches up his repair bay getting it ready for the next job and hoping it isn’t another wreck, and all the while anxiously hoping Captain Wherley can get the Helicopter properly armed and is able to get the authorizations for the M20’s.

When his repair bay was in order, Mike goes over to Kurt’s bay and asks if he needed any help, Kurt nods, so Mike helped Kurt pound and re-shape a bent and wrinkled chunk of sheet metal.

When the horn blew break time, both Mike and Kurt walked over, grabbed a cup of hot coco, and sat down together at the break table.

Soon Sergeant Berkner joined them at the head of the table; the first thing he said was, “We’re resuming test flights to the south again. Sorry Troff—I know this is particularly hard for you, especially in lieu of what happened to Goodman and Derry, because you’re scheduled for a test flight this afternoon. The Russian’s are a bit touchy about us flying over the Black Sea, so we’re back flying to the south.”

Mike hung his head with a very worried look, because now his life may hinge on what Captain Wherley is able to accomplish.

Kurt patted Mike on the back and told him, “It was great knowin’ ya’ now there will be two empty repair bays—so, how old are ya’”

“I just turned twenty—and I’m coming back!”

“Another twenty year old headen’ home in a box,” Travis remarks shaking his head.

“Will you guy’s cut it out—I’m not going home in a box,” Mike retorts, “with Captain Wherley’s help things are going to be little different this time.”

“Just what are you and Captain Wherley up to?” Sergeant Berkner asks with a questioning look on his face.

“If what we’ve got planed works, I think everything is about to change and we won’t be losing anymore men and Helicopters,” Mike firmly telling them, and then the horn blows sounding the end of the break; everyone gets up and heads back to their repair bays.

Just before the horn blew at noon, Sergeant Berkner comes walking into the repair bay, where Mike and Kurt are working on a sheet metal panel, and informs Mike, “At o-twelve-thirty you’re to stop by the Quartermaster to pickup an M20 and the test flight has been rescheduled for tomorrow. I don’t know what you’re planning, but you better be careful.”

Mike smiled when he heard the news and said, “I’m just trying to stay alive, Sarge. An M20 packs a lot more fire power then a puny sidearm—thanks Sarge.”

Then the last part of Sergeant Berkner’s order sinks in, “What do you mean the test flight has been rescheduled?” Mike asked.

“That’s right—if you’re going to take a M20—it needs to be calibrated, so you’re heading for the firing range this afternoon,” Sergeant Berkner tells him.

No more had Sergeant Berkner walked out of the repair bay, when Coffman came by to tell them to get the manuals secured and the area cleaned up for lunch; so, while Kurt went to secure his manual, Mike began straightening the repair bay.

At noon, the horn blew and both Kurt and Mike headed for the front door.

After Mike had finished eating lunch, he headed straight to the Quartermaster and stepped up to the counter.

Sergeant Derrick was sitting at his desk and gruffly says when Mike walked up, “You know its lunch time, —come back after thirteen hundred.”

“I know its lunch time, but I’ve been told to report here to get an M20.”

“You’re the one—huh,” Sergeant Derrick gruffly remarking getting up from the chair; he walks over to where Mike is standing and asks, “Full name—Specialist?”

“Michael Anthony Troff,” Mike tells him.

Sergeant Derrick goes to the computer terminal sitting on the counter and begins typing, after the screen refreshes he goes to a steel door and us

ing a key from a ring of keys on his belt, he unlocks the door; the heavy steel door swings open.

After the heavy steel door is open, Sergeant Derrick steps through and disappears inside.

A short time later, he reappears with an M20 assault rifle and a black calibration box and lays them on the counter.

Mike grabs the weapon and opens the door to gain access to the power button and mode switches.

After verifying that both switches are down, Mike moves the small lever at the top of the panel to the left and pulls down, the compartment for the three AA cells is then exposed and is empty.

Sergeant Derrick reaches into his pocket, removes an olive drab box, and places it on the counter with, "Thought you'd need these."

Mike removes the three AA cells from the box and installs them into battery compartment, and then he closes the battery panel.

Sergeant Derrick points to a very small target in the far corner of the room, near the ceiling.

Mike takes the M20 and points it at the target, depresses the red power button, and looks into the sight and observes that he now has the green power indicator bar showing.

Mike notices the calibration indicator bar located in the lower center between the mode switch and power indicators is indicating red meaning the weapon isn't calibrated.

Mike brings the weapon back down and depresses the red power button again, turning it off.

Looking to be sure the switch on the programming box is off, Mike removes the small protective rubber plug from the connector inside the compartment with the red power button and the two switches; he inserts the plug from the programming box into it.

Next, Mike takes his data link from around his neck and plugs it into the box, and then he turns the power switch on the box to on, one of the three lights on the programming box comes on; it was the red power light.

Mike smiles and says to himself, "Time to log-on to this puppy," Mike depresses the red power button again, and then he pushes the black button and the blue light comes on indicating uploading in progress.

When it goes out, Mike presses the first yellow button inside the M20's panel; the blue light comes back on indicating the M20 has received the correct information about its new owner."

Next, Mike points the muzzle of the M20 at the target again, and then he puts his trigger finger on the trigger and pulls the trigger; while holding the trigger he carefully, so as not to lose grip of the weapon and while keeping the weapon pointed at the target, he uses his other hand and pushes the second yellow button.

The white light on the programming box illuminates, along with the blue light.

With a smile, Mike releases the trigger and lowers the weapon.

He turns off the programming box, removes his data link, the cable, replace the rubber plug, and powers down the M20; Mike's now the user of the M20 and only he can use all of its advanced features.

Mike was about to take the weapon and leave when Sergeant Derrick barked, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Take the weapon and go back to the shop," Mike replied.

"Not yet—your not," said Sergeant Derrick very harshly.

"Why not?" Mike asked, and then he said, "I'm logged in as the user."

"Yeah—but you need to sign for this weapon," Sergeant Derrick tells him and slides a sheet of paper in Mike's direction; "here—enter the weapon's serial number and sign here," Sergeant Derrick pointing to the bottom of the form.

Mike opened the door of the M20 and copied the serial number of the M20 to the form, and then he signed it.

Closing the door on the M20, Mike takes the weapon, looks at Sergeant Derrick and asks, "Well—is that it? Anything else?"

Sergeant Derrick shook his head saying, "Nope—that about does it—the weapon's yours—be sure to return it when you return from the firing range. And one more thing—if I were you I'd..."

"Yeah—I know—memorize the serial number," says Mike before Sergeant Derrick had a chance to finish, and then he walks out of the Quartermaster room.

At the thirteen hundred formation, Mike was call from his Platoon and told to change into ACU's with full field gear and then report to the Orderly Room.

As his platoon boarded the bus to the shop, Mike went to his room and changed into his camouflage ACU's and field gear including helmet, and then he goes to the Orderly Room where he is told to wait until someone comes for him, so Mike sat down holding his M20.

Fifteen minutes later, an SP4 walks in and asks at the desk, “Someone needs a ride to the firing range?”

The clerk points to Mike, the SP4 turns and commands, “Specialist Troff—this way,” and heads for the door; Mike gets up and follows him.

When Mike gets outside, a duce-an-half truck is waiting with several men sitting in the back; the tailgate is lowered and Mike hops up into the truck and locates a place between a British and French Soldier.

Soon after the tailgate is raised and secured, the truck starts moving and heads out of the company area, turns left, and heads towards the northern perimeter of the NATO Base.

Leaving the NATO Base, the truck motors down a paved road heading to the north, ten minutes later the truck slows and makes a left turn onto a gravel road.

Mike thinking, “Feel’s like I’m back in basic—dirt and all!”

After a few dusty minutes, the truck pulls up to a gate with a sign that reads, ‘Cetin NATO Annex Qualifying Range’.

After being cleared by the sentry, who looks to be a Turkish Soldier, the truck continues; after another minute or two, it pulls into another assembly area and comes to a halt.

The tailgate is lowered and two Sergeants are waiting, one British and the other French.

The British Sergeant takes command and orders everyone off the truck.

Mike and the men form up into a Platoon, the French Sergeant translating the English commands into French.

Then, the Platoon is smartly marched through a gateway and over to another assembly area where the two Sergeants begin to give instructions as how the calibration and qualifying is to proceed.

The first hour is spent on calibrating the M20; walking back from calibrating his M20, Mike meets Captain Wherley and salutes him saying, “Sir—you too?”

The Captain returns the salute replying, “Yeah—had a bit of a problem convincing my Squadron Commander to let me use a M20—he thought I should be armed with a Colt Revolver, but I told him what you told me and he relented agreeing. So, here I am getting the M20 calibrated and looking for a bit of fun on the Qualifying Range.”

“Yeah—me as well,” Mike replied with a nod.

“Well—I’m off to the Qualifying Range. Oh,—by the way,—the test flight is scheduled for tomorrow morning—see you there.”

“Have fun on the Qualifying Range--Sir. And I’ll catch ya’ in the morning,” Mike salutes again and after Captain Wherley returns the salute, they go their separate ways.

For the next three hours, Mike shoots up the range re-qualifying; the two Sergeants were amazed at Mike’s marksmanship missing only two targets.

By five thirty, Mike was on his way back to the base with a calibrated M20 and a score of ‘Expert’.

Mike got back just in time to turn in his M20 and remove his field gear.

Laying his helmet on his bed, he remarks, “I’ll put you away later—I need to grab dinner before the Mess Hall closes,” and so he hurries out of his room, down the hall, down the stairs, across the main hallway and into the Mess Hall; later when Mike walked out of the Mess Hall, he was close to being the last man to leave.

Returning to his room, Mike stores his field gear and helmet in his military locker, and then he took off the his dirty camouflage ACU’s and puts them into the Landry bag.

For the rest of the evening, until lights out, Mike went down to the computer room and surfs the Internet; by ten o’clock, Mike was in bed and entering dreamland.

The next morning just before formation, Mike goes to the Quartermaster to obtain his M20; later when Mike walked into the shop, Captain Wherley was waiting for him in Mike’s repair bay wearing his flight suit and holding his M20.

Mike salutes him saying, “Sir—good morning,” Captain Wherley returns the salute with, “You ready?”

“Just about Sir—if you can get the EXR fired up—I’ll change into my flight suit and check us out some ammo.”

“Sounds good to me,” Captain Wherley replied.

So, as Captain Wherley walks out of the shop’s back door to the tarmac where the Helicopter is waiting, Mike with M20 in hand goes to the locker room; returning several minutes later wearing his flight suit.

As Mike walks to the supply room, he smiles thinking, “The last time I wore one of these was several months ago when I took an Officer for a ride down a river—God—has it been that long! I wonder what Clark would say if he could see me now—wearing this suit without the wings,” Mike looking down at the barren place for the wing patch; also looking at the helmet in his left hand without any call painted there.

Entering the supply room, Mike walks up to the counter, places his helmet on top and the M20 next to it; the Supply Sergeant walks up to the other side of the counter from his desk where he was typing on his computer and asks, “What have we here?”

“I’m going out on a test flight and I need some ammo,” Mike tells him.

“Since when are we using assault weapons?” The Supply Sergeant asked looking at Mike with one eye.

“Since guys are getting killed going out on test flights with puny side arms—I intend to stay alive with this,” Mike told him patting the M20.

“How much ammo do you want?” The Supply Sergeant asked.

“Four, twenty round magazines and two RPG’s.”

The Supply Sergeant stared when he heard Mike order the RPG’s.

“Did I hear right—you want two RPG’s?” The Supply Sergeant suspiciously asked, “You thinking of goin’ into a war zone?”

“You did, and I also need a bit of duck-tape,” Mike earnestly tells him, “and yeah—that’s what the southern flight area is—a war zone.”

The Supply Sergeant turns and goes into the back room and returns a while later with some of the requested items and puts them on the counter top.

Then a SP4 walks out of the back room and puts two RPG’s on the counter top next to the ammo magazines.

Mike picks up the roll of duck-tape and tapes two of the ammo magazines end to end; he does the same with the other two ammo magazines.

Mike picks up the M20 and using its sling, puts it across his chest, and then puts the two taped ammo magazines inside his helmet.

Grabbing the helmet with his left hand and the two RPG’s with his right, Mike walks out of the supply room.

As Mike walks towards the back of the shop, everyone stares and one guy shakes his head.

When Mike gets outside, Captain Wherley has the Helicopter running.

Setting the helmet down, Mike opens his door on the Helicopter and stows the two RPG’s, and then removes his M20 and carefully stows it next to Captain Wherley’s M20; after securing both weapons and the RPG’s, Mike opens the tool compartment and puts the two tapped ammo magazines inside and closes the compartment door.

Mike puts his helmet on and climbs into the ‘Radar and Target Acquisition’ seat, buckles himself in, and closes the door; this is a two seat EXR2, similar to the F32.

Captain Wherley gets a take off clearance for a departure to the south; he lifts the Helicopter to the standard five-foot hover, taxi, and takeoff level, and then he takes off.

Soon they're flying south towards Mardin over semi-arid land with sporadic farm fields.

Mike begins checking out the systems he'd replaced and repaired, and so far everything is checking out Ok; also, no signs of hostile action.

The test flight is going just great and maybe there won't be any need for the M20's.

Passing to the north-east of Mardin, they fly over a series of rocky buttes and plateaus, bypassing any sheep herders in the grassy areas to the south, until they come within two miles of the Syrian border, where they turn and head back north.

Then suddenly, Mike's radar indicates a rocket launch, he looks out the side window and sees a rocket flying towards them, wide eyed, Mike knew his number was up, but just as he thought the end had come, the rocket detonates in front of them producing a huge white cloud.

Mike immediately knew what it was and hollered over the intercom, "PL9 SIR—BANK RIGHT AND CLIMB—NOW!"

But it was too late, the Pilot reacted to slow and they flew right into the cloud; shortly thereafter, the twin jet turbines quit.

Mike quickly looks around and sees two pickups one with a mounted rocket launcher and the other with a mounted EXR machine gun, and on either side, several motorcycles with armed men all heading towards them.

As the Helicopter auto-rotated to a landing, Mike noticed a plateau a short distance away, so he called to the Pilot on the intercom, "Try and make for that plateau on our right—it's our only hope of getting out of this alive," the Pilot nodded and they circled over to the plateau, descending as they went.

Finally, landing on top of the barren plateau, Mike opens the door and jumps out as the big blades slowly spin down to a stop.

Mike unsecured the two M20's and the RPG's; opening the tool compartment, he gets the two taped ammo magazines and sets them aside.

Mike grabs his M20 and a RPG round and hurries to the edge of the plateau.

As Captain Wherley calls for help, and then shuts the Helicopter's systems down, Mike eases out onto a rock overlook and gets into a prone position.

Looking out from where they came, Mike sees nine vehicles rapidly approaching.

As Mike powers up his M20, Captain Wherley grabs his M20, the two tapped magazines, the remaining RPG, and joins Mike on the overlook.

Mike looks in his scope and sees two four-wheel-drive pickups and seven motorcycles speeding towards them sending up clouds of dust.

Mike looks over to Captain Wherley and asks, “Sir--what did you qualify as?”

“Expert—and you?”

“Expert,” Mike replied, and they both smiled, and then Mike said, “Sir—we must use the RPG’s and take out the two pickups if we’re to get out of here alive,” the Captain nods; each taking a RPG, they mount them on their M20’s.

When they came into RPG range, Mike said to Captain Wherley, “I’m going to take out the truck with the mounted machine gun—you take out the truck with the mounted rocket launcher. We only have two RPG’s and only one chance at this, so don’t miss or we’re not getting outa’ here alive.”

Captain Wherley looks at Mike with uncertainty written on his face and nods.

Mike, using the knob on the top of the computer-controlled scope zooms in on the truck, and then moves the cross hair onto the truck.

Mike then uses the knob on the side of the scope to move the red circle until it surrounds the cross hair, and then Mike squeezed the trigger, there was a hissing sound followed by lots of smoke, an instant later, a big explosion at the Truck.

When the smoke and dust had cleared, the truck was lying on its side on fire and billowing huge black clouds.

Captain Wherley fired his RPG round next and the other truck went up with a huge fireball.

The seven motorcycles slid to a halt, the riders are looking at the trucks in a high state of confusion.

Mike watching this through his scope smiled, and then he gets up and tells the Captain, “Now you must buy me some time to get us back into the air and outa’ here,” as they both remove the remnants from the spent RPG rounds from their M20s.

Captain Wherley looking puzzled asked, “Can you do that?”

“Yeah—but I need about twenty minutes,” Mike replies.

“Ok, I also radioed for help,” said Captain Wherley, “two F30’s will be here in about six minutes and a Evac Helicopter in about an hour.”

“Great—I don’t think we’ll be needing the Helicopter, but the two F30’s should come in handy. There’re four ammo magazines with enough rounds to keep the motorcycles busy until the F30’s get here. Now I’ve got work to do,” says Mike, and then he hurries back to the crippled Helicopter and Captain Wherley inserts the first magazine.

As Captain Wherley zeros in on one of the motorcycles, Mike leans his M20 against the side of the Helicopter, goes and gets the toolkit and a can of unclogging agent from the tool compartment.

After stuffing the can of unclogging agent into his right cargo pocket, he unrolls the toolkit; selecting a large flat blade screwdriver, a wrench and an injection nozzle for the can of unclogging agent, Mike climbs up to the engine cowl and using the screwdriver unlatches an access panel.

With the jet turbine engine exposed, Mike locates the plug to the combustion chamber; using the wrench, Mike removes the plug.

Hearing popping sounds coming from where Captain Wherley is, Mike looks over and sees one of the motorcycles lying on its side with the rider lying dead nearby.

Reaching into his cargo pocket, Mike removes the can of unclogging agent and screws the injection nozzle onto the can, and then he inserts the end of the nozzle into the jet turbine engine and squeezes the trigger on the can, filling the combustion chamber with the chemical foam from the can of unclogging agent

After Mike sees foam coming out of the rear of the engine, he stops injecting, puts the can of unclogging agent back into his cargo pocket, reinserts the plug, and tightens it with the wrench; after closing the access panel and latching it with the screwdriver, Mike gets down and goes to the other side of the Helicopter and repeats the same procedure on the other engine.

In the meantime, Captain Wherley has now taken out another motorcycle; with only five motorcycles remaining, they regroup just out of the firing range of the M20.

As Mike is finishing up and climbing down from the Helicopter, the two F30’s arrive and head towards the remaining motorcycles.

Mike puts the tools back into the toolkit and rolls it back up; after putting the toolkit and the almost empty can of unclogging agent back in the tool compartment, Mike grabs his M20 and puts it in the Helicopter, and then he climbs into the Pilot’s seat and looks at the clock.

The remaining motorcycles keep beyond Captain Wherley’s M20’s range and so he can only watch.

As one of the F30's starts to make a strafing pass, one of the men on the motorcycles brings up a handheld rocket launcher and to Captain Wherley's shock, fires it at the F30.

The F30 is hit and burst into flames, amazingly, the Pilot is still alive and ejects; the F30 crashes into the side of a butte and explodes.

The other F30 circles, as the parachute slowly descends to earth.

Mike watching in horror looks at the clock mumbling, "Come on—only another two minutes."

Helpless, Captain Wherley watches as the five remaining motorcycles head in the direction of the descending parachute; the other F30 sees what is taking place and makes a strafing pass to protect his friend.

The Motorcycles split up, with some going one way and some another.

Then, another handheld rocket launcher comes out and is fired, but this time the Pilot is able to evade and starts to circle again; another rocket is launched, but this time it explodes a fair distance in front of the F30, producing a black smoke cloud, which the Pilot easily maneuvers around.

Mike glances back at the clock and sees the time for the chemical he'd sprayed into the two engines has elapsed, remarking, "About time—let's see if this bird will start."

Mike flips the master switch and the Helicopter's systems come on line, he plugs his helmet in, buckles himself in, and tries to start the two engines; they sputter a bit with Mike saying, "Come on—come on—start!"

And then with a burst of flame coming from the exhaust ports, the engines start up.

Mike opens the door and hollers to Captain Wherley, "CAPTAIN WHERLEY—I'VE GOT THE ENGINES FIXED—GET IN—HURRY, WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME!"

As Captain Wherley heads for the Helicopter, Mike has the main blades coming up to takeoff speed.

When Captain Wherley approached the Helicopter, Mike is occupying his seat, so he stops and motions for Mike to get out, but Mike hollers back, over the noise, "THERE ISN'T TIME TO POWER DOWN—JUST STOW THE M20 AND GET IN—I'LL FLY HER."

"GET OUT—THAT'S AN ORDER—SPECIALIST," Captain Wherley commanding.

Mike hesitated, and then he said pointing to the F30 Pilot who's gathering up his parachute, "YES SIR! BUT—IF I HAVE TO POWER DOWN

AND CLIMB DOWN SO YOU CAN GET IN—THAT PILOT OVER THERE IS GOING TO DIE—IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?”

Captain Wherley looks to where Mike is pointing and sees the Pilot running for cover, as two of the motorcycles close in on him.

Captain Wherley shakes his head and inaudibly says, “No,” and stows his M20, secures both weapons, and then he climbs into the ‘Radar and Target Acquisition’ seat, buckles himself in, and closes the door.

After Captain Wherley connects his intercom and with a lot of uncertainty and sounding very uneasy, he said, “You’re going to get us both killed!”

“No I’m not,” Mike firmly told him, “I can fly this thing—I’ve had training.”

“Where? Hover taxing isn’t flight training for combat,” said Captain Wherley matter-of-factly.

“Where is not important—just trust me and make sure you’re buckled up,” Mike tells him as he slowly brings the Helicopter to a hover.

Mike checks his weapons stores and finding them to his satisfaction, he asks Captain Wherley, “You ready?”

Captain Wherley reluctantly nods, and then Mike tells him, “Hang on—things are going to get rather wild.”

Mike punches the thruster button and the EXR Helicopter shot forward accelerating, forcing both men into their seats.

When the F30 sees, the EXR Helicopter heading for the rear of the two motorcycles at a very high rate of speed it departed.

Mike choosing his guns locks onto the first motorcycle and issues a short burst, rather than a continuous strafe, taking out the motorcycle.

Over flying the second motorcycle, Mike sees him slid to a stop and bring up the rocket launcher, Mike quickly stomps on the right peddle and the Helicopter instantly swings around and is now flying backwards, but Mike hits the thruster button again and now they’re heading forward right at the motorcycle, all the while locking his guns onto the motorcycle; Mike fires another short burst and the bike explodes.

The F30 Pilot is now safe, at least for the moment, as there are still three motorcycles.

Then, Captain Wherley yells over the intercom, “ROCKET COMING AT US FROM SEVEN-O’CLOCK!”

Mike hits the countermeasures button, issuing a bright flare, then pulling back on the collective he punches the thruster button again and they shoot skyward.

Captain Wherley says on the intercom, “The rocket is still on us—the counter measures didn’t work!”

Mike executes his favorite maneuver, the Möbius, and is now heading straight at the oncoming missile.

Captain Wherley holds his breath in fear, Mike punches his fire button, his guns spit fire and the missile explodes in front of them.

Mike pulls the collective hard to the left and then pulls back; as they level off, and as the debris field passes by on the right, Mike gets a targeting solution on the rocket launcher as its trying to target Mike again.

Mike fires a missile and a few seconds later, there’s a huge explosion on the ground.

With two motorcycles remaining, Mike says on the intercom, “Well Sir—I think it’s time to put an end to these guys—don’t you think?”

Captain Wherley laughing in astonishment nods, and then says, “What are you waiting for—orders from the top?”

Mike gives a thumb up and heads for the two motorcycles.

This time coming at them from the left, Mike uses a normal strafing run and takes them both out.

When they see the Evac Helicopter heading towards them; Captain Wherley gets on the radio and informs them about the downed F30 Pilot.

As they head back to the base, Mike informs him, “Sir—there’s still another group to deal with—remember, we lost two flight crews and they removed two missile launchers and chain-guns. We only destroyed one group.”

“Yeah—but I’m sure you can take care of em’ with no problem,” replies Captain Wherley, and then pats Mike on the shoulder.

Approaching a small butte, Mike proceeds to land the Helicopter to the shock of Captain Wherley.

“What are you doing?” Asks Captain Wherley.

“Sir—I’m an E4—I’m not allowed to enter military airspace or fly.”

Once on the ground, Mike shuts the Helicopter down and unbuckles, disconnects his helmet, opens the door, climbs down, and waits for the Captain to do the same thing.

Captain Wherley hesitates for a moment, and then he also unbuckles, disconnects his helmet, opens his door, and climbs down; after switching places, they’re back in the air and headed back to the NATO base.

Captain Wherley comes on the intercom and lamenting says, “This isn’t right—you’re a better flier then me—hell—you executed maneuvers I’ve never seen. I could’ve never done what you did—especially the way you

handled the missile—if it wasn't for you, we'd be dead now. It should be you flying us back—not me. You should be the one who gets the credit for eliminating that group of combatants—not me.”

“It's Ok Sir. I don't mind—really,” Mike modestly declares.

Then Captain Wherley comes back on the intercom and asks, “Where did you get your flight training, and don't tell me you just happened to get the training from some retired Army flight instructor at some FBO—those are honed skills that only a top EXR Flight Instructor could've taught you.”

Mike just sat there quietly not quite knowing how to reply.

With no answer forth coming Captain Wherley speculating softly said, “Some of the new EXR Pilots coming from Rucker speak of a very young EXR Fighter Pilot who defeated three Marine F30 Top Gun Pilots...”

Mike piped up before he could finish, “Yeah I heard that story too, and you think it's me—and if it is—does it really matter? The reality here is—I'm an E4, and I'm not allowed to fly, so please don't tell anyone about what I did out here. I only did it to save our lives and that of the F30 Pilot. You're now a hero—so leave it at that.”

A tear formed in Captain Wherley eye and after a few minutes of silence he said, “Pegasus—my call is Black Ghoul—in-case we should meet in the air sometime,” Mike nods.

“I only have one request.”

“And what would that be?” Mike asked, apprehensive of what the answer will be.

“To teach me how to perform some of those maneuvers that you executed today.”

“How would I be able to do that?” Mike asked.

“You let me worry about that—I'll figure out a way,” Captain Wherley replied with a grin.

A few minutes later, they land at the hangar where they took off from, the test flight a complete success.

CHAPTER 4 -- Secret Training Flights.

It was the second week in August and a Monday morning when Mike awoke to the sound of that very loud bugle playing reveille and thinking, “I’m never going to get used to that blaring bugle—God! I’m going to become deaf if I have to wake up every morning to the sound of that damn thing! Gotta’ remember to bring some ear plugs back with me from the shop.”

So, Mike crawls out of bed and grabs his shaving kit and heads for the latrine and showers.

At the o-eight-hundred formation, several more names were call, and those men formed into a Squad off to one side; once again, no one from Mike’s Platoon was amongst those called.

That morning when Mike entered his repair bay, it was empty; no Helicopter had been brought in for repair.

In Kurt’s bay, a forklift was unloading several large boxes; it seemed as if Kurt’s parts have arrived, and now he can restore Harry’s wreck!

Mike was about to walk over and give Kurt a hand when Sergeant Berkner entered Mike’s repair bay.

Sergeant Berkner handed Mike a repair order telling him, “Here—it seems as if there’s some problems with Captain Wherley’s aircraft,” looking concerned, Mike takes the repair form and begins to read it.

“The Captain has his aircraft sitting outside, I suggest you go out and take a look at it,” hinted Sergeant Berkner in a disapproving tone; Mike nods with, “Yes Sarge—right away,” and starts walking to the back door.

When Mike gets outside, the Helicopter that Mike worked on a week or so ago was sitting in front of the maintenance hanger.

Mike walked up to the aircraft, opened the door to the cockpit, climbed in and sat in the Pilot’s seat; he then re-read the repair order and shook his head, because it was very vague and didn’t make any sense!

Mike said to himself, “This can’t be right! These are new parts and I checked them out on my test flight—those parts couldn’t have gone bad already!”

“Well Pegasus, are you ready to take care of that other group of combatants—they’re still out there and still a threat,” came a voice just outside the door.

Mike froze, and then he quickly turned his head to see who had

addressed him!

It was Captain Wherley standing there with a big smile on his face.

Mike put his finger to his lips and issued, “Shhhh... Someone might hear you!”

Mike climbed out of the Helicopter, and then he saluted.

After the Captain returned the salute, they shook hands.

“I thought you guys took care of em’,” Mike presumptuously remarked.

“Not until you teach me those fancy maneuvers you used the last time we flew,” said Captain Wherley looking serious, “so—you about ready?”

Mike glancing around to see if anyone had heard Captain Wherley, and then feeling apprehensive, Mike softly told him in almost a whisper, “How do you propose I do that—I’m not an Army Pilot? I’m an E4—remember.”

“Aren’t you supposed to check this bird out?” Asked Captain Wherley pointing to the repair order that Mike was holding.

Mike looks at his repair order he’s holding and nods.

“Ok then--,” said Captain Wherley, “get suited up, grab your M20, some ammo, and let’s go flying. Oh, by the way—you don’t need a helmet—I’ve got one for you inside the Helicopter.”

Mike gave him a hard look, then shook his head in disbelief and said, “Ok, you win—I’ll get myself logged out for a check flight,” and started walking back to the repair shop.

Twenty minutes later, Mike comes walking out of the repair shop wearing his flight suit and carrying his M20 with two ammo magazines.

When Mike gets to the EXR Helicopter, Captain Wherley tells him, “Stow your weapon inside and I’ll finish the preflight.”

So, Mike secures his weapon inside of the Helicopter and puts the two ammo magazines inside the toolbox.

Then as Mike is about to climb into the ‘Radar and Target Acquisition’ seat, Captain Wherley walks up to him, and without any warning firmly applies a pair of Pilots wings to Mike’s suit and orders, “There—now get in before someone sees you.”

Mike in a state of surprise begins to panic and quickly climbs into the Helicopter.

When Mike climbs in, he noticed there is another set of flight controls; the Helicopter has been converted back to a trainer, but by whom?

Mike pauses, and then eases himself into the now instructors seat and buckles himself in.

Captain Wherley climbs in next, and as he's buckling himself in, Mike is beginning to worry, because he doesn't have a helmet!

As Captain Wherley is about to start the Helicopter, Mike taps Captain Wherley on the shoulder and asks him, "Haven't you forgotten something?"

And when Captain Wherley looks back, his helmet has his call sign, 'Black Ghoul' stenciled across the front, and then he incredulously asked, "Like what?"

"Like maybe my helmet," replied Mike pointing to his head, "you told me you had one in the Helicopter."

"Ah' yes, so I did," said Captain Wherley with a grin, and then he reached down and produced a helmet and handed it back to Mike.

When Mike took the helmet, he noticed it had 'Pegasus' stenciled on the front; Mike stared for a moment, and then he asked, pointing to the marking, "What's this?"

"Your call sign—what else would it be?" Captain Wherley told him matter-of-factly, as he turned and started up the Helicopter.

Mike put the helmet on and Captain Wherley requested a takeoff clearance from the control tower.

As they flew southeast, Mike keyed the intercom and said, "You know I can't be seen wearing the helmet and the wings—you do know that of course?"

"Yeah—but in the mean time you're Pegasus and I'm Black Ghoul, and you're now a flight instructor, so start instructin'—I want to learn how to do those maneuvers you performed the last time we flew."

Mike shrugged his shoulders sighing, "Alright," and then he asked, "How good are you at performing loops and rolls?"

"Pretty bad—in fact—I can't perform either," replied Captain Wherley sounding embarrassed.

"You can't do a simple roll or loop! Didn't they teach you those maneuvers in flight school? Those are basic flight maneuvers!" Exclaimed Mike very surprised.

"We were told about the possibility of the aircraft doing those maneuvers, but because of the limitations in the Helicopter manual, we weren't taught how to execute them."

Mike just sat there in stunned silence, not believing what he just heard.

After a period of silence in which Mike sat there trying to make sense of this revelation, Captain Wherley came back on the intercom with, "Are you still with me?"

“Yeah, I’m still here. For your information, the limitations in the ‘Pilot’s Hand Book’ for this Helicopter is very, very conservative, and if I’m to teach you those maneuvers that I did last time, you’re going to have to learn how to do rolls and loops.”

“Ok then, let’s get started,” said Captain Wherley with enthusiasm.

“You don’t understand,” gasped Mike, “there isn’t enough time this morning! Before you can even begin to try those maneuvers that I did, you’ve got to master a perfect loop and do smooth controlled rolls. That’s going to take a lot of flight time. I don’t think your CO (Commanding Officer) is going to continue to let you go out on joy rides.”

“Who said anything about joy rides?” Captain Wherley retorted, “These are training flights. Once I inform my CO what’s required, he’ll authorize as many flights as required to get me trained in those maneuvers.”

“Ok—you’ve got the your flight time covered—what about me? I’m an E4 maintenance tech. I’m not a Pilot, much less a flight instructor—how are you going to explain me?”

“I already have,” replied Captain Wherley.

“What do you mean, ‘I already have’!” Exclaimed Mike looking aghast.

“I told my CO that Pegasus is stationed here on the base and he would be willing to train me on how to perform those maneuvers.”

“You told your CO about me—I’m so dead!” Exclaimed Mike almost shouting and losing his composure.

“Cool down—I told my CO about Pegasus, not you. He doesn’t know who Pegasus is or that you’re him, only that he’s stationed here and is willing to conduct training flights.”

“Yeah—and just how long do you think it’ll be before he figures it out, and then what am’ I going to do, --huh?” Mike Moans.

“So, --what if he does? With your flight skills, you should be a Pilot and a Commissioned Officer, teaching guys like me how to fly, not some maintenance tech fixing Helicopters, that’s a job for those who are unable to fly.”

“Yeah—well—I’ve heard that before, and besides, I don’t want to be an officer. I’m not going through training again like I went through in basic,” Mike blatantly telling Captain Wherley.

“Is that all you’re worried about—going through basic training again,” said Captain Wherley comprehending, “I assure you, it’s nothing like that—not even close.”

“No--it’s worse,” Mike shot back.

Captain Wherley began laughing, and then he said, “Most of the training is about how to lead, make decisions, and how to command. As an EXR Fighter Pilot, you already are doing most of that, so that part of the training

will be easy for you, besides, I think you may find it rather interesting. And yes, there is regimentation and it can be rather tough, but there's no verbal or physical abuse like there was in basic. I don't think you'll have any problems. All you have to do is follow orders, keep your gear and yourself straight and you should be fine. There is one other method of becoming an Officer, and that is, by being commissioned directly which you would definitely qualify for, but that happens very rarely now days."

Mike looked at him in silence until Captain Wherley inquired on the intercom, "Well, are you going to teach me how to perform a roll or not?"

"Ok, Ok, keep your socks on," Mike fervently told him, "I'll teach you how to execute a roll, and once I see that you can execute it flawlessly, then we'll move on to the loop. I'll not show you how to execute those advanced maneuvers that I did the last time, until you can master the basic roll, loop, and some very advanced pedal turns—you got that Sir?"

Captain Wherley nods with a big smile, "Got it—and you don't have to call me Sir while we're flying. Up here giving me flight lessons we're equal rank—Ok?"

"Ok--," returned Mike with a nod.

"One thing before I forget—when we land—be sure to remove the wing patch I put on your flight suit, and the helmet. We'll keep them out of sight in the Helicopter—Ok?"

Mike nods, and then he says, "Ok—but I can't take you up everyday, otherwise the guys in my outfit will get suspicious—especially my CO and Platoon Sergeant. So, once I show you how each maneuver is suppose to be done, then you go and practice it by yourself. Once I can see you execute the maneuver to my satisfaction, then we'll move onto the next—Ok?"

"Ok—I'm ready, so lets get started." said Captain Wherley.

So, Mike showed Captain Wherley how a simple roll is performed, and then Mike had Captain Wherley perform it.

The first few times Captain Wherley performed the roll, it was jerky, stiffly done, and really bad, but as the morning progressed, Captain Wherley began to catch on and his final executions weren't too bad.

It was almost lunch time when Captain Wherley and Mike landed in front of the maintenance hangar; after removing the wing-patch and the helmet, Mike, with the now completed repair form, gets out of the Helicopter and starts walking to the repair shop, Captain Wherley takes off and fly's to his hangar.

When Mike walks past his repair bay, there was a Helicopter parked there waiting to be repaired.

Mike went to the front office and turned in the completed repair order, and picked up a new repair order for the Helicopter in his bay.

After returning from lunch, Mike got started on the current job, the Helicopter in his bay.

When Mike began checking this Helicopter out, Mike couldn't find much wrong, so he did a routine preventive maintenance job and noted it on the Helicopter's log book and filed out the repair order respectively.

Two days later, after Mike had entered his repair bay, Sergeant Berkner walks in and hands Mike a repair order telling him, "Here—it seems as if there's still some problems with Captain Halver's Helicopter that you were working on a couple of day's ago."

Looking concerned, Mike takes the repair form and begins to read it.

"Sarge—there wasn't anything wrong with his Helicopter! All I did was a PM (Preventive Maintenance)—it's noted in the log book."

"Well—there's something wrong with it now!" The Sergeant firmly argued, "Maybe you missed or overlooked something."

"I didn't miss anything, Sarge, I checked that bird out thoroughly," Mike argued back.

"Just go out and take a look—she's parked outside," commanded Sergeant Berkner in a harsh tone.

So, Mike took the repair order, walked out of the repair shop and up to the Helicopter sitting nearby.

Mike was about to open the door to the cockpit when a Captain walked up; Mike came to attention and saluted with, "Sir?"

After returning the salute, the Captain introduced himself, "I'm Steven Halver, Rock Raker. I presume your Pegasus."

Upon hearing himself being addressed by his call, Mike got scared and quickly glanced around to see if anyone had overheard.

Seeing he was safe, Mike with a very red face said, in a soft pleading voice, "Please Sir, don't use my call here."

The Captain smiled and nods, and then he asked, "How about taking a little ride—I think you need to check out my ride," Captain Halver pointing to the repair order in Mike's hand.

Mike glances at the repair order and then remembering Captain Wherley, he asked, "You wouldn't be in need of flight instruction--Sir?"

Captain Halver looked at Mike and made a slight nodding gesture; Mike responded with, "I'll go and get suited up Sir," pointing to the repair shop, and then he sarcastically asked, "I won't be needing helmet, will I Sir?"

Captain Halver shook his head and Mike sarcastically remarked, “I didn’t think so, Sir. I’ll be back in a bit,” and he rapidly walked back to the repair shop.

Fifteen minutes later, Mike comes walking out of the repair shop wearing his flight suit and carrying an M20 and ammo, stows the M20 and the ammo, and climbs into the instructors seat; Captain Halver is already in his seat, and as soon as Mike is buckled in he starts the Helicopter.

As soon as the Helicopter is running, Captain Halver reaches down and produces a helmet; he hands the helmet back to Mike.

When Mike takes the helmet, he notices the wing-patch inside, so he takes the patch and applies it to his suit, puts the helmet on, and connects it to the Helicopter.

After Captain Halver gets a take-off clearance, they head out of the base and to the southeast, just as when he and Captain Wherley flew their training flight.

After they were flying for about three minutes, Mike came on the intercom and inquired, “How many more of you guys will I have to give flight instruction too?”

“For now—only myself and Black Ghoul, but there might be two more. There’re a couple of replacements coming from the States, —fresh from Fort Irwin,” replied Captain Halver.

“Wow—I don’t know if I can keep doing this,” Mike acknowledged, “I think my Platoon Sergeant is starting to get suspicious. I’ll train you and Black Ghoul, and then you two can train the others.”

“I’ll pass your concerns to my CO and let him handle the problem. Right now it’s very important that we learn how to execute those new maneuvers you used several weeks ago,” said Captain Halver with emphasis.

“You know about that encounter!” Exclaimed Mike.

“Yeah—it’s all over the Base.”

“THE BASE!” Exclaimed Mike shouting into the intercom mike, “I’m so dead, so dead!”

“No you’re not,” explained Captain Halver, “no one but myself and Black Ghoul knows that you’re Pegasus, so for now you’re safe.”

“Black Ghoul wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, anyway, I don’t know if I can keep doing this,” Mike told him, “it will require a lot of flight time by the time I can start teaching the two of you my maneuvers. Now, I would assume you can’t execute a roll or a loop in this aircraft—is that correct Sir?”

Captain Halver slowly nods his head, and then Mike sarcastically remarks, “I thought so. Rock Raker, in order to safely execute my easiest

maneuvers, you've got to flawlessly execute not only several versions of a roll and loop, but a couple of other basic maneuvers as well. I just don't see how I can pull this off without getting in trouble."

"How much flight time are we talking about?" Asked Captain Halver sounding very concerned.

"Fifty to a hundred hours, and that's just to get you to the point where I can start to introduce you to those advanced maneuvers of mine—it took me eighty hours with an aerobatic flight team to learn some of those maneuvers," explained Mike with a lot of uneasiness in his voice.

"Ok then, lets get started, the clock is running."

So, Mike spent the rest of the morning teaching Rock Raker how to execute a smooth roll.

Mike and the Captain were back at the repair shop at 11:30, just in time for lunch.

The next day there was another Helicopter parked in Mike's repair bay.

Mike had no more than sat at his bench and brought up the log on the Helicopter when Coffman walked in and handed Mike a repair order along with, "Here's the repair order for her," pointing to the Helicopter.

Mike takes the repair order, and then Coffman gives Mike a bit of advice, "I don't want to sound disciplinary, but try and do a good job on this bird. The last two birds you repaired came back within two weeks. That makes us look bad, —makes our squad look bad, —makes our platoon look bad--Ok?"

Mike looking worried nods, then Coffman imparts a piece of foreboding news, "The Old Man and the Platoon Sergeant have already put two marks next to your name—don't get another or else!"

A chill ran down Mike's back when he heard those words, then Coffman walks out of the repair bay.

A very anxious Mike began working on the Helicopter, knowing maybe this bird will also return, but not because it needs more work, but because the Pilot needs flight training.

When the horn blew break-time; Mike walked over to the break area got himself a hot cup of coco and sat down next to Travis Rozman.

Everyone sat quietly sipping coffee and hot coco until Wade Harris broke the silence, "You know there haven't been any more attacks since Mike and Captain Wherley, aka Pegasus, took out that group of insurgents. What was it like, Mike, flying with Pegasus?"

"Yeah—was it scary?" Asked Kurt Bolland.

Mike looked around the table; everyone was looking at him, waiting for an answer.

Mike shrugged his shoulders and said, “Naaa—well, maybe a little bit. Captain Wherley was the one doing most of the fighting, I was trying to get the stupid Helicopter to start, but I did launch an RPG and took out the pickup and the chain-gun—Captain Wherley took out the other pickup with the rocket launcher. Once I got the Helicopter started, we took off and Captain Wherley finished off the remaining insurgents, and we headed back and that’s all there is.”

“I’ve heard that Pegasus is a really hot EXR Pilot—he’s almost a legend,” remarked Coffman.

“Yeah—and I heard he took on and defeated four Marine F30’s from Miramar,” bragged Harris.

“I heard it was three, and he’s not a legend,” corrected Mike looking at his half empty cup of coco.

“Legend or not, he just saved our asses. In my book he’s a hero,” Coffman solemnly told them.

“Yeah, and we’re lucky he’s assigned to our Base, otherwise we’d all be heading home all shot up or worst—in a box,” Harris earnestly added.

Everybody nods except Mike; he just looks down at his cup.

“What’s the matter Troff, something bugging ya’?” Asked Matt Monty.

“I think he’s worried about not havin’ the bird he’s fixin’ not coming back in two weeks for the same problem. They’ve got their eye on him,” announced Coffman pointing with his thumb towards the office at the front of the shop.

“Gee’s Troff—you’d better get your shit together or they’ll be shippin’ you out,” said Rozman looking reproachful; Mike with a shameful red face took a drink from his cup and put it down on the table in front of him where he continued to stare at it.

Then the horn blew, the break was over and everyone got up; it wasn’t to soon for Mike.

Coffman commanded as he got up, “Breaks over, everyone to their work stations. Troff—don’t screw up—we’re watchin’.”

Mike nods and heads straight to his repair bay, and works on his Helicopter for the rest of that day.

Coffman came by several times and watched how Mike was performing the repair job; looking over Mike’s shoulder and making him feel nervous.

When the day ended, for Mike it was none too soon, and he was glad he could finally leave.

The next day shortly after Mike started working on the Helicopter, Coffman stomped into Mike's repair bay and threw down another repair order for Captain Wherley's helicopter, it seems as it's broken again, and with the same problem as the last time no less.

Coffman wasn't too pleased with this latest recall, and he made no bones about it, "Troff—this is your final chance—if you can't repair this aircraft then I'll find someone who can—do you get my drift?"

Mike intimidated and fearing the imprecations nods, and then picks up the repair order and heads for the door to the tarmac.

When Mike arrives at the Helicopter, Captain Wherley was waiting.

Mike saluted with, "Morning Sir. I suppose I'll need my flight suit?"

Captain Wherley returned the salute and nodded.

Mike turned without speaking and headed back to the repair shop.

Twenty minutes later, Mike returns wearing his flight suit, minus the helmet of course, and carrying his M20 and two ammo magazines.

Captain Wherley was already in the Helicopter and buckled up; Mike stowed the weapon and ammo and climbs into the instructor's seat.

As they flew southeast, Mike wasn't too jubilant and remained silent until Captain Wherley came on the intercom, "I've been practicing doing the roll since we last flew and I think I've got it down pretty good."

"You do, do ya'," said Mike in a cranky tone.

"Yeah—you wanta' see?"

"Ok—using your artificial horizon, roll to ninety degrees and hold it until I tell you otherwise," Mike gruffly tells him in that cranky tone.

There was a period of silence.

When no attempt was made by Captain Wherley, Mike came on the intercom and acidly said, "Well—I'm waiting."

"I've never tried to do a partial roll—I'm not sure if I can," said Captain Wherley sounding unsure.

"Just give it a try—you'll never know if you don't at least try," Mike earnestly tells him.

Captain Wherley proceeds to execute the requested maneuver, but fails to stop when the Helicopter reaches ninety degrees.

Mike grabs the flight controls and in a disdainful voice announces, "I've got the flight controls."

Once the Helicopter is under Mike's control, he returns the Helicopter to upright position, and then he says sardonically, "Here's how it supposed to be executed, —now watch the artificial horizon and how the flight controls move."

Mike rolls the Helicopter to ninety degrees and holds it there; the artificial horizon displays a vertical horizon at ninety degrees to the current horizon.

After flying at that attitude for a minute or so, Mike rolls the Helicopter back to normal, and then he orders Captain Wherley to try again.

Captain Wherley, trying to replicate what he saw Mike do, fails miserably, resulting in having Mike take over the flight controls before something bad happens.

Mike comes on the intercom and announces with dissatisfaction, “No, no, this isn’t going to cut it. You can’t proceed any further until you can fly a controlled roll—that’s it, —let’s head back to the Base.”

“What!” Exclaimed Captain Wherley, “Aren’t you going to show me how I’m to execute these controlled rolls—we still have lot’s of time before lunch.”

“I can’t—the instruction is over—I’m through,” Mike finally announces.

“Through!” Exclaimed Captain Wherley in surprise, as this revelation came out of the blue.

“Yeah, I can’t do this anymore,” Mike flatly tells him; “I’ve got an E5, my Platoon Sergeant, and my CO all on my case. I can’t keep getting this Helicopter to repair every week—they’re going to bust my ass and ship out for incompetency.”

There was a long exhale from Captain Wherley, and then he took the flight controls and headed back to the Base.

Mike pleading tells him on the intercom, “Sir, please don’t have anymore Helicopters come back unless they’re really in bad shape or in need of a PM. My ass is on the line here—sorry!”

“Ok Pegasus, I’ll inform my CO—but he’s not going to like this!”

“Thanks, and I’m really, really sorry,” said Mike with polite remorse.

When they land, Mike removes the helmet and wing-patch from his suit, after putting the wing-patch into the helmet he hands it to Captain Wherley with, “Here—I won’t be needing these anymore.”

Captain Wherley hesitantly takes the helmet with a nod.

Mike gets out of the Helicopter and walks back to the repair shop.

On the way to the locker room to change, he passes Coffman and tells him, “I can assure you that, that Helicopter won’t be returning for the same problem anytime soon.”

“For your sake—you better be right,” came the warning from Coffman; Mike gave him a discontented look and proceeded to the locker room.

For the next several weeks, and well into September, Mike worked on

several Helicopters, none of them being the two from Captain Wherley and Captain Halver.

CHAPTER 5 -- Transferred.

As soon as Captain Wherley had landed and got unsuited, he headed straight to his Squadron Commander's office.

Looking distraught, Captain Wherley entered Major Dean Debolt's office, interrupting a meeting with Captain Halver; they were discussing a support mission to the southeast near the Kurdish border.

"Captain Wherley what's so important that you need to interrupt my meeting with Captain Halver?" Major Debolt irritably asked.

"Pegasus has quit—he's not conducting anymore flight training," Captain Wherley pointedly told him.

"He can't do this," Major Debolt angrily barked.

Picking up his phone, he sternly commands into the phone, "Get me Major Booker," and while he's waiting, he comments to Captain Wherley, "Who does he think he is—as soon as I have a talk with his Squadron Commander he'll be back instructing or else he'll find himself in the brig for insubordination."

Hearing those words, Captain Wherley is making wincing gestures.

Then as the connection is completed and Major Booker comes on line, Captain Wherley clears his throat and shakes his head softly saying, "He's not in Alpha Squadron—Sir," making another wincing gesture.

Major Debolt politely excuses himself, "Sorry Booker—my mistake—have a good day—I'll catch ya' later at the club—bye," and he pushes the lever in the headset cradle, terminating the connection.

While still holding the handset, Major Debolt gruffly asked, "So, what Squadron is he assigned to—'B', 'C'?"

"Neither—he's not in a flight Squadron—per se!" Replied Captain Wherley with a wince.

"Not in a Squadron? What aren't you telling me?" Major Debolt gruffly asked looking incredulous.

"Well Sir," begins Captain Wherley wincing again, and then with some hesitancy he softly explains, "Pegasus isn't a commissioned officer, he's an enlisted man—an E4 maintenance tech over at the 127th HQ Company."

AN E4 MAINTENANCE TECH," Major Debolt bellowed; Captain Wherley nods now cringing.

Then Major Debolt drops the handset into the phone handset cradle and leaned back in his chair and throws his arms in the air in disbelief.

Captain Halver pipes up suggesting, “Can’t we have him transferred to our Company. It isn’t as if he’ll be transferred to another Brigade, he’s still in the 19th, but in a different Company.”

“Yeah—that’s a possibility,” said Major Debolt with raised brow, “but, the bigger problem is that—he’s a blasted E4 and not a commissioned officer, and Army Regs prohibit enlisted men from flying in controlled airspace.”

“Well then, send him to OCS, he’ll be back in three months as a Second Lieutenant, give him his wings and we’re in business,” said Captain Halver offering a simple solution.

Captain Wherley wincing again and stood there, shaking his head.

“Now what’s the blasted problem?” Major Debolt gruffly asked.

“He’ll have nothing to do with OCS—Sir. The Kid doesn’t want to go through the rigorous training. If you want him to be an officer, you’re going to have to give him a direct commission,” explained Captain Wherley.

Major Debolt shook his head saying, “That’s not possible, the Army isn’t giving direct commissions anymore—the Kid has to go to OCS—there’s no other way—ands’, ifs’, or buts!”

Captain Wherley just stood there with a blank look while Captain Halver nods.

Then Major Debolt announced, “Before we can send him to OCS, we need to get him transferred to our Company. I’ll get a hold of our CO, Colonel Degrote, and see what he can do to get Pegasus... What’s his name?”

“It’s Specialist Four Michael Troff, Sir,” replied Captain Wherley with a smile.

“Yes, Troff—to get our Mister Troff transferred to us, and then we’ll see about changing his mind about going to OCS,” said Major Debolt with a smug grin.

For the next week, Captain Wherley and Captain Halver, in their spare time, continued to practice what Mike had taught them, while Major Debolt and their Company Commander, Colonel Degrote started navigating through the Army’s bureaucracy of getting Mike transferred to their Company.

The last Wednesday in September Sergeant Berkner walks into Lieutenant Grier’s small office and hands him a sheet of paper with, “Sir, the First Sergeant is asking if there are any men we would like to replace. He’s hinting that the Army is in need of combat men for the NATO units in India.”

The Lieutenant looks at the sheet of paper, and then he looks up and asks, “Is there anyone that you would like to replace?”

They look at the roster board on the wall with all of the names of the men in the Platoon.

After scanning the list of names, Sergeant Berkner replies with a nod, “I see a couple of men I would like to replace—one for sure,” pointing to the name.

“He’s one of our last replacements, —are you sure about him?” Asked Lieutenant Grier.

“Yeah, he’s having problems and isn’t meeting expectations,” replied Sergeant Berkner.

“We’ll be short two men—the replacement for Specialist Derry hasn’t arrived yet—are you sure about this?” Asked Lieutenant Grier, Sergeant Berkner nods with, “Yeah—I’m sure Sir—we’ll get by, he wasn’t carrying his part of the load anyway.”

“Ok then—have his transfer papers on my desk by this afternoon. I’ll sign them and have em’ back to you by quitting time,” Sergeant Berkner nods and walks out of the office.

The following Friday morning, Mike was standing in the o-eight-hundred formation when several names were call and those men formed into a Squad off to one side.

Then another name was called, it was one of the Mechanics in the Third Squad from the Motor Pool.

Then shockingly, Mike’s name is called next!

He looks at the other members of his Squad in surprise and wonders what’s this all about.

Mike steps out of formation and walks over to the assembled Squad standing off to the side and takes his place on the end; there he waits as the Company is dismissed and his Platoon boards the Bus to the Motor Pool and Hangars.

A Staff Sergeant steps up to the line of men and sarcastically announces in a somewhat cheery tone, “You lucky son-of-bitches are leaving us. You’re heading back to the States, —apparently, your skills are needed elsewhere. A T T E N N T I O N! RIGHT FACE—F O O W A R D--MARCH!”

With a very worried look on his face, Mike and the rest of the men were marched into the building and into the Orderly Room.

In the Orderly Room, Mike was told to sit in a chair and wait his turn.

Thirty minutes later, Mike’s name is called and he gets up and goes over and stands in front of the same Clerk, Specialist Meyers, that he reported to

when he arrived over four months ago.

Specialist Meyers said, as he handed Mike's DD201 data disk to him, "Clear your wall-lockers, turn in your field gear and bedding to the Quartermaster, and when you return at thirteen hundred I'll take your meal card and give you your orders—a ride will take you to the airfield where you'll depart—and oh yeah, the uniform is ACU's—any questions?"

"Yeah—like why was I selected and where am I going?" Asked Mike feeling shafted.

"Can't say why you were selected, all I know is, your name was on the transfer list from your Platoon Leader. You're going to Fort Hunter—that's..."

"In California—yeah I know where it's at—I've been there before—at Camp Roberts for basic training," replied Mike breaking in with repugnance, "what about my books and stuff in my security locker?"

"Security will take care of it—you won't need em' here anymore," replied Specialist Meyers making a sarcastic grin.

"Well—is that it, can I go?" Asked Mike pointing to the door.

"Yeah, we're finished—don't forget to stop and turn in your meal card, pick up your orders, and sign out," reminded Specialist Meyers; Mike nods and walks out of the Orderly Room.

Mike, feeling disgruntled heads to his room; once inside he opens both lockers and begins to unload them, packing his things into his duffle and civilian bags.

It was nearly eleven thirty, when Mike walked into the Quartermaster room, and placed his field gear and bedding on the counter; by the time everything was checked in it was lunchtime.

Sitting by himself in dining room eating lunch, Mike was soon joined by Bollard, Rozman, and Coffman.

Coffman was the first to speak, "Really sorry about this, but I warned ya' about doin' quality work."

"Were you the one responsible for getting me transferred?" Mike harshly asked.

"No—it wasn't me," replied Coffman, "I'm not high enough on the totem pole to make those decisions. I told you Sergeant Berkner and Lieutenant Grier had several marks next to your name—my guess it was them."

"I saw security cleanin' out your document locker," remarked Bollard.

Mike, with a quick turn of his head, looks at Bollard and exclaims with a surprised expression, "Already!"

“When are you cleaning out your wall lockers?” Asked Rozman.

“Already have.”

“So when are ya’ leaving?” Asked Bollard.

Mike glances up at the clock and replies, “My ride’s picking me up in about an hour.”

The four men sat eating in silence, and then one by one they got up and turned in their trays and walked out of the mess hall.

As Mike’s fellow Squad members board the Bus for the Hangars, Mike heads up the stairs to his room.

After changing into a fresh set of ACU’s, he stuffs his old uniform in his duffle bag.

After grabbing both bags, Mike gives the room one last look and walks out the door.

Entering the Orderly Room, Mike walks up and announces, “I’m here to sign out—is my ride here?”

The Clerk, Specialist Meyers, nods and requests, “I need your mess card.”

Mike removes the card from his wallet and hands the card to Meyers, Specialist Meyers receives the card, and then after handing Mike a copy of his new orders, points to the ledger saying, “You’re clear to sign out—your ride is waiting outside.”

Mike nods and signs out, grabs his two bags, turns, and walks out the door.

Outside, he finds a van with six other poor soles whom are also being transferred; Mike takes a seat in the back, the only vacant seat.

The van drives over to the airfield, the same one where Mike first arrived.

There he and the other six men get out; a Staff Sergeant is waiting and has them form up, and then they are marched out onto the airfield; there they waited until it was time to board one of three military troop transports.

This time the aircraft was the passenger style, so Mike won’t be riding back to the States in a loud, bouncy, cargo hauler.

Mike places his duffle and civilian bag on a conveyor that moves his and the other men’s belongings into the cargo hold, and then he climbs the boarding steps into the airplane.

After entering the aircraft, Mike finds an empty seat next to another guy sitting next to the window.

On this long flight, Mike won't have the luxury of looking out the window; it's beginning to look like this will be a long boring ride back.

Mike reads the nametag of the guy on his right by the window, as Buchkolz, so he offers his hand with, "I'm Mike Troff. You headin' back for reassignment?"

"Ken Buchkolz here, and no—I'm getting out, my enlistment is up and I'm headin' home," replied the Sp5 taking Mike's hand, "and you?"

Mike shakes his head, only been in a little over a year, been reassigned to Fort Hunter. Sure, wish I were like you. What's your MOS?"

"44COM391, communications," Ken tells Mike, "just spent two years at Cetin."

"Hey—me too," Mike quickly returned.

"So how long where you there?" Asked Ken.

"A little over four months," Mike replied, looking somewhat embarrassed.

"Four months! Exclaimed Ken surprised, "What did you do to get the boot?"

Mike just shrugged his shoulders.

Then Ken asked, "What's your MOS?"

"58HAP100, Helicopter repair."

"So—what ya' going to be doin' at Hunter, repairin' Helicopters?" Inquired Ken.

"I don't know—maybe so," returned Mike.

"You know," the guy on Mike's left who just sat down pipes up, "Fort Hunter's Annex, Camp Roberts is a nice place. There are new roads, barracks and such. They even remodeled some of the nicer older buildings. Army Rangers are now trained there, and I'm going there myself—Advance Combat Training—hoping someday to become one of em'. I'm Greg, Greg Gressett, and I've just reenlisted," offering his hand; Mike takes his hand, looking incredulous.

With disbelief, Mike asks, "Seriously—why in the world would you want to reenlist?"

"To become a Ranger, a bump in rank, and a nice chunk of cash," he replied with a grin. Mike looks at his collar and sees the double chevrons of a Corporal and retorts, "You reenlisted for the rank of E4, a Corporal?"

"No," replied Greg, "after I graduate from the four weeks of training, I'll get E5, Sergeant."

For the next several hours, as they flew across the Atlantic, the three men exchanged information about themselves, where they come from, and what they like doing for fun.

It was dark outside when the seatbelt light came on, the pilot announced on the overhead paging speakers that they were about to touch down at Andrews Air Force base, and that this is as far as this airplane is going until it's refueled.

Now this was a big surprise for Mike, because he thought he would fly nonstop to the west coast.

After the airplane landed and taxied over to a building and stopped, all the lights inside the plane came on, and then everyone got up.

Ken said, as he got up, "This is as far as I'm going. I'll be going to Fort Belvoir to get mustered out—it's a short distance up the freeway. Good luck to you guys."

After shaking each other's hands, they got off the airplane.

Outside of the airplane a staff sergeant was waiting and had the men form up; he then marched them away from the aircraft and over to a building nearby.

Then he gave them at ease and said, "Those of you who are going to Belvoir, fall out and get on that Bus," pointing to a olive green military Bus waiting at the side of the tarmac with its engine running.

Ken broke rank, along with several other men.

First, they walked over to a trailer, loaded with baggage, which had just come from the airplane; after grabbing their baggage, they walked over to the waiting Bus and got on.

Then the Sergeant told them, "Behind you is a cafeteria and latrines, for those who would like to grab a bite to eat and relieve yourselves, —it'll be about an hour before the plane is refueled and is ready for re-boarding."

With the hiss of releasing air brakes, the Bus began to move away, and then Mike, Greg, and the other men broke ranks and went into the building with the cafeteria.

Finding a small table with two chairs, Mike and Greg sat down to enjoy their dinner; breakfast will be at Fort Hunter.

An hour later and refreshed, Mike and Greg walked back outside and got back into formation.

After spending, what seemed like another hour, the word was received that the airplane was ready for boarding, so the Sergeant marched them back to the airplane where they re-boarded the plane.

Reclaiming their previous seats, Mike and Greg sat down and fastened their seatbelts.

Soon the aircraft was moving down the taxiway to the runway.

After stopping at the holding line, as several F30 Jet Fighter's took off, they rolled unto the runway; a short time later, they were headed down the runway and with a slight bump, they were airborne.

The airplane banked and headed west.

Several hours later, as the Sun was just coming up, the plane landed at the Paso Robles Municipal Airport.

Another olive green Bus was waiting, for those bound for Fort Hunter, as Mike and a group of men formed up in front of a Staff Sergeant holding a clipboard.

After each man's name was checked off the sheet on the clipboard, they got on Bus, after the Staff Sergeant gave the clipboard to the Driver; he stowed it in a compartment in the front of the Bus, and then he took his seat behind the wheel, closed the door, and now it was time to head to Fort Hunter.

Pulling into a large parking lot, the Bus came to a stop; there was another group of men standing in formation, with another Staff Sergeant in charge, they seem to be waiting for them.

When the Bus Driver opened the door, the Staff Sergeant stepped in and grabbed the stowed clipboard and removed the page adding it to the pages on his clipboard, then he commanded, "EVERYONE OUT—ON THE DOUBLE—NOW MOVE IT," to Mike's chagrin.

As Mike and the other men disembark, the Staff Sergeant barked, "FALL IN! LET'S MOVE IT—WE DON'T HAVE ALL DAY."

All of the men form up into a large Platoon, and as Mike stands there, he remembers this place where he'd gotten off the Bus, several times, from Camp Roberts.

The parade ground is just across the street, bringing back some bad memories.

Once everyone had formed up, the Staff Sergeant calls them to attention.

Then the Staff Sergeant orders, "As I call your name, you're to re-board the Bus for Camp Roberts. The rest of you are assigned to Fort Hunter."

As the Staff Sergeant began reading names and they re-boarded the Bus, Mike got a bad feeling; sure enough, his name was called followed by Greg's, and then both Greg and Mike got back on the Bus.

Greg inquired of Mike as he sat down next to him, "Aren't you supposed to stay here at Fort Hunter?"

Mike just shrugged his shoulders looking confused and very apprehensive.

Then the doors close, the Bus started up, drove out of the Fort, and headed down the road; Mike remembered this very same trip.

Thirty minutes later, the Bus entered Camp Roberts, and as the Bus drove through the post, it brought back lot's of bad memories for Mike, and to be back here was repulsive.

Just to see this place was disheartening and made him uneasy about being here; for Greg, he was excited.

When the Bus entered the basic training area of Camp Roberts and pulled into a compound similar to one in basic training, he got a foreboding feeling.

Then the Bus pulled up behind one already there; men on that Bus were disembarking and forming up a short distance away with a Drill Sergeant in-charge.

As soon as the door opened, a Staff Sergeant poked his head in and loudly commanded, ALL RIGHT, YOU ALL KNOW THE DRILL—OUTSIDE, ON THE DOUBLE! NOW MOVE IT, MOVE IT, MOVE IT!"

Fear shot through Mike as he, Greg, and the rest of the occupants quickly got up, grabbed their duffle bags, civilian bags, and hurried off the Bus.

Forming up into a Platoon next to the other Platoon, Mike was in disbelief, for here he was again, back in basic training, but why?

After two more Buses pull up behind the one Mike had been in and unloaded, the Staff Sergeant finds he's several men short and gets them from those other two Buses, and then he calls attention and orders the platoon into proper dress formation, then he gave them at ease, "Good morning men, I'm sure you're all hungry and you'll be shortly taken over to the mess hall for breakfast, but first, I want to welcome you to 'Advanced Combat Training' and my name is Staff Sergeant Axtell, your Platoon Sergeant. For the next four weeks, your CO is Captain Pelkey, and the First Sergeant is Sergeant Kapler—remember their names, you will be quizzed on them later. Now for some basic information, linen exchange will be every Monday morning before breakfast. Reveille is at 0530, first formation is at 0800, and there will be one at 1300 and a final at 1700. Your quarters and gear will be kept neat at all times and will be subject to inspection at anytime except on Sundays—that includes Saturdays. Saturday will be considered a work day and there will be two formations—one at 0800 and the other at 1300."

Fear shot through Mike when he heard Sergeant Axtell introduce himself!

Mike stood frozen in shock knowing he's going through basic again!

Standing in the middle of the third squad, with Greg next to him, Sergeant Axtell hadn't recognized him yet.

Then Sergeant Axtell brought the platoon to attention; shortly after coming to attention the Platoon next to them started running to the first barracks by squads.

"Now when I dismiss you, you're to run to that barracks," commanded Axtell pointing to the building next to the one the other platoon just ran to, "go inside and claim a bunk, leave your bags, and then return on the run back here, where I'll take you over to the Quartermaster to get your bed linen, any questions?" They all shouted, "NO SERGEANT!"

"Great—FALL OUT!"

The platoon broke ranks and ran to the building pointed to by Sergeant Axtell.

When Mike ran past Sergeant Axtell, he did a double take, and then he smiled.

Inside the barracks, which was identical to the one he'd been in during basic, Mike and Greg entered the cubical on the left at the rear of the barracks, the one with the sign indicating the Third Squad.

Mike claimed the bottom bunk on the right side at the back of the cubical; his wall locker was next to the back wall, along with the wall locker for the man in the top bunk.

A window without a shade separated the two sets of wall lockers at the back of the cubical for both sets of double bunks.

Greg selected the bottom bunk on the left.

After depositing his duffle and civilian bags on his new bunk, Mike hurries out of the cubical, the barracks, and gets back into line in the platoon.

After everyone had returned, Sergeant Axtell brings them back to attention and marches them to the Quartermaster for their bedding.

With his bed linen, Mike is marched back to the Second Platoon Barracks where they're dismissed to deposit their bed linen on their bunks; they'll make their bunks later, but first, breakfast is in order.

Back in formation, the Second Platoon is marched over to the mess hall where the platoon is dismissed for breakfast.

After placing a plate on his tray, Mike fills it with flapjacks and syrup, followed by a couple pieces of toast; after placing a glass of cold milk on his tray, Mike finds an empty table and sits down, very depressed.

A few minutes later, Greg asks if he can join him, Mike nods and Greg sits down opposite of Mike.

Then two more E4's ask to sit, with nods of approval from Mike and Greg, they join them.

The E4 to Mike's left, is a Specialist like Mike, and introduces himself, "I'm Roger Talbott—I guess we're the only E4's in the Platoon."

Mike and Greg glance around and notice everyone else sitting nearby, are E2's and E3's.

When another platoon enters the mess hall, they notice several more E4's, all a mix of Corporals and Specialists.

The other E4, also a Specialist, introduces himself, "I'm Pat Littlefield. So—why are you guys here—personally, I got volunteered?"

"Greg Gressett here," Greg introducing himself, "I re-upped for this school, I'll get E5 when I graduate in four weeks, plus a nice chunk of cash to go along."

This piece of information caused Pat and Roger to give Greg a rather obnoxious stare.

Then Roger remarked in a rude manner, "We have a lifer eating with us."

Pat looked at Roger and inquired, "Did you re-up too?"

Roger gave Pat a quick turn and huffishly told him, "Not on your life—I also got volunteered."

Then they looked at Mike silently eating, waiting for his introduction and reason for being here, but none was forthcoming.

"Well?" Pat grunted getting impatient.

Mike looked up at the three faces looking back and told them, "Mike Troff, and I don't have a clue as to why I'm here—probably been volunteered like you two," looking at Pat and Roger.

As the E4's ate and discussed their apparent fate, Mike continued to eat in silence feeling very melancholy.

When everyone had finished eating, they all got up and deposited the dirty dinnerware and trays at the disposal window, and then walked back to the barracks.

When they entered, Sergeant Axtell was already waiting and called for their attention, "Everyone at ease! Gather around I've got some more information I wanta' pass on. In a few minutes, we're going to fall out and I'll take you back to the Quartermaster to get your field gear. When you get back, you'll have the rest of the day to make your beds, get your wall lockers, footlockers, and barrack's in order. Monday I'll take you over to get

processed in and issue you your weapons, because on Tuesday you'll begin training—any questions?"

A hand went up from near the back of the Group; Sergeant Axtell pointed to him.

"Will there be another PT test and weapons qualifications—I just had them a couple of weeks ago?" The Private asked.

"Yes, but only for those who hadn't qualified in last six months, there will also be a PT test you'll be required to take whether or not you just had one. This is an Army requirement for each of you each year—any more questions?"

With no further hands being raised, Sergeant Axtell said, "Men—this isn't basic, you've all been through that, so you all know what's expected. I'm not a Drill Sergeant and I'm not going to babysit you. There isn't going to be any final written exams per se'. What you learn in the next four weeks may keep you alive and well, or ending up going home a cripple or worst—in a box. So, if there aren't anymore questions, fall out."

Knowing the repercussions of what the next four weeks will bring, Mike feeling very uncertain and melancholy hurries towards the door of the barracks; after all, he didn't ask for any of this!

As Mike hurries past Sergeant Axtell, Axtell grabs him and pulls him aside and says, "Troff—don't let what happened between us in basic, get in the way of your current training. As I just told you, I'm not a Drill Sergeant, so there isn't going to be any restrictions handed out. Your life and those around you will depend on what you learn—do you understand?" Mike nodded with, "Yes Sergeant."

"Ok then, get outside we've lot's of work to do before lights out tonight."

After forming up they were marched back over to the Quartermaster and were issued field gear, this time to Mike's surprise, he got a Chameleon suit.

After they returned to the barracks and dismissed, they hurried inside and began to get things setup and in-order; to Mike's surprise, there was a civilian wall locker, so he is able keep his civilian clothes, but whether he can wear them is another question.

CHAPTER 6 -- Basic Training Redux.

Monday morning arrived with that loud bugle, sounding reveille; bringing back memories, that Mike tries to forget.

Mike crawled out of his bunk, gets his shower slippers, shaving kit, and then heads to the latrine, hoping he'll wake up and discover that this is all a bad dream.

Once in the shower, the cold water from the nozzle brought him to the realization that this is for real, he's back in basic training!

Readjusting the hot and cold valves until the water is warm, Mike lathers-up; later after toweling off, Mike goes over to shave.

Back in his cubical, Mike puts his slippers and shaving kit back, and begins getting dress for the days activities.

After getting, his area in order and bed made to military specifications, it time to head to the mess hall for breakfast.

With his usual helping of flapjacks and syrup, toast, and cold milk, Mike locates an empty table and sits down; wanting to be by himself in this nightmare, he's soon joined by Greg, Roger, and Pat.

Pat yawning says, "For awhile I thought this was all a bad dream until that damn horn blew."

"Yeah, I hear ya'—I know," grumbled Mike with discontent.

Then into the mess hall walked Sergeant Axtell, together with the other three Platoon Sergeants and the First Sergeant.

When the four E4's see them, Roger retorts, "Well, let the games begin—this nightmare is about to get real."

"It's not all that bad—you'll see," Greg tells them with a smile, trying to lift their spirits, but all he gets from the other three are obnoxious stares.

After languishing through the meal, Mike and the other E4's head for the disposal window.

Back in the barracks, Mike and the rest of his Squad sit on their foot-lockers, waiting for the word to fall out when into the cubical walks Sergeant Axtell; the men quickly stand.

Sergeant Axtell has another man with him, an E2 from the Fourth Squad, and firmly announces, "Private Schones will be replacing Corporal Gressett," to everyone's shocked surprise, "Corporal Gressett, you're to unload your wall lockers and tear down your bunk, but first come with me. Troff, you're now the Leader of this Squad and I want you to come with me

too.”

Looking shocked and dismayed, Mike nods and when Sergeant Axtell turns to leave, Mike glances over to Greg with a perplexed expression, Greg returns with the same expression, and then they proceeded to follow the Sergeant.

Following Sergeant Axtell, Mike and Greg are led to the back of the barracks where the two cadre rooms are located.

After opening the door on the left, Sergeant Axtell motions with his hand for them to enter, after Mike and Greg are inside, Sergeant Axtell enters closing the door behind him.

From their experience in basic, both Mike and Greg know why they are here.

Sergeant Axtell begins by telling them, “As you’ve probably guessed, because of your current rank, you’re both are now Squad Leaders. Gressett you’re now the leader of the Fourth Squad,” looking and pointing at Greg, “so, the both of you are to move your gear in here—this is where you’ll both be bunkin’. Now for your first assignments—just like when you were in basic this barracks needs to be maintained, so it’s up to you to see that each of your Squads get the place in-order before you fall out for the 0800 formation each morning. That also includes Saturday inspections, which by the way, will be every Saturday. Now as you know, there are four basic areas that need takin’ care of, they are the latrine, the laundry room, the hallway and the outside area around this barracks. For the rest of this week, the Third Squad has the hallway, and the Fourth Squad has the laundry room—so, see that it gets done—you have about thirty minutes before formation. One thing more, have your men bring their DD201 Disk with them when they fall out,—any questions?”

“Why us—me?” Mike asked.

“Because, as I just got done tellin’ you,” Sergeant Axtell firmly tells him, “you are one of the four ranking men in this platoon. And—because of your record, you’re a natural leader—now we’ll see just how good you are.”

With Greg looking surprised, Mike feels apathy, but he nods; then giving both men a resolute look, Sergeant Axtell walks out of the door.

“Well—I guess we better inform our Squads about the details,” said Greg with a sigh, Mike nods and they both head back to their respective Squads.

When Mike entered his Squads cubical, he formally told them about the details and about the Saturday inspections.

“So let’s jump to it—we got less than thirty minutes to get this hallway swept,” commanded Mike.

So, while his men swept the hallway, Mike unloaded his wall locker; Greg also came in and started to unload his.

For the next thirty minutes, which wasn’t very much time, as the two Squads did the chores, Mike and Greg walked back-and-forth carrying their gear to their new quarters.

It was five to the hour, when Mike had finished transferring his stuff to his new room; his Squad had finished sweeping the hallway and was sitting on their footlockers.

Pete Schones had moved his footlocker from his old Squad to the foot of his new bunk which was now vacant, because Greg had removed it, as it was filled with his field gear.

No more had Pete gotten the foot locker squared away, when fall out was shouted from the front of the barracks; everyone ran out of the barracks and formed up into Platoons, Mike stood at the head of the Third Squad and the other E4’s at the head of their Squads.

When Sergeant Axtell called for each Squad to report, Mike saluted with, “Third Squad all present or accounted for.”

After all of the formalities have been dispensed with, the Company Commander, Captain Pelkey, ordered First Sergeant Kapler to have the Platoons start the days activities; which today was getting the men processed in.

Unlike when Mike was here the last time, this time when they marched out, they were all in step, with Mike leading his Squad of seven men.

On the way to the processing center, they marched on some of the same pathways that Mike had been down before, and he wasn’t having pleasant memories; this was the nightmare he had of getting recycled.

Arriving at the processing building, each Platoon by Squad entered and handed the DD201 Disk to a Soldier sitting at a computer terminal.

After a few minutes of checking through everything, they were told they could leave.

When Mike’s turn came, he sat there waiting for the word to leave, when the Soldier looking at the monitor abruptly remarked, “What have we got here?”

“Is there something wrong?” Mike nervously asked with concern.

“It says here you refused to go to OCS,” then he turns to Mike and asks, “may I ask why?”

Mike replies nonplus shrugging his shoulders, “I don’t know--I just don’t want to be an officer, that’s all.”

“Does your Platoon Sergeant know about the recommendation?”

“Yeah—I believe he does,” replied Mike, remembering the conversation about him being a natural leader in his room earlier.

“My advice, —go for it. You’ll be out of here in a flash, and in three months you’ll have these Sergeants saluting you and taking your orders,” said the Soldier; Mike just looked at him and shook his head.

“Ok—but you’re making a mistake,” the Soldier advising, “once these training Sergeants find out what’s in your 201, they’ll be on your case until you give in—mark my words.”

Mike looking appalled asked, “Can you remove the recommendation?”

The Soldier shook his head and tells Mike, “Can’t, that’s illegal—I can be sent to Leavenworth for the rest of my life, sorry friend. But if I were you, I’d go to OCS.”

Then the Soldier told Mike he could go, so Mike gets up and feeling even more downhearted, walks out of the building and rejoins his Platoon.

Once everyone had returned, all of the Platoons were brought to attention and marched out and back down the pathway.

The next stop was the barbershop; Mike’s nightmare just got worst, as well as the other two E4’s, but Greg was enjoying it quite smugly.

An hour and forty minutes later, with his hair cut to basic training specifications, Mike and his Platoon were marching on the pathway going to where, one can only imagine?

When they turned and marched into the Post Infirmary, Mike rolled his eyes and mumbled to himself, “Of course--all we need to make this nightmare perfect is a bit of pain and agony.”

To Mike’s relief he only needed two boosters, and they were given together as one shot with minimal pain and only a small amount of discomfort which passed within the next two hours.

At noon, they were back in their company area and standing in line in the mess hall for chow.

Sitting at a table with his fellow Squad Leaders, Pat, out of curiosity asks, “Well, what kind of torture do you think they’ve got in-store for us this afternoon?”

“Don’t know, but I’m sure we’re going to find out,” retorts Roger shrugging his shoulders; Mike quietly eating looks at Roger expressionless.

Then, Greg says to Mike, “Well, you sure are quiet.”

Mike looks at him and says dismissively, “There isn’t anything worth sayin’,” and goes back to eating his hash browns.

After the 1300 formation, the four Platoons were back on the pathway, marching back towards the main part of the post.

Finally, they arrive at a large building with large double steel doors, which were propped open and looking quite dark inside.

Once all of the Platoons were assembled along the side of the building, they then, in an orderly fashion, entered the building through the open double doors.

Once inside, Mike discovered it was the large dimly lit auditorium he was in before; they filed into the seats and sat down.

After everyone had been seated, the stage in front was lit up and an Officer, a full Colonel, walked from the right side of the stage to a podium at the center and began to speak, “Good afternoon men and welcome,” he said good-naturally and the seated men loudly chorused, “GOOD AFTERNOON SIR.”

Then the Colonel introduced himself and this lecture, “I’m Colonel Orrin Holtan and this is an orientation of what the next four weeks of training will entail,” he pauses for a second or three, and then continues, “starting tomorrow you will undergo vigorous physical and field training, followed by more lectures like this one.”

Mike, Pat, and Roger all grimaced, even Greg, who was looking forward to this, was now looking distraught.

After twenty minutes of explaining the training and what is expected, the Colonel in a very solemn tone informed the men what the final test will be, “Now for you final examination. During the final fourth week of your Advanced Training, each of you will be taken to a drop-off point and you will, with what you’ve learned, hike to a predetermine point and complete a mission objective and return to the drop-off point. You will have three day’s in which to complete the objective, just as if you were on a mission. You will use the information you learned in previous weeks of training to survive—and men—the key word here is—survive! While on the three-day mission, you’ll only have three MRE’s and the only weapons you’ll have are your MK12 Combat Knife and MH4 Hatchet-Tomahawk. On the afternoon of the third day, at 1600 hours you better be back at the drop-off point, because men, your ride won’t wait longer than thirty minutes. If you miss your ride, you’ll have to use the emergency transponder to summon your extraction, and to get extracted because you couldn’t return to the drop-off point in time, is to fail, and to fail means you’ll redo the training course until you pass. So, take the training very seriously and good luck to each of you,” done speaking, the Colonel walks from the podium and off the stage from where he came.

As Mike and his Platoon wait to leave, Mike mumbles, “Oh great! Now it becomes serious! What other crap are they going to shove down our throats?”

Then they are ordered to get up and file out, the orientation is over and it’s time to leave.

Back outside, the Platoons are marched out and head back down the pathway, after a bit of double-timing, and chanting cadence, they arrive at a large PT field; for Mike, the nightmare keeps getting worst.

After an hour of PT, and very wet with sweat, the Platoons are on their way back to the Company area.

After at ease is given, each Platoon Sergeant gives their Platoons some final instructions before the men are dismissed.

Sergeant Axtell tells his men, “That’s all for today, tomorrow you will begin the training in earnest. Those of you who still have your foot and wall lockers to get in order—you have the rest of the afternoon to do so—take advantage of this time—there’s going to be an open foot and wall locker inspection on Saturday. Believe me when I tell you, that after the training the next four days you won’t be feeling like getting your gear ready for inspection. After the last formation, each day, you’re free to wear civvies and leave the area. A Bus will stop every half hour over by the Company HQ. You can use that to visit the main commissary, theaters, USO, etcetera. Be sure you’re back by lights out at 2200, when bed check is made, or you’ll be listed as AWOL—any questions?”

An E2 in the Second Squad raised his hand, Sergeant Axtell pointed to him, and the E2 asked, “You’re telling us we can wear civilian clothes and leave the Company area?”

“Yes—this isn’t basic and I’m not a Drill Sergeant—any more questions?”

With no one raising their hands, Sergeant Axtell brought them to attention and promptly dismissed them; thirty-two smiling faces head for the barracks.

When Mike entered his room, he went straight to the pile of civilian clothes he had on his bunk.

After selecting a pair of jeans, a shirt, socks, and athletic shoes, he quickly changed.

With a large smile on his face, Greg did likewise while happily announcing, “You see, it isn’t going to be so bad—we can even wear our civvies.”

Looking at him, Mike grunted, “Just wait until this time tomorrow, then we’ll see what you have to say—I’ll bet you won’t be so chipper then,” Greg looked at Mike stone-faced.

Mike, Greg, Pat, and Roger spent the rest of the afternoon getting their wall lockers in order.

When it was time for dinner, the four men all wearing civilian clothes entered the mess hall and found it filled with jovial men all wearing civilian clothes.

After dinner, Mike and his three fellow Squad Leaders caught the Bus and went to the commissary, where they got notebooks, pencils, erasers, and lots of laundry supplies, because they knew things were about to get very dirty and nasty in the days ahead.

The next morning, Tuesday, as Mike and Greg were getting their room in order, Sergeant Axtell walks in and tells Mike, “You’re out of uniform soldier!”

Mike looks shocked and quickly looks himself over, with Greg looking on trying to figure out what’s wrong with Mike’s uniform.

Then Sergeant Axtell hands Mike a set of metal Chevrons, telling him, “You’re no longer a Specialist—Corporal Troff.”

A big smile comes to Greg’s face as Axtell extends his hand to Mike.

Mike takes the insignia from Sergeant Axtell and shakes Axtell’s out held hand, and then he shakes Greg’s hand and all the while with a look of indifference.

After Sergeant Axtell leaves, Mike, with Greg’s help, put the new insignia on his shirt collar and on his cap.

When it was time to fall out for the 0800 formation, Pat and Roger, exiting their room was also wearing Corporal insignia.

Meeting them in the hallway by their doors, Mike points to them and sarcastically remarks, “I see you two have been demoted as well.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” sighs Roger as they hurry to the front door.

After the 0800 formation they’re on the pathway at a double time until they came to an obstacle course, the same one Mike and Alex Owens ran through over a year ago.

This brought back the memory of Sergeant Lyman threatening Mike with that stick, and poor Alex!

Mike is now wondering how Alex is doing in the civilian sector and hoping he has a good job; Mike wishes he were a civilian and helping his old friend and business partner with the Helicopter flight service; “Next group

get ready,” brought Mike back to reality.

With the command to go, Mike runs towards the first wall and wonders if Sergeant Axtell will threaten him if he failed to scale the wall, but Mike makes it on the first try, and after reaching the ground on the other side, he heads for the next wall in the series.

After everyone was finished, and was about ready to drop from exhaustion, they were marched over to a nearby open field, and there they did PT.

Mike with sweat running down his face and back was panting; Greg, who was excited about being here, wasn't so sure anymore, he looked terrible, almost as bad as Alex did!

At noon, the mess trucks arrive for another lunch in the field, again more memories of basic, but more pleasant; as it had been in basic, the food was great.

Mike asked Greg, “Are you Ok? You didn't look too good back there.”

“Yeah, I'm fine—just outa' shape,” he replied looking inadequate.

After lunch they made the men run the obstacle course in reverse, a cruel change from what was done in basic, and then back to the PT field for more exercise.

At four that afternoon, dirty, sweaty, and really smelling bad, they were given a long break to rest, to quench their thirst, and go to the latrine.

Thirty minutes later, they were ordered into formation and started back to the Company area at a double time.

Just prior to being dismissed, Sergeant Axtell told them that no one would be allowed into the mess hall without showering and wearing a clean uniform or civvies.

Mike thought to himself, “The way everyone smells and feels I don't think that'll be a problem.”

Late that afternoon the showers ran full tilt, as everyone in the Second Platoon couldn't wait to get into the showers.

Wednesday, Mike awoke to the bugle playing reveille from the loudspeakers on that tall pole in the center of the assembly area.

The Sun had yet to make itself known; the air had a chill to it, being early fall and the tree's in the highlands were just starting to show some tinges of color.

A brief feeling of excitement shot through Mike, as he stood in formation at 0800, when two large trucks pulled in and backed up to the barracks.

Mike knew what they were doing from when he was in basic; they were bringing the weapons racks, for today it looks as if they're going to be issued the M20's.

Sure enough, they made an about face and marched over to the Quarter-master Armory and filed inside.

An hour later, everyone was back in formation, were brought to attention, marched out of the Company area and down the gravel pathway holding their new weapons in front of them with the muzzles pointing up and to the left; then they were ordered to double time.

After several minutes of this harried pace, the heavy weapons were beginning to take their toll; Mike's arms were now beginning to hurt and his fingers were starting to get stiff, bringing back those horrid memories, he thought was over.

Now his breathing was becoming a bit labored and his sides were beginning to hurt; all Mike wanted now was to get to that large green wooden building, he remembered going to in basic.

As they march, the Platoon Sergeants began calling cadence to help everyone keep in step and their minds off of their discomfort.

Just as his arms were about to fall off and with sweat running off his brow, Mike and the rest of his platoon, began chanting, "LISTEN, LISTEN, SARGE'--HEAR WHAT WE SAY--WE DON'T WANTA' DO, ANY PT TODAY!"

This was followed by Sergeant Axtell calling in rapid succession, "YOUR LEFT, YOUR LEFT, YOUR LEFT RIGHT LEFT--I WANTA' HEAR SOME MORE."

The Platoon responded with, "LISTEN, LISTEN, SARGE'--HEAR WHAT WE SAY--WE DON'T WANTA' RUN, BECAUSE IT AIN'T NO FUN."

This was followed by Sergeant Axtell calling again in rapid succession, "YOUR LEFT, YOUR LEFT, YOUR LEFT RIGHT LEFT--I WANTA' HEAR SOME MORE OF WHAT YOU DEPLORE."

The Platoon responded yet once more in similar rapid succession, "LISTEN, LISTEN, SARGE'--HEAR WHAT WE SAY--WE DON'T WANTA' CRAWL, IN THE ROCKS AND DIRT, BECAUSE WE'LL ALL GET DIRTY AND WE MIGHT GET HURT."

Mike rolled his eyes, as this was the exact same chant he remembered when he was in basic on this very same pathway; this now, for him, had become a very, very, bad nightmare; "When I'm I going to wake up?" He wondered.

Finally, a while later they arrived at the large green wooden building and came to a halt.

After filing into the building, Mike, once again along with the rest of his Platoon, found themselves in one of four rooms, sitting at one of four long tables with their M20's lying in front of them; the other Platoons were in different rooms.

For Mike, this has become a very big déjà vu event.

Then the instructor, whom was a Master Sergeant, walked into the room and introducing himself and what will be taught, "Good morning, I'm Sergeant Fuller," and points to his name which is written on the white board behind him.

Mike made a double take!

Wasn't this the same Master Sergeant, who gave the class back in basic?

For the next hour, Sergeant Fuller touched on the basics of the M20, just in-case they were forgotten.

Mike thought this was a waste of time, because who is going to forget how the M20 works!

Next, the boxes of batteries were handed out and everyone powered up their weapons.

The first thing Mike did before hitting the big red power switch was to make sure both mode switches are down and the M20 is locked into the safety mode.

Powered up and looking into the sight, Mike sees the power bar is green and the calibration indicator is indicating red, not calibrated.

Then they proceed with logging on process and finally as a final reminder, Sergeant Fuller tells them, "Be sure your calibration and power indicators are both indicating green before you leave the firing range tomorrow."

Mike nods his head and mumbles, "Yeah right, like duh!"

Then everyone gets up and files back outside where they're called to attention and marched over to the mess hall for lunch.

After lunch, it's back on the pathway until they come to the PT field; tears come to Mike's eyes when they turned into the field with all of the PT Stations, especially that infernal overhead ladder he hated so much, and him bemoaning to himself, "Not again--those damn Monkey Bars!"

For the rest of the afternoon, the four Platoons alternate through the different PT stations, until everyone is dirty and tired, then they return to the Company area where they are dismissed.

The first order of business is to secure the weapons in the racks; Mike is now in charge and checks to be sure the weapons are properly secured, and

then he hands the keys to Sergeant Axtell.

The next order of business is to hit the showers which are again going full tilt.

Following the showers was a trip to the mess hall for dinner, because after all of that PT, Mike was very hungry.

When Mike fell asleep that night, he knew what they were going to be doing on Friday, and knowing that, made him feel a whole lot better; for a change it was sweet dreams.

The next morning, Thursday, after chores and breakfast, Mike stood at attention wearing his helmet and holding his M20.

Then four very large trucks pulled into the Company area and parked side by side with the their open boxes facing the Company formation; the drivers and their assistant's got out of the cabs and lowered the tail gates of each truck.

After climbing aboard, Mike seated himself on one side, at the head of his Squad; Greg and his Squad slid in next to them with Pat, and Roger and their Squads on the opposite side.

A short time later, Mike and the rest of the Company were headed down the road, in the back of the trucks, on their way to the firing range.

As Mike sat there with a slight smile, he quietly thinks to himself, "At least I'm going to get to fire off a few rounds. The only bright spot in this nightmare."

As they're traveling down road, the only sounds were that of the truck and the warm wind of early fall, blowing in his face.

Once again, Mike is having a déjà vu moment, as this is what he was doing exactly one year ago.

As they slowed, Mike turned his head, and saw the truck ahead of them make a right turn onto a gravel road and knew what was coming next.

A large cloud of dust came from the truck ahead of them, and as it picked up speed, it sent out a billowing cloud from its big dual rear wheels.

Now it was their turn and with a slight bump, that Mike remembered, as the truck left the blacktop and entered the gravel road; two more trucks, carrying the Third and Fourth Platoons followed.

The air was now heavy with dust from the trucks ahead of them as they picked up speed, along with their truck making its own cloud of dust.

After about ten minutes of this, Mike had a flashback to when he'd wish they'd had marched to the range, he even remembered thinking double-tim-

ing would've been nicer then this hell.

A few more minutes of this and the truck slowed again.

Mike remembered this turn, and what followed wasn't very pleasant, because not only was this part of the ride extremely dusty, but it was very rough too.

For the next several minutes, Mike and the rest of the men riding in the back of the truck were bounced up and down on the hard wooden bench until their bottoms were hurting.

Finally, they slowed and pulled up along side of the truck that they were following, and came to a stop; the two trucks following them pulled up on the other side, until all four of the trucks were parked side by side.

The drivers and assistants came around and lowered the tailgates and everyone was glad to dismount.

Mike's déjà vu continues as he's now covered with dust, and assembling a short distance from the trucks.

Repeating what he'd had done a year ago, Mike and the rest of his Platoon dusted themselves off, making another cloud of dust.

Choking on all of the dust, Mike coughing says to himself, "Great—it just keeps getting worse!"

When Mike was brought to attention, he was once again in front of that long high wooden fence which he remembered from before.

Then they were marched through the opening in the center of the fence with the wooden sign above, forming an arch with the words, 'Where Braves Enter, Warriors Leave', Mike just shook his head.

Once through, Mike found himself in the same assembly area with the bleachers with the roof; the open buildings with the wooden tables and benches are still there just as he remembered them, and then they started filing into the bleachers, starting with the First Platoon.

Mike smiled as he remembered how very disappointed he was back then, because he hadn't seen any place where he could shoot.

Mike, sitting on the second level bench, looks around and notices to his left, the small enclosed area with the eight firing positions and the dark gray targets, and in front of the bleachers, the crude wooden stage with the two tall wooden posts on each side, holding the two large PA speakers, was still there as well.

And yes, the six-foot high concrete wall with the four stalls, forming four open-ended bunkers was also still there, as well as the long deep concrete block pit with the steps on each end.

Mike looks beyond the bunkers and sees the sandbag-pillboxes, and beyond them, the two tanks with the holes in them; Mike smiled when he saw the sprocket wheel he blew off was still laying a short distance away.

A Sergeant carrying an M20 comes up unto the wooden stage from a small set of steps at the rear, and walks up to a microphone and begins to speak, “Good morning I’m Sergeant Burkey.”

“Well,” Mike thought, “he’s not the same Sergeant from before and there’s only him, the last time there were two guys.”

“This morning you’re going to calibrate your M20. You all have done this before, so I’m not going over the routine again. And if you’re wonderin’ you won’t be throwing hand grenades or launching an RPG’s—I know you’re all disappointed,” Mike smiled, almost giggling with delight until he heard the rest of the statement, “but you’ll be doing it for real very shortly-- Does anyone have any questions?”

With no hands raised, Sergeant Burkey orders, “Ok then, let’s proceed to the calibration building.”

An hour later, Mike and his Squad reemerged from the building with weapons fully calibrated and ready to shoot some targets, which Mike didn’t think would be very long in coming.

It was almost eleven, when the last Platoon in the Company had finished calibrating their weapons, and then they were marched back out to the trucks and told to board, as Mike’s stomach was starting to complain.

He’d thought that they would eat here, but now he’s about to get dirty again!

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled into another firing range and dismounted; after forming up, they marched through the gate and onto the assembly area.

When Mike passed through the gate, the sign read, ‘PRACTICE RANGE 9’.

“Well,” Mike thought, “this is new. I’ve never been here before—must’ve added another firing range.”

After getting seated in another set of roof covered bleachers with a wooden stage and large PA speakers, Mike sees beyond the stage are the familiar ammo loading tables, for filling the magazines with ammo.

This time an officer, a Lieutenant, walks up to the microphone and introduces himself and what they are going to do, “Good-Day men, I’m Lieutenant Ostman the Range Safety Officer, and for the rest of the day and again on Friday, you will be target practicing, because on Monday you will re-qualify. You’ve all done this before, so you know the routine. Since every one of you had previously qualified, I expect every one of you to make at

least Marksman. Starting at 1300 the First Platoon will take its place on the firing range and the next Platoon in line will be at the ammo loading tables, filling magazines with ammo—any questions?”

Mike raised his hand. The Lieutenant pointed to him and Mike stood and said, “Sir—I just re-qualified last month—do I have to re-qualify again?”

The Lieutenant looked rather surprised, and as Mike started to sit down, he asked, “Where did you re-qualify Solder?”

Mike stood back up and said, “Cetin Sir.”

“Cetin NATO base in Turkey?” The Lieutenant asked, looking surprised.

“Yes Sir,” Mike replied sharply, and every eye in the bleachers was on him.

“That’s considered a combat zone,” noted the Lieutenant.

“Yes Sir—I know,” Mike acknowledged.

“What did you qualify as?” Asks Lieutenant Ostman.

“Expert—Sir,” Mike sharply replied, the Lieutenant stared as well as everyone sitting in the bleachers, but Sergeant Axtell just smiled, because he heard about Mike’s shooting abilities from Sergeant Lyman.

“What’s your name Solder?”

“Spe—Corporal Mike Troff—Sir,” replied Mike, almost forgetting he wasn’t a Specialist any longer.

“No—your good for another year,” replied the Lieutenant, and then he paused pondering.

Suddenly as Mike was starting to sit down for the second time, the Lieutenant pointed at Mike and told him, “Corporal Troff see me after lunch—I might have a little job for you.”

Just prior to sitting, Mike responds with, “Yes Sir,” and sits wondering what kind of nasty job the Lieutenant has in mind, as he gets pats on the back from his Squad and Greg, then the Lieutenant dismissed them for lunch.

When they went back out to where the four trucks were parked, the mess trucks had already arrived and the cooks were setting up the mess line.

Twenty minutes later, the mess line was ready and the odor of the chow was overwhelming.

Mike with a complaining stomach couldn’t wait to get in line.

A few minutes later, Mike was sitting down next to Greg, Pat, and Roger enjoying the chow.

After Mike had finished eating, he got up and headed over to where the dirty trays and utensils were returned, and there he disposed of his tray, and utensils, and then he walked to Command Building.

Upon entering, Mike approaches a desk with an Sp4 working at a computer.

“Ahem--,” Mike clearing his throat; the Specialist looks up and asks, “Can I help you with something?”

“Yeah--Lieutenant Ostman told me he wanted to see me after lunch—it’s after lunch,” said Mike, explaining the reason he’s here.

The Sp4 nods, picks up the phone, and speaks.

After several seconds, he hangs up and says, “The Lieutenant will see you over there in his office,” pointing to a door off to the left, “you can go right in.”

Mike walks to the door, raps twice, a voice from behind the door answers, “ENTER,” so Mike opens the door and steps inside.

When Mike enters the office, there, to his surprise was Sergeant Axtell standing behind Lieutenant Ostman softly talking and pointing at a computer display, seemingly discussing something displayed there.

After a brief pause, Mike walks to the front of the desk, comes to attention, and salutes saying, “Corporal Mike Troff reporting as requested, Sir.”

As Lieutenant Ostman looks away from the display, Sergeant Axtell moves to one side of the desk.

“At ease Corporal,” commands the Lieutenant, Mike takes an at ease stance with hands behind his back.

The Lieutenant then says, “I’m a little short handed, one of my assistants rotated out last week and I haven’t received a replacement yet, and since you’ve already qualified last month I figured you can help me with the qualifications on Monday—what do you say?”

Mike was a bit overwhelmed by the sudden request, and then he figured why not, and said accepting, “Yes Sir, I’ll do it.”

“Wonderful,” said the Lieutenant, “on Monday when you’re dismissed, report to the Range Safety Office and I’ll see you then—any questions Corporal?”

Mike couldn’t think of any and shook his head.

“Ok then, you’re dismissed,” ordered the Lieutenant.

Mike came to Attention, saluted, Made an about face, and smartly walked out of the Lieutenant’s office.

“This afternoon we’ll see just how good of a shot he really is,” said the Lieutenant, with Sergeant Axtell nodding with a half smile.

Later that afternoon, Mike was standing at a station on the firing line, getting ready to shoot at some targets and looking forward to it.

Now this range had targets from 3 all the way to 400 meters, and those 400 meter ones looked very small from where he stood.

Those long-range targets looked very daunting, but he faced them once before when he qualified in Basic Training, right here at Camp Roberts.

As soon as the command to begin firing was given, Mike quickly set his computerized sight to the most distant target at 400 meters and the nearest target at 10 meters; the 3 meter ones, he'll just point at and shoot, as Sergeant Lyman had taught him.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, Mike fired at the first of those 400-meter targets, and then without looking to see if it fell, he moved to the next.

After taking out a 100-meter target, Mike glanced out to the distance to see if those 400-meter targets had gone down and they did.

Now the fun part began, as Mike lowered his weapon and began firing from the waist at the 3 to 6 meter targets as they popped up in front and a little to each side of him.

Finally with only two 10-meter targets remaining, Mike brought his weapon up, sighted, and fired, the first 10-meter target fell, then he sighted on the remaining target, fired, and it too fell.

With an empty magazine and no targets remaining, Mike stood there and waited until everyone else had finished.

With a smile on the Lieutenant's and Sergeant Axtell's face, they looked at each other and nod; their question had been answered.

When Mike got back to the barracks, they were taken over to the PT field for a good work out, as if this is all they need, more agony!

Finally, stumbling into the barracks after an hour of exercises, Mike and Greg removed their dirty, smelly, sweat soaked uniforms, and headed to the showers, which were crowded, so they had to wait until a nozzle became vacant.

Soon several men stepped out providing several vacant nozzles, so Mike and Greg each stepped under a vacant nozzle and turned the water on.

The warm water felt good as Mike stood there enjoying the water running down his body.

Fifteen minutes later, with no one remaining, Mike steps out of the shower feeling clean, refreshed, and cheerful.

Leaving the latrine, Mike walks back to his room in a good mood.

Greg is already there waiting, wearing his civvies and says, when Mike enters the room, “Hurry up, I’m starved.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m hurrying,” Mike telling him, and then puts on his jeans, shirt, and his favorite pair of athletic boots and laces them two thirds the way up, so they’re comfortable.

Then out the door they go, heading in a hurry to the mess hall.

With full trays, Mike and Greg join Pat and Roger at a table near the window.

As Mike enjoys his chicken and mashed potatoes with creamy golden brown gravy running down the side, Pat inquires, “Well, how did ya’ do?”

“Not to bad,” replied Greg, “nailed most of em’, except those ones way out there which you can barely see.”

“Yeah—I know what ya’ mean,” groaned Pat, “those close in pop-up’s aren’t any easier.”

“Just point at em’ and shoot,” said Mike, “it’s easy.”

“So then—how well did you do?” Asks Roger; Mike looks at him and motions with his hand in a so-so fashion.

Greg pipes up, “Ole eagle eyes here, nailed them all, and in record time. He was done way before anyone else and stood there watchin’ while every-one else was still shootin’.”

“Even those four hundred meter buggers!” Exclaimed Pat looking surprised, Greg looking sardonic nodded while both Pat and Roger were astonished.

As for Mike, he nonchalantly continued eating his meal.

Later, after returning to his room, Greg asked whither he wanted to go to a movie or to the USO.

Mike shook his head telling him, “I’ll pass—maybe tomorrow afternoon. I’m going to work on my gear—remember, Saturday morning there’s an inspection and I hate to think what will happen if you don’t pass.”

Greg looked at Mike expressionless, then nods with, “Yeah—I guess you’re right. My gear does need a bit of straightening up.”

For the rest of that evening they worked on their gear until it was time to turn-in.

Mike fell to sleep knowing his gear is in order and ready for inspection, come Saturday morning.

CHAPTER 7 -- The Boss!

Friday morning arrived with that loud bugle sounding reveille; Mike crawls out of bed and heads to the latrine to shower, shave, and take care of other business; Greg follows him a couple of minutes later.

After Greg settles in at the sink next to Mike, Mike asks as he squeezes some toothpaste onto his toothbrush, “You ready to knock off some more targets today?”

“What! We’re doing that again? I’d though we were through with target practice,” said Greg as he started to lather up his face.

“Hell no—weren’t you listenin’? Practice on Friday and qualifications on Monday—need all the practice we can get.”

“Like if you need any—you don’t have to qualify like the rest of us,” Greg said grudgingly as he drew the razor across his cheek; Mike just smiled and took a swig of mouthwash swished it around in his mouth and spit it out into the sink.

After wiping his face with a towel, Mike puts his stuff back into his shaving bag and said as he turned to leave, “See ya’ back in the room,” and walked away; Greg just nodded as he washed the lather off his razor in the sink.

After putting on his ACU’s, Mike started to make his bed, and then Greg walked in.

Mike told him, “Ya’ better hurry up. We need to get this place in shape and eat chow. You know tomorrow we have an inspection—I think we should have a GI Party tonight.”

Greg stops, turns to look at him, Mike gives him a forced grin, and then Greg nods with a sigh replying, “Alright Boss—if you say so.”

“I’m not your Boss,” Mike hotly returned, “we’re equal rank.”

“Some of that natural leadership ability starting to show through--huh?” Greg sarcastically asked; Mike gave him a disgusting look.

After getting their room in order, Mike and Greg walked over to the mess hall for breakfast.

With his usual helping of flapjacks and syrup, toast, and cold milk, Mike sits down next to Pat and Roger; Greg sat down shortly thereafter.

Greg was the first to speak, “Mike thinks we should have a GI Party tonight—what ya’ guys think?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Pat nonchalantly.

“Yeah—good idea, considering there’s an inspection tomorrow morning,” said Roger with a nod.

“Ok then—we’ll get our Squads busy right after chow this evening—is everyone in agreement?” Asks Greg, followed by three nodding heads, “Great—GI Party it is.”

“I think we should have a GI Party every Friday evening, since we’ve got an inspection every Saturday morning,” suggests Mike with a serious expression.

“Sounds Ok with me,” Greg replied, “you’re the Boss.”

“I’m not the Boss,” said Mike looking rather irritable, and finishes his milk, gets up, grabs his tray, and heads to the disposal window.

“What’s up with him?” Roger asked, watching Mike walk away.

“Last Monday when we were assigned as Squad Leaders, —in our room, Sergeant Axtell had said according to Mike’s record, he’s a natural leader. Mike is having some issues accepting it, and doesn’t like being call a Boss,” explains Greg; Pat and Roger develop mischievous smiles.

When everyone had returned from the mess hall, Mike walks into the Third Squad’s cubical and gives it a quick look around, after seeing everything was in order, he remarked, “This place looks good,” and then he told them, “we still have the area around the barracks to police, so let’s hop to it.”

Fifteen minutes later, Mike and his Squad were back in the barracks waiting for the command to fall out for the 0800 formation, which came ten minutes later.

Standing at attention, Mike heard the trucks pull in and stop; he knew they were getting a ride to the firing range.

Twenty minutes later, the Company was heading down the road to the firing range in the back of the four trucks.

After about thirty minutes they pulled into the firing range and dismounted; after forming up, they marched through the gate and onto the assembly area.

This time when Mike passed through the gate, the sign read, ‘PRACTICE RANGE 5’.

Mike shook his head and said to himself, “Well, I’ve been here before—this should be easy.”

After getting seated in the roof covered bleachers with the wooden stage and large PA speakers, Lieutenant Ostman the Range Safety Officer, steps up on the stage and walks up to the microphone and gives his cheery, “Good morning men,” and the men loudly chorused in returned, “GOOD MORNING SIR!”

“As you can see, this range has targets from ten to two hundred meters and some of them are not stationary,” announced Lieutenant Ostman turning to point down range.

After turning back to face the seated men, he continued with the orientation, “From looking at your qualifying records, most of you had problems with the 3 to 6 meter, the two hundred-meter, and the moving targets, so when we get down on the line I’ll have someone give you a few pointers and hope this might help some of you—does anyone have any questions?”

With no hands raise, the Lieutenant said, “Ok—with no questions let’s shoot at some targets, but before I dismiss you—will Corporal Troff report to me after I dismiss you—Class dismissed.”

Mike is looking confused as he gets up, because he wasn’t supposed to see the Lieutenant until Monday.

As everyone exits the bleachers, Mike walks over to where the Lieutenant is standing, comes to attention, and issues a salute with, “Sir—reporting as ordered.”

“Ah’ yes, Corporal Troff,” replied Lieutenant Ostman returning the salute, and then he commanded “At ease Corporal. According to what I’ve read in your records, you’ve pretty much mastered the M20 and are an exceptional shot, so if you’re up to it, I would like you to demonstrate how to properly knock down the 3 to 6 meter, the two hundred-meter, and the moving targets.”

Now standing at ease, Mike was totally in shock and just stood there looking at the Lieutenant, until the Lieutenant asked, “Well—what do you say, Corporal, will you do it?”

“Yeah—I mean yes Sir—I’ll do it,” replied Mike coming around nodding his head.

“Great—then follow me,” ordered the Lieutenant, and he heads for the firing line with Mike in tow; on the way, the Lieutenant grabs four ammo magazines from the loading table as he and Mike walks by, and hands them to Mike.

When the Lieutenant and Mike arrived at the firing line the first Platoon was there and waiting to start shooting.

Mike and the Lieutenant walked over to the Range Officer's command box where the Lieutenant picks up a couple of wireless microphones; putting one on himself, he hands the other one to Mike and tells him to put it on.

Mike puts the microphone on, and then the Lieutenant flips a couple of switches and the microphone's are live, then he covers the microphone with his hand and whispers, "Leave three of the magazines here, insert the fourth when we get to the firing line. You can use up the entire magazine to do your demonstration, if you wish," Mike nods and puts the other three ammo magazines on the small table.

"If you're ready, follow me," commands the Lieutenant, Mike nods and they walk over to the center of the firing line.

When they get up on the line, the Lieutenant introduces Mike, "I have with me Corporal Michael Troff, and he'll demonstrate how to handle those 3 to 6 and 200 meter targets I mentioned at the orientation, so pay close attention to what he tells you—he qualified as expert with a score of ninety seven on a range much harder than this one. Corporal, you have the Platoon."

"Thank you Sir," said Mike as he stepped up to an open station, and then he brought his M20 up, sighted in on one of the stationary 200-meter targets and fired, a split second later the target fell to everyone amazement.

After he lowered his M20 he said, while keeping the muzzle pointed down range, "There—nothing to it—easy as calling home, which reminds me," followed by laughter up and down the line.

Then he began instructing, "Ok—the first thing you wanta' do is set your computerized sight, so you don't have to keep resetting it for every target, that wastes time—time you don't have when qualifying and probably the reason most of you only made marksman—you should've learned this in Basic. Ok, now do as I tell you. First, zero in on the two hundred-meter stationary target, and set your sight on that target, and once you've got it set, lock it in. Now zero in on one of the ten-meter targets and do the same. Once you've got those two targets set, everything in-between will be set. Once the firing order is given, see if you can hit the two hundred meter stationary targets. And don't forget to hold your breath, before squeezing the trigger."

Then the loudspeakers blared, "READY ON THE LEFT--READY ON THE RIGHT--READY ON THE FIRING LINE--THE FIRING LINE IS CLEAR TO FIRE!"

Then the sounds of gunfire erupted from the firing line and to everyone surprise the 200-meter targets began to fall.

Then suddenly some of the 200-meter targets began to move!

Clouds of dust billowed up from behind the targets, but not one target fell, then Mike waved his hand to have everyone stop shooting.

The loudspeakers blared, “CEASE FIRING—CEASE FIRING—CEASE FIRING!”

When all shooting had stopped, Mike said, “Didn’t anyone teach you guys how to lead a target? Once you learn how to lead a target, it’s easy to hit—watch.”

Mike zeroed in on one of the moving targets and fired, and like the last time, a split second later it fell, to everyone astonishment.

After lowering his M20, Mike started his instruction again, “Ok—I hope you were told in Basic, that when shooting at a moving target at that distance, it will be gone when the round arrives. What I do with these moving buggers is, for my first shot, I lead them by half their width. If I miss, I take note of how far to the left or right I’d missed by and add or subtract that to the lead distance I just used. If you can’t see where your round went, then keep adding half the target’s width to each shot. I guarantee you’ll nail the target on the third shot. Now mind you, this is just a rule of thumb. As the speed increases and the distance increases, so will your lead distance. When you qualify on Monday there will be a couple of targets further out than two hundred meters, but they won’t be moving, so be sure to aim a bit high, because the heavy nine millimeter round will drop and fall short of the target. Ok now, when the firing order is given, try and hit the two hundred meter moving targets, and remember to hold your breath prior to squeezing the trigger.”

Then the loudspeakers blared, “READY ON THE LEFT--READY ON THE RIGHT--READY ON THE FIRING LINE--THE FIRING LINE IS CLEAR TO FIRE!”

Then the sounds of gunfire erupted from the firing line, at first only a few moving targets fell, then more and more of them began to fall until all of the moving targets were down, then the loudspeakers along the firing line wailed, “ALL CLEAR ON THE LEFT--ALL CLEAR ON THE RIGHT--ALL CLEAR ON THE FIRING LINE!”

Then Mike said, “Well done. There’s times when the range can get a bit overwhelming, with so many moving targets that it seems to be in total chaos, just take a deep breath and relax, pick out a target and concentrate on that one—the rest will be there when you’re ready for em’—they’re not going anywhere.”

Then Mike lowers his M20 to his waist and says with firm intent, “Now for those 3 to 6 meter buggers,” and starts blasting away; the targets fall moving or not, and he wasn’t aiming, to everyone’s astonishment, he was just pointing and firing away!

When all of the targets have fallen, Mike brings his M20 up and begins instructing, “As you can see—it makes no sense to take your sweet old time aiming at targets right in front of you. When you’re in combat, you won’t have time to aim—it’s you or him—I choose me every time.”

Laughter erupts again from the firing line.

With a smile on his face, Mike continues with his instruction, “This point and shoot method is something you must learn instinctively. There is no proper procedure with steps to follow—I had a terrible time until my Drill Sergeant in Basic gave me a piece of advise, and that was, imagine looking at the target from inside the muzzle of your weapon, and when you see the target in your minds eye, fire. I hope that helps some of you—for the rest—it’s something you’ll have to wrestle with until you finally discover the secret. So, go ahead and give it your best and good luck.”

Then the loudspeakers once more blared, “READY ON THE LEFT--READY ON THE RIGHT--READY ON THE FIRING LINE--THE FIRING LINE IS CLEAR TO FIRE!”

Then the sounds of gunfire erupted from up and down the firing line; a lot of the targets fell, but there were some which refused to fall.

Mike walked over to a Private who was having trouble, several stations from where he stood, and began talking to him and pointing to a target; the Private nodded and while Mike watched, he finally began hitting his targets.

Mike patted him on the back, and when the Private turned, he had a smile on his face; Mike gave him the thumbs up and headed for another poor soul having trouble; of course, this hadn’t gone unnoticed by Lieutenant Ostman and Sergeant Axtell.

For the rest of the day, Mike instructed each Platoon on how to hit the long range and nearby targets.

And when the last Platoon walked off the firing line, Mike, with four empty magazines and his M20 slung across his chest with muzzle pointed upward, followed the last man to the assembly area.

Mike waiting at the assembly area with his three friends, who now thinks he’s a Top Gun, is hungry and tired along with rest of the Platoon that is waiting to form up and get on the trucks for the return ride to the barracks.

When Sergeant Axtell walks up everyone thinks it's time to form up, but instead, he sharply orders, "Corporal Troff follow me," Mike looks at his friends and they shrug their shoulders, so Mike walks over to Sergeant Axtell and follows him to the Range Safety Building.

When they entered the building, Sergeant Axtell commands, "C'mon, stick on my heels," motioning with his finger as he rounded the clerk's desk and heads to a door at the rear; Mike sticks close, following Axtell to the door.

Opening the door, Sergeant Axtell and Mike enter and walk up to the desk where Lieutenant Ostman is sitting behind.

Standing at attention, Sergeant Axtell salutes and the Lieutenant returns the salute and tells them, "At ease men," both Mike and Axtell relax.

The Lieutenant leans back in his chair and says, looking at Mike, "Corporal Troff, the reason I called you is because of what I observed today on the firing line."

"Did I do something wrong?" Mike piping up feeling he's about to be reprimanded; Sergeant Axtell has a wolfish smile on his face.

"No—you didn't do anything wrong—on the contrary, you did very well—better than I expected. So good in fact, I would like to recommend that you attend a short school on Basic Instruction Procedures, and remain here as an instructor."

Mike was totally blown away; he never thought he could teach!

The thought of ending this nightmare he's in was very tempting, but what other kind of nightmare would he be getting into?

All Mike can see is being in Basic Training for the rest of his time in the Army, and that wasn't a pleasant thought.

All Mike wants right now is to get out of the Army, go home, and fly Helicopter's with Bob Manning, his business partner.

Looking at the Lieutenant sitting there smiling at him, Mike had to gracefully reject the offer, "While the offer is really tempting Sir—and it's a very generous offer, but..."

"But..." the Lieutenant, repeating in a disappointed tone, Sergeant Axtell's wolfish smile vanished and was replaced by a scowl.

"But, I must graciously decline, and thank you for the offer Sir," Mike politely telling him.

"I'm very disappointed to hear that," said the Lieutenant sounding upset, "if you decide to reconsider—the offer still stands, and will be entered into your record along with why it was offered, and that you declined. You know Corporal, you have a gift for teaching that only a few have—think about it."

“Thank you Sir and I will,” Mike politely replied.

“That’s all, you both are dismissed.” Both Mike and Axtell saluted, and after the Lieutenant returned the salute, they made an-about-face and walked out of the office.

When Mike and Sergeant Axtell arrived back at the Platoon, the other Platoons were in the process of boarding the trucks, so Sergeant Axtell formed them up and had them board their waiting truck.

When they arrived at the barracks, they got off the trucks and hurried into the barracks to get cleaned up for chow.

Mike sat down with Greg and no more started eating when Pat and Roger joined them.

Pat was the first to ask, “Well Boss, are ya’ ready to have that GI Party?”

“Yeah—as soon as I get back,” replied Mike, looking a bit irritated.

“Say Mike, what did Axtell want with you?” Roger curiously asks.

“Nothing much—the Lieutenant want to see me,” replied Mike in a non-chalant manner.

“See you about what?” Pat asks probing, getting a bit personal.

“To tell me I did a good job instructing and wanted me to join their staff as an instructor,” explained Mike, and then picking up his glass of milk, he started drinking.

“Well—are you?” Asks Greg matter-of-factly; all three are now looking at Mike in anticipation.

“No—I don’t wanta’ be an instructor, just like when this Major tried to get me to go to OCS,” Mike tells them looking expressionless.

“You were asked to go to OCS!” Exclaimed Greg looking surprised, Mike nods.

“Man—what’s with you, you should’ve went for it,” Greg told him in disbelief, “just like you should’ve taken the Lieutenant up on the instructing job. Man—you sure don’t see your ship at the dock. Someone needs to sit down with you and have a long talk on priories and opportunities,” Mike looks at Greg wondering what Greg meant by the ship at the dock, as Pat and Roger sit there, shaking their heads.

Mike looks at the clock and downs the last of his milk, and then remarks, “If we’re going to GI the barracks before lights out, then we better be getting back.”

Greg, Pat, and Roger nod, with Roger adding a sarcastic remark, “Anything you say Boss,” and finish his glass of milk.

Mike gives Roger a dirty look, grabs his tray, and heads to the disposal window; Greg, Pat, and Roger follow shortly thereafter with smug smiles.

When Mike walks into the Barracks, he goes directly to his Squads cubical.

Finding all seven of his men lying around reading or listening to music, Mike immediately commands, “Everyone up—we’re having a GI Party. Tomorrow morning there’s an inspection and this place needs to be in shape—so, snap to it—let’s get moving.”

The seven men looked at Mike with disgusting expressions thinking he’s kidding.

When Mike didn’t see the response he was looking for, he clapped his hands several times and harshly said, “I’m the Leader of this Squad and I’m not askin’ I’m orderin’, so let’s get the lead out we only have five hours to get it done.”

As Mike watches his men unhappily start moving, Greg walks into his Squads cubical and a few moments later groans can be heard, then the same for Pat and Roberts Squads.

Thirty minutes later, the barracks is noisy with men busy scrubbing, washing, wiping, and polishing.

About an hour later, Sergeant Axtell comes into the barracks expecting to see everyone lying around, and is surprised by all of the activity.

As Pat walks by, Axtell asks, “Corporal Littlefield, who ordered the GI Party?”

“It was...” Pat began, but Greg piped in with, “The Boss,” as he walked by.

“The Boss?” Asks Sergeant Axtell looking and sounding very confused.

“Yeah—Mike Troff,” said Pat with a grin, “and he’s scheduled one every Friday.”

“Boss—hey. Well, at least someone here has enough sense to take charge,” replied Sergeant Axtell with a big grin.

Then Mike comes walking by to refill his pail with clean water and Sergeant Axtell tells him, “Good job—Boss,” when Mike hears Axtell calling him, ‘Boss’, he gives his two friends standing next to Sergeant Axtell disgusting expression’s, and then he drops his head with embarrassment.

Then he tells Sergeant Axtell, “Littlefield, Talbott, and Gressett also thought it was a good idea.”

“But, it was originally Troff’s idea—so he’s the Boss,” Pat teasingly rebuffs with a big grin, Greg nodding along.

“Well, who’s ever idea it was—good work, and keep it up,” said Sergeant Axtell with a smile and walks deeper into the barracks to see how his Platoon is doing, mumbling, “Boss—huh—hmmm!”

By the time lights out arrived, the men were worn out and tired, the barracks was clean, polished, and ready for Saturday’s inspection.

Saturday arrived very early, and Mike was up getting ready for the mornings inspection.

Mike and Greg were putting the finishing touches to their room and gear before going out and checking on their Squads.

With everything in order, Greg walked out of the room to see how his Squad was coming.

Mike was about to follow when in walked Sergeant Axtell, to Mike’s surprise, and informs Axtell, “We’re ready in here and I was about to go and see how my Squad is doing.”

Sergeant Axtell glances around and says, “I can see that you are—good work, but that wasn’t the reason I came.”

“It isn’t,” said Mike surprised.

“No,” replied Sergeant Axtell shaking his head.

“Then why are you here?” Asks a confused Mike.

“To see how you’re doing,” replied Sergeant Axtell with a grin, “I remembered from your time in Basic Training you had trouble with the verbal part of the inspection. I always knew you knew the answers, but had a nervous problem in front of Officers.”

“Sergeant, I’m over that—I’m fine now, and I can handle the verbal part of the inspection,” Mike flatly tells him; Axtell nods with, “That’s good to hear—then you better be checking on your men,” and then Sergeant Axtell walks out of the room followed by Mike.

The word came that it will be an in barracks inspection with open wall and footlockers, so there wasn’t going to be a 0800 formation.

Peering out the open door, Greg watched the inspection team enter the barracks and go into the latrine and softly announced to Mike, “They’re here and are inspecting the latrine. I hope it passes—really had the Squad working hard getting it cleaned up and in shape.”

“Don’t worry—it’ll pass just fine,” Mike confidently tells him.

“I hope so—here they come—they’re going in the First Squads cubical,” announced Greg, as he watched the inspection team exit the latrine and enter the cubical of the First Squad.

Greg periodically pokes his head out and watches, as the inspection team goes from cubical to cubical, and when they entered the Third Squad's cubical, Greg said, "They're inspecting your Squad—mine's next, then it's us!"

Mike just smiled, because he remembered when he was just like Greg—worrying about nothing!

"Don't worry—everything will be Ok—you'll see."

"You can say that—you're not hoping to become an E5," retorted Greg sounding very nervous; Mike just smiled.

Fifteen minutes later, poking his head out the door, Greg nervously exclaimed, "O' God they're going into my Squad's cubical—I hope they pass!"

Again, Mike shook his head and giggled.

After another fifteen or so minutes, they hear footsteps coming towards the cadre rooms.

In a soft whisper, Greg nervously stutters, "They're here—you think they'll come in here first?"

"No," Mike says, "they'll probably hit Pat and Roger first. You better get a hold of yourself, and for heaven sake calm down—you're an E4—you've been through this before."

Greg looks at Mike and nods with, "You're right—everything will be fine—I've been through other inspections," all the while looking at Mike with a sorrowful expression and rubbing his sweaty hands; Mike looks at him and starts laughing.

Then the inspection team exits Pat and Roger's room and gets ready to enter Mike and Greg's room.

As soon as Mike and Greg see them, Greg goes over to his bunk and stands next to it, and Mike stands by his.

When the inspecting Officer, Captain Pelkey, enters the room, Mike without hesitating loudly utters, "A TEN TION," both Mike and Greg come to attention.

Captain Pelkey, their CO, was followed by First Sergeant Kapler and Platoon Sergeant Axtell.

The First Sergeant held a clipboard and was taking notes; who said there wasn't going to be restrictions!

With Mike being closest to the door, he was the first to be inspected.

After spending a few minutes giving Mike's wall and foot lockers a close examination, and making a few positive remarks, Captain Pelkey steps in front of Mike and asks, "Corporal Troff, in absence of an Officer or ranking NCO, who is in command of the Platoon?"

"The next ranking man, Sir."

“If that man is you—are you prepared to assume command—become Boss?” Captain Pelkey firmly asked.

“Yes Sir,” replied Mike in a quick firm response.

“If your men are still able to fight, what would be your primary concern?” Captain Pelkey firmly asked, as his third question.

“To carry out the mission as ordered too, Sir,” replied Mike in firm confident tone.

“And if they’re not in shape to continue, then what would be your primary concern?” Asks Captain Pelkey.

“To return to base, or a LZ for extraction with the least amount of casualties, Sir,” replied Mike in the same confident tone for the fourth time.

Then Captain Pelkey smiled, turned, and quietly remarked to both Sergeants, “Based upon his record, and what I see and hear, I think upon graduation he should be promoted to E5—his display looks very good as does his Squad,” and then they stepped over to Greg.

Ten minutes later, the inspection was over, the inspection team walked out of the barracks and headed to the third Platoon; it was now their turn.

Greg sat down on his bunk, gave a sigh of relief, and then he remarked, “Man—you were asked four questions!”

“Yeah, I know,” said Mike a little surprised.

“So what’s up with that?” Greg asked.

“I don’t know—and the questions—I never expected those kind of questions,” Mike told Greg looking surprised.

“Yeah—I would’ve never been able to answer them like you, especially the last two,” replied Greg looking worried.

Then Sergeant Axtell entered the barracks and called, “Everyone, gather around, I have a few words I like to say.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” grimaced Greg in a worried tone, and then he and Mike joined Pat and Roger and walked to where everyone was gathering in front of Sergeant Axtell.

With everyone standing in front of him, Sergeant Axtell said, “Outside of a few very minor discrepancies, you all came through with flying colors. I’ll post the list of what needs correcting for the next inspection on the Platoon bulletin board. Well done men, there are no more formations today, so the rest of the day and tomorrow is yours—any questions?”

Axtell looks over the men and finds no raised hands, so he tells them, “Ok, you all have a nice weekend,” turns and walks out of the barracks.

Mike and his three friends head back to their rooms feeling relieved that

this inspection is done.

After changing into civvies, the four men meet in Pat and Roger's room and make plans for the weekend, which includes washing all of the weeks filthy uniforms, and calling home, or maybe even an email; Mike remembering his remark on Friday.

CHAPTER 8 -- The Score Keeper.

Monday morning and M20 qualifying day for everyone in the platoon, except Mike that is, for him, well, he'll be assisting with the qualifications.

As Mike was getting his part of the room in order, Sergeant Axtell entered the room and said to Mike, "Everyone is to form up with weapons except for you—you won't need your weapon, because you're not re-qualifying and you'll be riding in the front with the driver."

"Yes Sergeant," Mike replied looking surprised.

Sergeant Axtell kept his gaze on Mike for a moment, and then looked over to Greg; after glancing about the room, he turns and walks out the door.

Once Axtell was out of the room, Greg asked, "What was that all about, and why aren't you taking your weapon?"

"Because I don't need to re-qualify—I just did that last month," Mike tells him with an expression of Duh!

"And what's up with you riding up front?" Asked Greg looking quizzical; Mike just shrugged his shoulders and mouthed, "Don't know."

At o-eight hundred all four platoons were standing in formation in front of the barracks; four large trucks were parked in the parking lot behind them with diesel engines idling.

After row call, the four platoons loaded into the back of the four trucks, two squad's seated on each side; Mike climbed into the second truck with the driver and Sergeant Axtell slid into the truck next to him.

With everyone loaded, the four trucks drove out of the company area and headed down the road to the qualifying range.

Thirty minutes later, the four trucks turned onto a gravel road, and then came the dust!

Mike enjoyed the dust free cab and felt sorry for those who had to endure the hardship; the only saving grace was the fact that it was a short trip, little while later they slowed and made a right turn and passed under a wooden arch that read, 'FORT HUNTER QUALIFYING RANGE' and came to a halt. It was the same range where Mike had first qualified in Basic and it brought back the only pleasant memory he had then.

As soon as the four trucks were parked side-by-side, the tailgates were lowered and the men climbed down.

No sooner had they planted their feet on the ground, they began to shake the dust off, making another cloud of dust.

Mike walked over and joined his platoon as Sergeant Axtell taking charge ordered them to form up into squads.

Then men started falling out of the other platoons, all without weapons, and formed up in another smaller group to one side; Mike figured these men didn't need to re-qualify either, but why wasn't he joining them?

His answer came with the command from Sergeant Axtell, "Corporal Troff, fall out and report to the Range Safety Office."

Mike broke ranks and headed to the wooden building behind them with the flagpole and flag in front, the other group of men was marched off for what appears to be detail duty.

Then the First Platoon was marched through the gate and onto the qualifying range; the other platoons were given At-Rest until their turn came.

Mike entered the Range Safety Office Building and stepped up to a desk with a Sp4 entering data from several forms into a computer.

"Ahem--," Mike clearing his throat, the Sp4 looks up and asks, "Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah--Lieutenant Ostman told me last week to report here for qualifications duty," said Mike, explaining the reason he's here.

The Sp4 looks at him, and then picks up the phone and speaks.

After a bit, he hangs up and says, "The Range Safety Officer will be out shortly, you can wait over there," pointing to the left of the door he just entered, so Mike goes over and stands to the left of the door.

Several minutes later, Lieutenant Ostman comes out of his office and walks towards Mike; Mike comes to attention, Lieutenant Ostman responds with, "At ease Corporal," Mike relaxes, and the Lieutenant asks, "are you ready to score targets?"

"Yes Sir."

"Good, --then follow me--and you'll need these," says Lieutenant Ostman handing Mike a couple of yellow foam earplugs.

Mike takes the earplugs asking, "Why do I need these?"

"You'll be subjected to several hours of gunfire and we don't want you to have ear damage, now do we Corporal?"

"No Sir," Mike replied as he stepped out of the building with the Lieutenant in the lead and heading to the gate of the qualifying range.

Then the Lieutenant turns and looks at Mike and adds, "Be sure to wear them."

When they reach the gateway, the Lieutenant inquires, “Have you ever done this before?”

Mike shakes his head with, “No Sir.”

“Well it ain’t hard,” the Lieutenant begins, “you’ve been through this in Basic and again last month so you should have a pretty good idea of what a scorer does.

You’ll be given a prompt card so you’ll know what to tell each man being tested as to what’s expected, and how you’re to score—it isn’t hard.

After the first three or four, you’ll have it down and you won’t need the prompt card any longer,” Mike nods thinking, yeah right.

After walking through the gate, Mike notices the men sitting in the bleachers as two Sergeants standing on a raised platform are giving instructions.

Then Mike is led around a tall wooden barrier and to a small shack where the Lieutenant meets a Staff Sergeant and says, “Sergeant Arbuckle, this is Corporal Troff and he’ll be helping us score today—will you see that he’s properly equipped and show him to his position along with any instructions that you feel is necessary.”

“Yes Sir,” responds Sergeant Arbuckle with a salute.

After returning the salute the Lieutenant enters the shack after which Sergeant Arbuckle commands, “Corporal Troff wait here,” and he too goes into the shack and after a couple of minutes returns with a clipboard and a pair of field glasses.

Then he commands, “Corporal, follow me, and I’ll show you where you’ll be working,” and so Mike follows Sergeant Arbuckle down the firing line until they come to an empty station.

There, Sergeant Arbuckle tells Mike, “Here’s your testing station. You’ll find pencils and extra score sheets in that box,” pointing to a large green box with a double lid mounted on a large post.

Mike hangs the field glasses around his neck by its cord, and then lifts the right lid to the box and takes one of the score sheets and clips it to the clipboard; after removing a pencil, he slips it behind the clip on the board and closes the lid.

Then with Mike looking at the Sergeant, the Sergeant imparts some last minute instructions, “Be sure to get each Examinee’s full name, rank, and serial number. That’s last name, first name, and middle initial—you’ll not be giving any help or commentary—the only dialog you’ll have with the Examinee is to inform him of the safety and test rules,” then reaching into the

box, Sergeant Arbuckle removes a large plastic laminated card, and hands it to Mike, “here this may be of help—any other questions?”

“Yeah—where do I turn in the completed score sheets?” Mike asks.

“They go in here,” said Sergeant Arbuckle pointing to the other lid, “when each platoon has finished and while the next platoon gets orientation in the bleachers, you’ll remove all of the completed score sheets and bring them to the Range Control Shack where you’ll turn them in and get new ones—any more questions?”

“Nope—that should do it,” replied Mike with a nod.

“Good, and if you need any help just raise your hand, and don’t forget the earplugs,” said Sergeant Arbuckle pointing to Mike’s ears without the plugs; Mike nods and sets the clipboard on top of the green box, and as the Sergeant walks to the next station, Mike removes the yellow ear plugs from his pants pocket and puts one of them into his ear, he’ll put the other one in later after he has spoken to the Examinee.

Then while Mike waits for the first Examinee to arrive, he reads the plastic card.

The first Examinee to be tested walks up to Mike.

Mike introduces himself to the Examinee with a smile, “Hi, I’m your Scorekeeper,” looking at his uniform Mike writes down his last name on the top line of the score card, and then Mike asks, “Your first name and middle initial please,” the Examinee gives them to Mike.

Mike writes those down following the last name separated by commas, and then Mike asked, “Your serial number?”

The Examinee conveys his serial number and Mike writes it down to the right of the Man’s name.

Noticing the Examinee’s rank, Mike checks the box in the enlisted men’s column.

Then Mike looked at the Examinee and asked, “You ready to start shooting?”

The Examinee nodded with, “Yeah, let’s get on with it.”

“Then follow me,” Mike said, turning and walking towards a position on the firing line, the Examinee following him.

When they arrived at the station, Mike told him, “Your first set of five targets, will be at the 200 to 400-meter range. You’ve been through this before so, take a comfortable position and get ready. Once the order is given to start shooting, you’ll have fifteen seconds to hit all five targets—as you know that’s three seconds per target—good luck and good shooting.”

The Examinee takes a deep breath and exhales, and then he drops down into the prone position, gets comfortable, and waits for the command to start, as Mike inserts the other earplug.

It wasn't long in coming, when the first five targets popped up; they were way out there, and the Examinee could barely see them, so he quickly had to zoom and focus his sight in order to place the crosshair on the target, this was costing him precious time.

Once the Examinee had sighted he fired and nothing happened!

The Examinee had missed his first target, and this seem to upset him, so he fired a second time wasting a precious round and failed again; Mike shook his head in silence and marked the two shots down as misses.

Giving up the Examinee aimed at a 200-meter target and succeeded in hitting it, and ignoring the other 400-meter target, the Examinee concentrated the rest of his rounds and time on the remaining 200-meter targets, nailing all of them.

Now with the allotted rounds used up, the Examinee had hit three out of the five long range targets and Mike gave him a score of three, one for each downed target with ninety five more to go.

When the next five targets popped up they were closer in, at the 100 to 200-meter range.

Still lying in the prone position, and with a fifteen-second time limit, the Examinee got himself ready to start shooting again.

When the order was given to start shooting, the Examinee started popped off the next five rounds, dropping all five of the targets; Mike gave him five for this set.

When the next ten targets popped up, the Examinee was shocked to see that they were scattered from 100 to 400 meters and he only had thirty seconds to hit all ten; with the problem he had with the first set, the Examinee got a bit uneasy.

When the order to begin shooting was given, the Examinee started shooting at the six nearer targets first, he knocks them all down, but there still were those four targets way out there.

The Examinee took his time and downed one of the 200-meter targets and used even more time to down the second one.

Then he aimed at the 400-meter target, taking inordinate amount of time to fire, the target fell just as his time ran out.

Mike scored him a nine; Mike smiled, because the Examinee used the same strategy he had used in Basic.

The first session was now complete and Mike gave him a score of seventeen, and tells him, “You can get up and remove the magazine and turn it around and get ready for the next session.”

The second session is the midrange 75 to 100-meter targets, and when they pop up, some of them move.

Mike remembered using his computerized sight to nail every one of them in Basic, and he hoped the Examinee would do the same.

When the command was given to start firing, the Examinee did just as Mike had hoped and easily knocking down all twenty targets and completing two sessions.

With two sessions down and only three misses, the Examinee was on his way to earning Expert level.

Removing the spent magazines, the Examinee inserted the fully loaded ones, and awaited the start of session three.

Mike informed the Examinee that the next set of targets were from 40 to 75-meters and only one will popup at a time, but, it will only remain up for three seconds, and then it drops back down, “Only thirty targets will popup. If you miss or take too long to fire, it will be counted as a missed target.”

The first target popped up right after the command to fire was given, and took the Examinee by surprise; he barely had time to get the first shot off, just hitting it in the nick of time.

So far, the Examinee hasn’t missed any of these targets and the first ten targets have come and went, all of them being within the 40 to 50-meter range.

When the eleventh target popped up it was at 75-meters and the Examinee tried to sight on it, but as he fired, it dropped straight down, missing it like what happened to Mike.

The Examinee had taken too long to fire and lost another point, he now has four misses to his score.

A bit shaken, the Examinee missed the next one as well, but calmed down enough to nail the remaining targets.

The Examinee then removed the empty magazine and turned it around and reinserted it into his weapon and got ready for the last session.

If the Examinee can hit the next twenty-five targets, he’ll have a score of eighty-eight, and good enough for the Sharpshooter level.

Mike now informs the Examinee that, the last session will be a walk-through; the Examinee looks at him with a deadpan expression on his face.

“Don’t worry none,” Mike tells him, “it’s not that bad. You’ve been through this before. As you know, the targets will be really close, at 3 to 6 meters.”

“Yeah—I know!” Exclaimed the Examinee, “That’s what worries me.”

“If you remembered what I told you last week in practice, you shouldn’t have any trouble. But the real trick is to locate and knock em’ all down within fifteen seconds, that’s the difficult part. There’s one rule that you must follow, and that is, once you start down the path, you must never turn and point your weapon back towards the firing line. There will be no targets popping up behind you, only from your left front to your right front. Nothing will popup directly to your right or left, so don’t swing your weapon from side to side. This is for range safety, doing so will get you disqualified and you’ll have to do this again when you get to your next duty station. You clear on this?”

The Examinee nods with, “Yeah, I got it.”

“Ok then,” says Mike, “let’s go down to the starting point and get ready for the command to start shooting.”

So, the Examinee and Mike walked off the firing line, and with his M20 pointing downrange, they continued to a place on a dirt path with two stakes on each side with red flags; where they waited until the command to begin firing is given.

The first target popped up directly to the Examinee right front, taking him almost by surprise.

The Examinee instantly, swung his M20 around and fired, knocking it down.

Then the Examinee started to slowly walk down the pathway between big boulders, huge cactus, and clumps of sagebrush, with Mike following.

Suddenly, another target popped up from behind a boulder in front of him with only the top part exposed!

The Examinee swung his weapon onto it and fired, but nothing happened!

He just missed another target!

Then down it went and another came up from behind a clump of sagebrush, on his left front.

The Examinee swung the weapon around to this one and fired, missing that one as well; now missing two targets with Mike shaking his head.

The Examinee started to walk again and before taking ten steps, two more targets popped up on each side of him.

The Examinee pointed and fired at the one on the same side he’d just shot from, and then quickly swung his weapon over to the other target and

fired, knocking down both targets.

The Examinee downed the next series of targets as they popped up until they had reached two more stakes with yellow flags on each side of the path; thus ending the first half of the fourth session.

Both He and Mike turned and walked all the way back to the two stakes with the red flags, turned around, and waited for the command to resume.

So far, the Examinee had downed ten of the first twelve targets with only twelve more to go.

Then the command to begin was given and the Examinee started his final walk down the path.

On this trip, the Examinee wasn't having the problems that he previously had and knocked them down one by one until the Examinee reached the two yellow flags, where he let out a big sigh of relief.

With a nod from Mike, his Scorekeeper, the Examinee knew he had earned eighty-six the level of Sharpshooter.

The rest of the day proceeded likewise until worn out and tired; Mike walks to the Range Control Shack with the final group of score sheets and hands them to Sergeant Arbuckle.

Taking the score sheets from Mike, he says, "You did a fine job Corporal Troff. We sure could use you on a permanent basis."

"That goes double for me as well," remarks Lieutenant Ostman as he exits the Range Control Shack, "I can arrange it so you can remain here—how about it Corporal?"

"Thanks for the invite, but I must decline at this time," Mike tells them with a shake of his head.

"Sorry to see you go Corporal, you did a fine job and it'll be noted in your record," says Lieutenant Ostman, offering his hand; Mike accepts his hand and they shake.

Then Sergeant Arbuckle extends his hand with, "That goes for me too," and Mike and the Sergeant shake hands, then Mike comes to attention and salutes, after the Lieutenant returns the salute, Mike turns and walks away.

Mike comes around the tall wooden barrier and heads for the main gateway as the last man of the fourth platoon walks through.

Joining his platoon, whom are loosely formed into squads Greg, who's standing with his squad behind Mike taps him on the shoulder and happily announced, made Expert by one point—how about that!"

"Congrats," Mike tells him with a shake of hands and smiles.

“Thanks—it was a tough test—missed most of the 400-meter targets and several of the 5 to 20-meter buggers, but I nailed the rest,” boasted Greg; Mike just smiled, then Sergeant Axtell called attention and everyone came to attention and formed straight squads.

Soon they were heading back to the company area in the back of the trucks, this time Mike rode in the back with his squad.

When Mike got back, he was hoping to go and get out of his dirty uniform, and he looked forward to a nice hot shower before chow; so was the rest of the platoon, but that wasn’t going to be the case, to Mike’s and the rest of platoon’s surprise.

As soon as they got off the trucks, the four Platoon Sergeants call the platoons into platoon formations and they were told to fall out by squad and go into the barracks to secure their weapons in the weapons racks and return; tired and very dirty the men did as was ordered.

Once they were back in formation, Mike had a bad feeling of what they were going to do next, because he’d seen it before, right here in Basic Training, and sure enough, they were brought to attention and marched over to the nearest PT field.

For the next grueling hour, they did PT, and when they marched back, they were not only very dirty and sweaty, but smelled horrible; Mike and the rest of his platoon couldn’t wait to get into the showers.

That evening after chow, the barracks was unusually quiet, as almost everyone was lying in their bunks bone-tired; that night everyone slept soundly.

Starting the next day, it was déjà vu again for Mike, because he was back in that same large building with that huge sandbox, but this time it wasn’t storming outside, it was nice and sunny.

For that entire day, they learned and practiced marshal arts with an hour of PT thrown in at the end for good measure; and so it went for that entire week.

On Monday of the following week, they were back out in the field in their Chameleon suits, learning how to use them; Mike was introduced to the suit back in Basic on this very field, more déjà vu!

Mike is now beginning to feel like he’s caught in a very bad time warp!

On Thursday they started learning about tactical exercises and then practiced out in the field, so now when Mike and his platoon got back, they were nice and dirty.

That evening not only were the showers running full tilt, so was all of the washing machines and dryers.

On Friday the entire company spent the entire day in a large lecture hall for a lecture on Tactical Special Operations or TSO's as it was referred too.

Then to Mike's shock, they began to use the war game from two years ago as an example of a TSO, and how a young man was able to infiltrate the enemy's HQ and obtain critical information which helped to bring about their defeat.

The Officer giving the lecture remarked, "This young man was untrained and yet brilliantly carried out a successful mission—simply brilliant!"

Mike just sat there slack-jawed at what this Officer was unknowingly saying about him.

When the last hour had arrived, the Officer announced to everyone's surprise, that starting on Monday the company will play Capture the Flag.

The Officer explained, "Each platoon's flag will be the main objective—plus there will be several minor objectives, and each objective achieved will be worth points. The game will end either by the capture of the opponents flag or at 2100 hours (9 PM) on Wednesday. If by this time no platoon has captured their opponents flag, the platoon with the highest score will be declared the victor. On Monday morning, the games will start with a lecture, and then the First Platoon versus the Third Platoon in one assigned area, and the Second Platoon versus the Fourth Platoon in another. Then on Thursday the two victorious platoons will play each other so only one platoon is victorious. You'll all be issued a special weapon that uses marker rounds and everyone will be wearing face protection and combat gear. Although these rounds splat on contact, they will hurt if you get hit on bare unprotected skin. Now these rounds are propelled by compressed air and have maximum range of about 100 meters, but are accurate only to about 30 to 40 meters. Each platoon will be using a different color and everyone will be abiding by the following Rules. First, no one will be allowed to leave your assigned area. A map will be provided that marks the boundaries. Second, all decisions by the Referees are final. There will be twelve Referees assigned to each platoon plus six Field Referees, so as you can see there will be plenty of observers to monitor the field exercises. Finally, the Referees will decide if a hit requires a man to be temporally suspended and placed in a makeshift infirmary until such time deemed by a Referee to return to the field or be permanently removed as being killed and all hits count as points

for the opposing side with a kill counting the highest. The platoon with the most men remaining at the end will earn additional points—are there any questions?”

A man from the First Platoon raised his hand, the Officer pointed to him and the man asks, “How are hit points awarded?”

“Each non-suspending hit counts as one point. Each hit requiring a trip to the suspension, infirmary tent, counts as three points and each kill is five points. Remember these points are awarded to the opposing side. At the end of the time period and no one has captured the flag, then each man remaining in the platoon counts as one point for that platoon. All minor mission objectives achieved count as one hundred points. Remember, any platoon who captures the other platoon’s flag is automatically the winner—points earned are immaterial at this point,” explained the Officer, and then he asked, “Any more questions?”

After a brief period of silence and no hands being raised, the Officer dismissed the class with attention being called and everyone stood as the officer walked out of the lecture hall, then each platoon filed out of the lecture hall, formed up outside, are marched back to the company area and are dismissed.

That evening in the mess hall Greg, Mike, Roger and Pat were eating their last meal of the day when Greg asks, “Have any of you guys played paintball—I have—with a group of friends in high school—there were eight of us and boy was it fun.”

Mike looked at him dumbfounded and exclaimed, “That’s all we need, to return all covered in paint—now that isn’t gonna’ be any fun,” and also remembering that summer when he was in the military training exercises out in the desert, and the Red Army’s Head Quarters standoff that ended in a wet slippery mess.

“What ya’ mean!” Declared Greg, “That’s gonna’ be great fun—it’ll be the best time I’ll have since I’ve arrived here.”

The other three look at him slack-jawed.

Then Roger remarks, “You enjoy getting plastered from head to toe in paint and having to do laundry at night.”

“The object is not to get painted, but to paint someone else,” replied Greg with a smile.

The other men look at him straight-faced, and then Mike says, as he gets up grabbing his tray, “C’mon we’ve got a GI party to get started,” and starts walking to the disposal window.

Roger downs the last of his milk and gets up and after grabbing his tray follows Mike, then Pat and Greg follows suit.

An hour later with the barracks bustling with activity, Sergeant Axtell walks in to check things out and sees everyone busy cleaning, scrubbing, and polishing, smiles commenting, “I see the Boss has got things under control—no need for me to stick around,” and so he leaves.

At lights out, everything is in order for Saturdays inspection; Mike and Greg are in bed bone tired and sound to sleep, and so is the rest of the platoon, because tomorrow will come early.

CHAPTER 9 -- Capture the Flag.

Saturday morning inspection went off without any problems and the third platoon passed with flying colors.

The rest of the day was spent shopping at the Post Exchange (PX) getting some badly needed laundry supplies and for Mike a new pair of jeans. That evening at mess, the conversation returned to the field training exercises on Monday.

Greg was all worked up with anticipation while Roger and Pat looked on with discord; Mike just shook his head feeling glad he'd bought extra laundry soap, because he feels he'll be needing it.

Sunday morning both Mike and Greg slept in, because this is the only day that they didn't have to be up before six AM.

At eight, Mike got up, slid over to the edge of his bed and sat up; he looked over at Greg who's still under the covers with his head buried in his pillow and said, "Gressett wake up—are you gonna' waste the whole morning in the sack?"

Greg moans and buries his head deeper and pulls the covers over his head.

"C'mon Gressett get up—we've missed chow and I'm hungry—lets go to the PX Cafeteria and get something to eat."

"You go—I'm laying here until the mess hall opens at noon, ahhhhh..."

"No--you're--not--not this Sunday" Mike tells him, goes over and throws the covers off, uncovering Greg.

"Go away," Greg complaining, grabs the covers and pulls them back over him; Mike just shakes his head and goes over to his wall locker.

After getting his shaving kit, bath towel, soap dish, clean underwear, Mike slips into his shower slippers and heads for the latrine.

When Mike returned, Greg was still in bed; after putting his stuff away, Mike put his shirt on and told Greg, "Enough is enough, get out of the sack or I'll throw a bucket of cold water on ya'."

"Just go away and leave me in peace," moaned Greg.

Looking at his alarm clock on the nightstand, Mike gives Greg an ultimatum, "If you're not out that sack in five minutes, I'll get Talbott, and Littlefield to help me throw you out—now believe me, you don't want that."

"I'll bet Talbott and Littlefield are still sacked out too," grumbles Greg from beneath the covers; Mike just looks at him, shakes his head, and puts

on the new pair of jeans he bought yesterday.

After putting his socks and shoes on, Mike looks at the clock and announces, “Times up—now you’ve ask for it—I’m getting Talbott and Littlefield—you’re not going to like what’s coming,” Mike walks out of the room and Greg rolls over and mumbles, “A guy can’t enjoy some time in the sack!”

When Mike returns to his room with Talbott and Littlefield, Greg was at his wall locker getting his shaving kit, some clean underwear, and his soap dish.

After grabbing a bath towel and throwing it over his shoulder, Greg comments as he walks past Mike, Talbott and Littlefield, “A guy can’t even get to sleep-in once in a while.”

Mike responds with, “Sleep-in--yeah, but not until noon. Now hurry up—we’ll wait for you,”

“Yeah, yeah,” Greg grumbles with a nod and walks out of the room and heads for the latrine.

When Greg returned thirty minutes later, Mike was discussing with Talbott and Littlefield the day’s agenda.

Greg asked, as he puts his stuff away and grabs a clean shirt, “so what ya’ got planned?”

“First, we’re gonna’ stop at the Post Internet Café and see if there’s any computer stations open—gonna’ send a few emails home, been months since I wrote to my family and friends, they’re probably wondering what happened to me,” suggests Mike, “that should take us till noon and chow.”

Both Talbott and Littlefield nod approvingly.

“Ok—I guess it wouldn’t hurt me to send a email home either,” announced Greg, and then he asked, “What are we goin’ to do after chow?”

“Maybe a movie,” replied Littlefield, “there’s a Sci-Fi flick playing at the main theater, —it starts at thirteen-hundred and runs about two hours. After that—don’t know—open for suggestions though.”

“Sounds great, so let’s get something to eat—I’m hungry,” Greg tells them.

“And you were the one who wanted to sleep until noon,” laughed Mike.

After putting on a pair of jeans and lacing up his sneakers, Greg grabs his wallet and closes his wall lockers and locks them, and then he follows his three friends out of the room.

It was almost three o'clock when the three men walked out of the theater.

Greg asked, "We still got two hours before the Mess-Hall opens, so what's the plan?"

"Well—I really don't know," Pat tells them shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm for headin' to the USO Club for a little TV," says Mike, "I want to catch some news and see what kind of weather we're having tomorrow."

"Sounds great—hope it's sunny tomorrow—I don't like crawlin' around in the mud," remarked Roger looking impassive.

So, off to the Post USO Club they go, and upon arriving they find everyone gathered around the large screen TV which is showing intense fighting.

Mike inquires from a nearby soldier, "What's going on?"

"Pakistan and Iran have invaded India, and Israel and Turkey are on heighten alert—this might be the start of a global war," replied the Soldier with a grim expression.

"What about China or North Korea?" Asked Mike in a serious tone.

The Soldier shrugged his shoulders and softly replied, "Don't rightly know—nothing has been said of them so far."

"At least we're not involved," Greg remarked.

"I wouldn't make any bets," Mike firmly announced, "If Turkey is attacked we're in it along with all of the NATO countries in Europe—remember, Turkey is a member of NATO and we have two NATO bases there—Cetin and Incirlik."

"Say—weren't you at Cetin?" Greg asks, Mike nods and adds, "Yeah, and we're already fighting there and guys are dying. I saw a bit of action myself—my roommate was killed shortly after I arrived."

"Boy, I bet you're glad to be out of there—left just in time too. Now you're nice'n safe here with all of us," Greg said portentously.

"I wouldn't be so sure," returned Mike in an ominous tone; Greg, Pat, and Roger look at him with quizzical expressions.

When Mike went to bed that night, he had a foreboding uneasy feeling and now wishes he'd listened to Major Clark and taken his Mother's advice.

Monday morning, Mike and his company are marching double-time, to the field exercises that were spoken of at last Friday's lecture.

As Mike briskly marched, he felt a bit naked without his M20; for the exercises that start tomorrow, they'll be issued a different kind of weapon, one that shoots paintballs.

When they reached the place where the exercises will be conducted, the four platoons came to a halt in front of a large circus-like tent and filed inside.

Once seated inside, a Master Sergeant and his assistant, a Staff Sergeant, standing on a raised platform, began to lecture on the various weapons that the men will be using during the field exercises.

Lying on a long table to one side of the lectern, at which the Master Sergeant was standing at, was a hand grenade, a land mine, a claymore mine, and two guns; one of the guns looks almost like the M20, but without the computerized sight.

This weapon also had a short metal tube attached to the underside, and to the end of the tube a shiny flexible mesh hose.

The other gun was really strange; it was kind of like a handgun, and it also had a metal tube attached to the bottom of the gun, and the other end, was attached to a small cylinder.

On the top of this gun there was what appears to be some sort of hopper with a cap.

The Staff Sergeant was standing behind the table and held up each weapon as the Master Sergeant described it; there was a large flip chart on an easel to one side with diagrams of the weapons lying on the table.

Pointing to the table, the Master Sergeant said, "These are the weapons you will be using—they are non lethal, but they will smart if you get hit. So don't remove any clothing otherwise they'll leave marks, and I don't mean paint. You'll all be required to wear a full face helmet and eye protection, so don't get caught without it—otherwise it'll be an article fifteen. Besides, I don't think any of you want to lose an eye—now do you? Now do you have any questions?"

A hand went up followed by several more; the Master Sergeant pointed to a man in the middle of the audience; the man got up and asked, "Will we be required to wear face protection while we sleep?"

Then he sat down and the Master Sergeant responded, "No—the exercises will end at twenty-hundred and resume the next morning at o-eight-hundred. Any other questions?"

Another hand goes up near the front and the Master Sergeant points to him and he stands and asks, "You said the weapons will leave a mark if you get hit and you're not wearing anything—what kind of mark?"

"If you're thinly clad," the Master Sergeant began as the man sat down, "and you get hit by one of these small paintballs, it's going to really hurt and it'll raise a good size red welt, besides getting covered with a splat of paint. I think you'll be wanting to have your uniform on even if it gets a bit warm—

believe me—you don't want to get hit by one of these things wearing only a tee shirt"

Mike says to himself, "Great—that's all I need—another way to make my life miserable. If crawling around in the dirt isn't bad enough, now I'm going to get plastered with welts and paint!"

Then another hand goes up, the Master Sergeant now points to him, the Soldier stands and asks, "These paintballs, how do I get the paint out of my uniform, or do I need to buy or get issued new ones?"

"You don't need to obtain new uniforms," the Master Sergeant began, "the marker paint is water soluble, so it'll come out in the wash, but the wash water might become a bit colorful," his face now displaying a big grin.

After no more hands were raised, the Master Sergeant continued, "Ok, now lets describe how these devices work—except for the paintball guns, which we'll be calling Markers instead of guns or weapons. Which is what they're actually called, because they mark the victim with a splat of paint when hit. We all know what the other devices are, and we'll start with the hand grenade."

The Staff Sergeant picks it up and goes over and flips the page on the chart to show the internal structure of the grenade.

Then he begins to describe how it works, "Like the Marker you'll all be carrying, and you'll also be carrying several of these as well. As you can see by this chart, this grenade is non-lethal. It's filled with dozens of pea size paintballs inside a membrane with a small firecracker located at its center. When you pull the ring, like with a real grenade, it frees the triggering device—the handle, and it becomes armed. Once the handle is released, you have three seconds before it goes off, releasing a shower of small paintballs along with a loud bang. As depicted in the diagram here," the Staff Sergeant using a pointer, points to the diagram as he continues to lecture, "as the small spring wound mechanism starts running it pulls the pin from the spring-loaded trap that holds the grenade together. When the trap is sprung the grenade pops open like a five-petal flower exposing the paintballs inside the membrane, the firecracker goes off forcing the surrounding contents out. So, along with the loud bang and some smoke, there are lots of paint splotches."

Then the Master Sergeant added, "Of course, any one or one's unlucky enough to get splotched, is declared dead and is removed from the exercise and the platoon who tossed the grenade is scored accordingly. Any questions, so far?"

A hand went up and the Master Sergeant pointed to him, he stood up and asked, “How can you tell which platoon threw the grenade?”

“By the color of the paint splotches,” replied the Master Sergeant smiling, “Each platoon will be using a different color. The color’s are Brown, Orange, red, green, blue, yellow, and violet. The paintballs inside the grenades, the claymores, and the liquid paint inside the landmines are of these colors—each device has a band or marking on it denoting the color of the paintballs inside, as you can see by the red band on the grenade the Sergeant is holding.”

The Staff Sergeant holds up the grenade while pointing to the red band painted around its midsection.

“The other two devices all work in a similar fashion, but with greater amount of paintballs and a larger firecracker, so they make a louder bang and have a greater range and coverage,” said the Master Sergeant.

As the Master Sergeant looked over the audience, Glen looked radiant where as Mike, Roger, and Pat looked pained.

Finally, the Master Sergeant said, “Now for the field assignments. Starting tomorrow, The First Platoon will face the Third Platoon, and the Second Platoon will face the Fourth Platoon. Then on Thursday, the two platoons who were victorious on Wednesday will face each other, until on Friday when there will only be one victorious platoon.”

Glen had a huge smile and whispered to Mike, “This is going to so much fun—just like when I played back home.”

Mike, with a despondent expression looked at Glen and whispered back, “No it’s not. Running around and getting covered with dirt, welts, and paint isn’t my idea of fun!”

Glen looked at Mike with an etched expression.

Then the Master Sergeant said, “Each Platoon Sergeant and the Squad Leaders will get a GPS-Compass and a map of the area marking the boundaries his platoon will be operating in—and under no circumstances will you cross those boundaries—any questions?”

With no hands raised, the Master Sergeant announced, “With no further questions, that’s all I have at this time and good luck tomorrow—Platoon Sergeants take charge of your Platoons,” with that, he and his assistant walked off the platform and out of the tent.

The men of the four platoons get up and the Platoon Sergeants lead the men out of the large tent with the First Platoon leading the way.

The Platoon Sergeants marched their Platoons over to another smaller tent, there, one by one, each Platoon went inside where they were issued a marker, a belt with two small cylinders of compressed air, two canisters containing two hundred paintballs and four of those hand grenades.

Mike's marker was one of those that looked like his M-20; the shiny flexible mesh hose had a quick release that attached to one of the cylinders on his belt.

The magazine in the bottom of the marker held the fifty or so of the small paintballs, instead of real bullets; the magazine was refillable from the canisters containing about a hundred paintballs each.

Now these Marker weapons didn't have a targeting computer for help in target acquisition, only a regular night vision sight was present.

"Guess I'll need to do it the old fashion way," Mike said to himself, "anyway, this thing only has a 300-foot maximum or about 100-meter range, so it's going to be mostly point and shoot rather than aiming."

Each Squad Leader as well as the Platoon Sergeant got a wrist mounted GPS-Compass along with a multi-function timepiece; they also received a vinyl topographic map.

Finally, with the trucks waiting, each Platoon is loaded up and heads out in a different direction to their assigned starting positions.

When Mike's truck arrived at his designated starting place, they got off the trucks and Sergeant Axtell had them form up.

There in a large semi-circle were several tents of different sizes, a very large tent on the right with a sign that read, 'MESS HALL', and a smaller tent that read, 'QUARTERMASTER'.

Now on the left were three medium size tents with signs of which two read, '1st & 2nd SQUADS' and '3RD & 4th SQUADS' the remaining tent had a sign that read, 'STAFF', and in the middle was another medium size tent with a sign that read, '2ND PLATOON HQ'; in the very center of the semi-circle there was a pole and on this pole was a red flag with a white numeral two flapping in the wind.

Mike says to himself, "That must be the flag spoken of at the orientation."

Positioned around the perimeter was sandbag bunkers; four of the bunkers were positioned in front of the HQ in a vee formation guarding the avenue to the flag.

Then Sergeant Axtell said, "After I dismiss you, I want all squad leaders to position their men, and then meet me in the HQ tent—the rest of you get ready to defend this area or to move out—A-A-TEN-N-TION—FALL

OUT!"

Sergeant Axtell heads to the HQ tent.

Mike and his three fellow squad leaders took charge of their squads.

Mike said to four of his men, "You four get in those bunkers," pointing to the bunkers forming the vee, "you'll defend our HQ and flag when the time comes."

When Greg, saw what Mike had done, he had several of his men do the same with the other bunkers until their Headquarters were defended by strategically place men inside bunkers, and then all four-squad leaders headed to the HQ tent.

When Mike and his three fellow squad leaders entered the tent, Sergeant Axtell was standing at a card table looking down at a vinyl map; when he saw the four men enter he motioned with his hand, telling them, "Over here," Mike and his fellow squad leaders joined Sergeant Axtell at the table.

Looking down at the map, Sergeant Axtell said, "The first thing that needs to be done is to position men inside the bunkers around our HQ for defense."

Mike piped up, "Already done, Sergeant."

With a surprised look on his face, Sergeant Axtell remarked, "Well done," looking at Mike, and he then asked, "Any more suggestions?"

"I think we should set some booby traps and mine the perimeter for advanced warning, just in case they try a surprise attack," responded Mike.

"Excellent idea, Corporal Troff, and your squad has the honors," said Sergeant Axtell, Mike just looked at him for a moment, and then nodded.

"I think we should breakup the platoon into separate squads and not be concentrating a lot of guys here in defense of the HQ," Greg suggesting, "to maximize our score we can't all sit here and play defense—we must become aggressive."

"Won't that expose our HQ to attack? Besides, we don't have enough men to do as you suggest," responded Sergeant Axtell.

"Neither do they," Greg remonstrated, "but if we leave one squad position within the HQ for defense, a second close by, but out of sight, we can use our remaining two squads and attack their HQ."

"Personally I think they'll leave one squad in their HQ and send their other three squads to attack us," Mike surmised in a speculative manner, "and that's the main reason I suggested the land mines and booby traps.

"And I bet they'll be all grouped around their HQ in small bunches and easy to pick off—especially with a grenade or two," Greg injected.

“And a good reason to only have one man in a bunker,” added Mike with a grin.

“Ok,” said Sergeant Axtell with a nod, “Troff—I’m placing you in charge of defending the HQ with your squad and the First Squad. Corporal Gressett—you’re in charge of attacking the other HQ with your squad and the Second Squad. Ok—lets put this plan into action.”

Mike made Roger his second in command and Greg made Pat his second in command.

Mike assigned the remaining men in his platoon to place claymores as booby traps just out of firing distance from the HQ, so the other platoon must pass through the minefields to fire on the HQ.

Roger had two of his men search for two hidden locations for his squad to hide, the rest of his men helped Mike’s men dig in landmines in such a fashion to force the opposing force down a narrow corridor into the HQ.

Once the booby traps and landmines were placed, it was time for evening mess, which they ate in the mess tent.

After returning from the mess tent, Mike and Greg went to their tent to turn in for the night.

The next morning after formation and breakfast, the First Squad split in half and hid themselves in the two locations outside of the main perimeter, and there they were to remain concealed and wait until given the order to attack.

Mike broke his squad up and had a man in each bunker guarding the route into the HQ; he positioned the rest of his squad randomly around the HQ, one man per bunker, then he took a position behind a big boulder to the left of the main route to the flag where he could get a good shot at anyone trying to make a dash for their flag.

Finally everyone was ready, at ten o’ clock, Greg and Pat headed out with their two squads, with two mission objectives; one, to locate the other HQ, and two, to ascertain if they are still there and how much of the platoon is defending the HQ.

So, Greg splits the two squads into two man teams and heads out to locate the Fourth Platoon HQ.

After about an hour, one of Pat’s team encounters a group of men from the Fourth Platoon making their way towards the Second Platoon’s HQ; and by the looks of them it was an entire squad.

Hunkered down, the two men watched as the squad from the Fourth Platoon passed by, and after they had passed, using the small pocket radio

that they were issued, the two men disclosed the number of men and location of the sighted squad to Pat, and Pat in turn reported it to Greg.

Ten minutes later two men from Greg's squad encountered another large group of men from the Fourth Platoon, and this information was also radioed back.

After plotting the locations of the reported sightings on the map spread out on the card table, Sergeant Axtell summoned Mike to the HQ.

Looking down at the map, Sergeant Axtell says, "Looks like they're heading our way, and should be arriving in two separate assault groups about five to ten minutes apart—the first group should be here in about ten or fifteen minutes."

"We'll be ready for em'," said Mike with a slight smile, "they're going to get a big surprise when they encounter the mine field and booby-traps—that should whittle down the first group to a manageable size."

"I hope so," returned Sergeant Axtell, "but, the second group will be alerted and will be watching out for additional mines and booby-traps. But, what worries me more is—where is their third squad? Are they doing as we, remaining back at their HQ?"

Mike shrugs his shoulders, muttering, "Don't know."

"Well, you better get to your position—the first group should be arriving shortly," said Sergeant Axtell looking at his hi-tech timepiece; Mike nods and heads back out to his boulder.

When Mike got behind his boulder, he radioed Roger and told him to stay concealed and don't engage until called; Roger reaffirmed, and then he heard the first man from the advanced group come stomping through the brush, "Here they come," Roger softly announces to Mike on the radio.

Now in groups of two, they pass by Roger's position and head to the booby-trapped area.

Suddenly there's a loud pop, screams, and a few cuss words, then two markers are held up and two Referees hurry to the scene.

Then another loud pop followed by more cuss words and two more raised markers.

Now there's confusion among the remaining group.

After halting any further advancement, they gather in a hunkered huddle to discuss the situation.

Then the Referees walk by Roger's position with the four men of the group all covered in green paint.

Roger radios to Mike, "The booby-traps got four of em'. Now the rest of

em' are hunkered down in a group, totally confused as what to do--hee, hee, hee," Roger giggles.

"Great!" Mike exclaims, "Now hopefully the other four will step on the landmines, then all we have to worry about is the second group, and maybe some of those guy's will stumble into the remaining booby-traps and landmines. Maybe you won't be needed—so just stay quiet and out of sight."

After about five minutes the remaining men radioed to the next group explaining what happened and asking what they should do; they were informed to proceed with caution and try to find a way through the booby-trapped field, and that rest of the assault group was almost there.

So, the remaining four men started to advance through the booby-traps, starting where the other two had already gone off, knowing this way was now safe.

Very cautiously the four men advanced forward looking for more booby-traps and tripwires.

After a minute or two the lead man's hand went up; he's found a trip wire and the other three men halt.

He carefully follows the tripwire back to a claymore fasten to a nearby tree, he points to it and they all carefully approach the claymore so as to not set it off.

After disarming it they slowly continue on, all the while looking for more tripwires.

Roger watches and radios Mike with a suggestion, "These guys are so engrossed in looking for more booby-traps they're sitting ducks—we can easily take em' out."

"No!" Mike tells him, over the Radio, "Just stay put, because the second group should be arriving shortly and you don't want to give yourselves away and ruin our little surprise."

When after advancing and not encountering anymore booby-traps, the four remaining men figure they're through the booby-trapped field and radios back to the other group that a path had been cleared and sends them the GPS coordinates, then they separate into two groups and proceed to advance on the Second Platoon' HQ.

A couple of minutes after the remaining four men of the first group, from the Fourth Platoon, had disappeared through the trees and brush, the second group arrives and starts after the first group following the GPS information that was radioed to them; Roger radioed Mike, informing him

that the second group had arrived and is headed his way.
Mike then informed Sergeant Axtell of the situation.

Two men from the first group are following an animal trail, while the other two are slowly making their way through some thick underbrush, when suddenly the lead man following the animal trail steps on a landmine; it goes off spraying both men with green paint.

Raising their markers, signaling they're out of the exercise and after wiping the paint from their face shields, they turn and head back; a short time later they meet a Referee and its official.

With only two men remaining in the first group, they reach a clearing with lots of big boulders strewn about, and view the entrance to the Second Platoons HQ.

Mike notices movement on the other side of the clearing and looks through the scope on his marker; there he sees two men hunkered down in some brush looking back.

Mike now knows game time is about to start, so he notifies Sergeant Axtell that men from the other platoon have arrived.

Then the second group arrives, and now there's ten men to deal with; they breakup into two man teams and start advancing using the big boulders for cover.

Mike notifies the two men in the forward bunkers to get ready.

The ten men continue to advance darting from boulder to boulder, when suddenly, two men, one on each end of the advancing line, step on landmines resulting in two more raised markers and them leaving the field covered in green paint; Mike smiles thinking the landmines are doing the job, now there's only eight men remaining and no one has yet fired a shot.

The remaining men halt, study the situation, and decide to try lobbing small rocks out to set off the landmines to clear an area; several mines do go off creating large circles of green paint denoting where the mines had been.

When the attackers got closer, the men in the two bunkers began firing keeping the attackers pinned down and from advancing further.

For the next several minutes there was intense return fire from several of the boulders keeping the two men in the bunkers from returning fire.

Then suddenly several men broke from behind several boulders while the two men in the bunkers were still unable to return fire, because of the intense incoming fire.

Mike watched helplessly in horror as the attackers pressed closer to the bunkers, when suddenly two grenades sailed out from behind two nearby boulders in gentle arcs and fell into both bunkers; a second later a loud pop and two raised markers.

Both of Mike's defenders are out of the exercise; they get up covered in blue paint, they leave the field.

Now it's eight attackers to Mike and his five defenders, and he now thinks it time to call in the reinforcements.

Now after a bunch more rocks have been lobbed and more of the land-mines triggered, the field into the Second Platoon's HQ is now open; Mike's little plan to funnel the attackers down a narrow corridor didn't work, and now he, along with his remaining squad, has to hold off the attack until Roger and his squad arrives.

Four of the attackers make a dash for the now two empty bunkers under a hail of paintballs fired by three of Mike's squad members; one attacker is hit, but the other three make it to the bunkers.

The bunker on the right has two attackers and the bunker on the left now has one; the other four attackers quickly move up.

Mike cautiously peers out from behind his boulder, trying to locate a target within range, but to Mike's frustration, all of the attackers are still out of range of his marker.

Then without warning, a grenade is thrown from one of the taken bunkers and falls short of the intended bunker and goes off, covering the front sandbags of the bunker with blue paint, then a second grenade is tossed from the other taken bunker and it too, falls short, way short, and harmlessly goes off covering everything in the near vicinity with blue paint.

Mike calls over to the man in the splattered bunker to try and lob a grenade into the bunker with the single attacker inside.

The man in the splattered bunker lobs a grenade to the other bunker; it hits the top edge and rolls into the bunker and immediately goes off, a marker is raised, and the attacker inside comes out covered with green paint, and another attacker is eliminated.

Another man from Mike's squad, who's inside the bunker that was totally missed, throws another grenade, but it doesn't make it inside and goes off just outside and covers some of the sandbags of that bunker with green paint.

Mike notices an attacker behind a boulder getting ready to make a dash to the now empty bunker, so Mike motions with his hand to the man in the bunker closest to the boulder to get ready.

The man dashes for the empty bunker firing his marker to keep anyone from shooting at him, and it works; he makes it to the empty bunker, Mike shakes his head in disgust.

Then another grenade is lobbed and it falls into another of the Second Platoons bunkers followed by a raised marker and another man of the Second Platoon comes out of the bunker covered with blue paint.

Then suddenly another man from the Fourth Platoon makes a dash for the bunker containing his comrade, taking the Second Platoon by surprise.

Now both bunker contain two men and two behind boulders.

With an empty bunker available, Mike signals with his hand to be ready for an attempt by the Fourth Platoon to try and get one of their men into this bunker.

Mike is now very worried, because the Fourth Platoon has taken two of the Second Platoons bunkers and has six men verses the Second Platoons five.

Sitting there and waiting for the attackers to come into range, Mike feels helpless and wonders where Roger and the Second Squad is and asks himself, "Where are you guys?"

Then it happened!

All of the attackers began shooting in unison, providing covering fire for one of their men to get into the empty bunker, and keeping the Second Platoon hunkered down and from returning fire.

Mike watches in horror as one of the attackers from an occupied bunker with two men, makes for the empty bunker, and gets inside.

Now three of the outermost bunkers of the vee formation are occupied by the Fourth Platoon.

Then, from out of the woods and brush came Roger and his squad, and attacks the two men behind the boulders from the rear, taking them by surprise; with nowhere to go, they are picked off and with raised markers they're out of the exercises.

Now all that remains of the two squads from the Fourth Platoon are the four men in the three bunkers.

Now out flanked on two sides, it isn't long before they are taken out.

Greg's plan of splitting the defending squads into two units has worked and now the Second Platoon prevails; all they need now is to get the Fourth Platoon's flag.

Now Greg and Pat are having a hard time trying to advance into the Fourth Platoon's HQ and grab their flag.

The remaining two squads are heavily deployed in defense of their HQ and flag.

Unlike the Second Platoon, the Fourth Platoon's remaining squads are all evenly positioned around the HQ with each bunker having two men they are able to cover the bunkers on either side in crossfire.

Both Greg's and Pat's men are unable to get close enough, even to throw grenades; all they can do is try and pick off an unlucky defender when he tries to shoot, and so far that's been difficult.

Greg radios back to Sergeant Axtell, informing him of the stalemate. Sergeant Axtell tells Greg, "Keep the pressure up, maybe you'll find a weak spot—over."

Sergeant Axtell looking worried says to Mike and Pat, whom are standing at the map table, "Gressett and Talbott are meeting very stiff resistance. It seems the Fourth Platoon has heavily fortified their HQ and Gressett is having a very hard time advancing."

Mike and Pat look back with frustration, and then Sergeant Axtell exhaled and announced, "I'm going for broke."

"Huh—going for broke!" Exclaimed Mike in surprise, with Pat turning to look at Mike with a questioning expression.

"I now have a good idea where the Fourth Platoon's third squad is, so they have no one to attack our HQ," began Sergeant Axtell, "I'm sending the remaining squads to help Gressett and Talbott, —there's no need to keep them here. Now listen up—here's what I--we're going to do. Troff, you're the best shot in the platoon—probably in the entire company, so I want you as a sniper and try to pick off any of the defenders poking their heads out. The rest of the Third and Second Squads, I'm going to use them to try and get close enough to lob a grenade or two into their bunkers—if what Gressett tells me is true all it will take is one grenade to take out two men. We'll probably lose a few men, but if we can poke a big enough hole in their defense, then maybe Gressett and Talbott can advance into their HQ and grab the flag."

About half an hour later Sergeant Axtell arrives with remaining Third and Second Squads and joins what remains of Greg and Pat's squads, which is twelve, after losing four men after trying to take out the foreword bunkers.

Now with the additional thirteen men from Third and Second Squads, the Second Platoon has twenty-five men for the final assault.

Looking through field glasses, Sergeant Axtell sees how the Fourth Platoon has fortified their position; it looks nearly impossible.

The Fourth Platoon has chosen their location very wisely within an 'L' shape row of huge house size closely placed boulders on their left and rear which even a snake couldn't slither between and a thick grove of Hawthorn and Mesquite with lots of long sharp thorns on the west; no chance of getting through those even if the area isn't mined which it probably is.

And to make matters worst, a bunker was placed on top of one of the huge boulders with two men inside covering their flag; a crude wooden ladder is leaning against the boulder.

Taking the glasses from his eyes, Sergeant Axtell just shook his head and remarked to his four squad leaders, "I don't see anyway of getting their flag. Even if we manage to get inside their HQ, I don't see how we can grab the flag without getting picked off by the two men in the bunker on the top of the boulder, and who knows where the rest of the men are positioned—this will be like Urban warfare—any ideas?"

The four men looking hopeless looks at him, and then slowly shook their heads, then Sergeant Axtell says with a sigh, "Looks like this exercise comes down to who's got the most points and right now we do—so, we'll let the clock run out and see what happens. The way it stands it's a stalemate—they can't get out and we can't get in. In the mean time let's see if we can increase our lead by taking out a few more of them—let them think we're still trying to get in."

For the next several hours, paintballs flew back and forth splattering harmlessly on trees, boulders, and the front of the two foreword bunkers.

Then at eighteen hundred a blow-horn announced, "CEASE FIRE, CEASE FIRE."

The paintballs stopped flying and then three Referees stepped out from a small grove of trees with raised hand, signaling the end of the exercises which puzzled Sergeant Axtell, because there still were several hours until twenty-hundred and the official end of the exercises.

Then the men from both platoons got out from their positions and stood looking towards the Referees, then one of the Referees motioned towards the

direction from which they had come.

As everyone watched, two men from the Fourth Platoon walked out of the woods and as they walked towards the Referees one of the men was holding a white flag with a red number two on it.

As the men of the Second Platoon looked on in shock, the Fourth Platoon irrupted in cheers, and then one of the Referees pointed to the Fourth Platoon and officially pronounced them to be the winner and will meet the other winner from the First and Third Platoons exercise on Thursday, to decide the final winner.

With heavy hearts and low spirits, the Second Platoon headed back to their HQ to have their final mess and prepare to depart in the morning.

When Sergeant Axtell got back, he had a short debriefing in the Second Platoon HQ tent with the four-squad leaders.

In the debriefing, he bemoaned it was all his fault that he misjudged their opponent, and that their strategy all along was to draw them out of the HQ and keep them occupied, so the men of the Fourth Platoon could simply walk in and take the flag unopposed; his final comment was, “A lesson to remember men, —don’t assume anything, especially the strength of your opponent. That’s it—be ready to move out in the morning—any questions?”

With no questions, he dismissed the men and they walked out of the tent and headed for the mess tent.

CHAPTER 10 -- Mr. Kelso.

After spending the last four days agonizing over their loss in the exercises to the Fourth Platoon, on Friday morning, they, along with the rest of their company are marching down a pathway, next to a road, leading to another training seminar.

With a little over two weeks remaining in their advanced infantry training, Mike was pondering when are they going to be taking the final exams and where is he going to be stationed next?

They arrive at that large building with large double steel doors, which once again, were propped open and this time the inside was lit.

After all of the Platoons were assembled along the side of the building, they proceeded in an orderly fashion into the building through the open double doors; once inside, they filed into the seats and sat down.

After everyone was seated, a Master Sergeant walk onto the stage and up to a podium where he began to speak, “Good morning, I’m Master Sergeant Paul Finley. It’s now time for your final exam that you were told about at orientation. If you fail to show up at your designated pickup location at the allotted time, means you’ve failed the exam and will repeat the training. To ease any doubts or misgivings, the exam is easy—no one has failed yet.”

“Yeah, right,” Mike thinks, “there’s always the first time.”

“Your mission is to hike eight miles in three days and recover an object or complete a task that you’ll be told about,” said Sergeant Finley, and continues explaining, “starting on Monday, each man in the first Platoon will be taken to one of Thirty-two drop-off points, he than has three days to complete his mission, then on Tuesday it’s the Second Platoons turn and so-on. Is there any questions?”

A hand went up in the First Platoon from a man with a very worried expression; the Sergeant pointed to him and he stood and remarked, “Isn’t eight miles in three days quite a hike, Sergeant?”

Sergeant Finley smiled and said, “That’s only a little over two and half miles a day soldier, you’ve gone further when you went on bivouac in Basic Training—a simple two and half miles a day shouldn’t even bring a sweat, believe me when I tell you, you’ll soon be going much farther. Are there any more questions?”

Mike thinking, “Oh swell—now it’s a eight mile hike—what’s next?”

With no questions, Sergeant Finley concludes, “Ok—with no further questions, Sergeant First Class Donovan is up next with a lecture on local wildlife.

Have a nice weekend and see you all on Monday—Sergeant Donovan the class is yours,” looking off stage to his right; as Sergeant Donovan walks on stage and over to the podium, Sergeant Finley walks off to the left.

For the next three hours, they sat through Sergeant Donovan’s wildlife lecture, and when it was finished it was time for lunch.

As Mike waited for his turn to file out of the building, he rolled his eyes thinking, “Great—now I might be eaten by a Bear or Cougar, and I only got my knife for protection—this nightmare keeps on getting worst and worst. The next thing they’ll tell us, beware of Big-Foot.”

Eating lunch, Mike and his three friends ate in silence with worried and uneasy expressions; even Greg, who is normally enthusiastic about this stuff, was silent.

After lunch they marched over to the Hand-to-Hand building where they were introduced to the MH4 Hatchet or Tomahawk, as the Sergeant who was an Indian called it; while holding his MH4 Hatchet up to show everyone it had two feathers attached, and then he began telling and demonstrating the proper way to throw it.

So, that afternoon, the four Platoons practice throwing the MH4 Hatchet until they could hit the bull’s-eye target, although only few were able to nail the black circle in the center, including Mike.

After mess there was another GI Party, because there’s an inspection Saturday morning.

After passing inspection on Saturday with flying colors, the rest of the day and Sunday was free, so Mike spent the time getting his gear ready for Tuesday, when his Platoon goes on the three-day hike.

Monday morning when Mike returned from Breakfast there was a group gathered around the Platoon bulletin board; it had the week’s agenda and to Mike’s surprise and shock, they and the First Platoon were scheduled for a PT test on Friday and the hike or bivouac mission on Tuesday.

Today, they’ll be preparing for the PT Test on Friday, along with Third and Fourth Platoons; the Third and Fourth Platoons will take their PT Tests on Tuesday.

All day they practiced at the PT field, concentrating on their weak areas, for Mike, it was the Monkey Bars; by the end of that day, Mike managed to complete three laps before falling, good for seventy-five points on the test, which he was quite happy with considering his handicap.

Mike went to bed with feelings of anxiety and uneasiness about the next day.

Tuesday came bright and sunny, and Sergeant Axtell informed everyone to fall out at the 0800 formation in woodland ACU's and full field gear.

When Mike heard that his uniform is to be woodland camouflage, he knew they wouldn't be bivouacking around here, but to the north in the mountains.

After having breakfast and getting their areas in order, the men of the Second Platoon were standing at attention at 0800 in full field gear minus their M20 assault weapons, which was a bit strange considering the M20 is part of their field gear, but considering they won't get any ammo to fire, it would be an extra dead weight to be lugging along; a Bus was also waiting at the end of the assembly area.

When the formation was over, the Second Platoon boarded the Bus and headed out of the Post to highway 101, and then a short distance north where they exit onto Jolon Road to Fort Hunter; twenty minutes later they enter Fort Hunter and pulled into that large parking lot across the street from the oval parade grounds.

Four trucks were waiting, parked side-by-side, for each Squad to get into.

After the Second Platoon was loaded onto the trucks, they headed west out of the Fort until arriving at an intersection where the trucks took different roads; the truck with Mike and his Squad and the truck with Greg's Squad both headed north.

A few minutes later they arrived at another intersection with a gravel road; the truck with Greg and his Squad turned onto the gravel road leaving Mike's truck which continued heading north.

After another ten minutes or so, that road also becomes gravel and now the truck makes a cloud of dust as they continue on; five minutes later the truck comes to a halt, and a Buck Sergeant gets out and with the drivers help, they lower the tail gate.

The Sergeant announces, "First man on the right side—time to dismount."

Roger is the first man sitting at the end on the right side, at the back of the truck, gets up and jumps off; Mike is the first man on the left on the other side.

As Roger started up a very primitive dirt road, the Sergeant got back in and the truck started up and continued down the gravel road; a few minutes later the truck came to a stop again.

This time when Sergeant came around to the back of the truck, he pointed at Mike and told him, “Your next—time to get off,” so, Mike got up and hopped off the truck.

Then the Sergeant ordered, “Follow me Corporal.”

Mike follow him over to where another dirt road or more precisely a trail led off up a valley with steep sides covered with trees.

Mike looked up the trail going up into the valley, and then the Buck Sergeant handed him a map, three MRE’s, a vinyl blue flag, and a small olive-drab box with a black flip cap covering a push switch.

Then Sergeant instructed, “Follow this trail for four miles and there you’ll find a flagpole—run the flag up and tie it off—that’s your mission, then return to this location where you’ll be picked up at 1800 in three days. Now that shouldn’t be too hard, and if you follow this trail and the map you shouldn’t have any problems.”

Pointing at the small olive-drab box, the Sergeant told Mike, “Put that on your belt so you don’t lose it. If you have a life threatening emergency—flip the black cap and push the button and a Helicopter will come right to you, but only if you’re wearing the box—you clear on everything,” Mike nods.

“Ok then, I’ll see you at 1800 in three days right here, and good luck,” said the Buck Sergeant.

Mike stepped back as the Sergeant got back into the truck and drove off down the gravel road to the next drop-off point.

Mike takes a deep breath and thinks, as he starts up the trail into the valley, “Shouldn’t be hard he says—just follow the trail—yeah right, this is all I need, a leisurely eight mile stroll.”

After an hour of hiking, Mike sits on a big boulder to rest and looks at the map and notes the different landmarks; recognizing the fire tower on the top of the mountain across the valley from the map, Mike remarks looking chagrined, “I’m about here—I’ve only gone a little over a half mile.”

Then he gets up, folds the map and puts it into a pocket and starts walking again.

When the Sun was about as high as it was going to get for the last week in October, Mike came upon a small grove of Hollyleaf Cherry trees; most of the leaves had already fallen along with most of its fruits, but many still clung to its branches.

Mike smiles while looking at the dark purple small plum size fruits, thinking, “Looks like I won’t need to eat that MRE—I’ll save it for later.”

So, Mike gathers a bunch of fallen fruits, sits down, and enjoys a tasty lunch provided by Mother Nature.

After taking a swig of water from his canteen, Mike gets his map out and finds the grove is noted on the map, and then notices that he hasn’t gone two miles yet!

“What!” Mike exclaims, “This can’t be right—I’ve had to of gone at least two miles,” and then he says, “well—I’m not double-timing,” as he puts the map back into his pocket and starts out up the trail.

Soon the Sun slid behind the mountain to the west and the air took on a sudden chill, Mike got his field jacket out and put it on.

Looking at his watch, it read two-o’clock; getting his map out and sees he has now hiked a little over two miles with another two miles to his mission objective, so Mike starts out again.

After another hour and a half, it was getting dusk in the deep valley.

Now knowing it will be dark in this valley in about an hour, Mike decides to call it an early day and make camp; he’ll need some daylight to find firewood for a campfire.

It was a clear night as Mike sat in front of his campfire roasting several de-spined Prickly Pear pads and fruit, shish-kabobed on a stick, which he found growing nearby.

While the Prickly Pear pads and fruit roasted, Mike stirred a boiling pot of Mesquite beans, pods, and peeled Yucca fruit.

Finally, all was ready and Mike enjoyed a hearty tasty meal of what Mother Nature provided.

After eating the last roasted Prickly Pear pad, Mike grabbed his dirty mess kit, flashlight, and walked down to a small stream that he found when gathering firewood; this stream ran very cold and Mike knew it wasn’t mountain fed, but originated from a spring somewhere further up the valley, so he wasn’t worried about it flooding, unlike when he was in Basic Training.

After washing the mess kit in the stream, Mike returned to his campsite and stowed the mess kit in his backpack; in the morning, he’ll make another trip to the stream to get some water to purify for refilling his canteen.

After adding some more wood to his campfire, Mike settled back to enjoy the warmth from the campfire and gaze at the dancing flames.

As the flames danced, Mike remembered back to when he and his two friends were sitting at a similar fire in the desert while listening to an old Indian explain the rite of Blood Brothers; Mike looks at his hand, the ceremonial scar very visible, and wonders how Glen is doing in the Air Force.

Mike sighs with a smile saying to himself, "I hope he doesn't have to go through this crap."

Then his thoughts turn to Pam, a smile came to his face as he sees her face in his mind and he longs to be with her and wonders if she's still waiting for him to return.

Then Mike looks up and see the big full bright moon coming over the mountains and lighting up the entire valley; the harvest moon, Mike whispers, "Sunday is Halloween."

Mike gets up saying, "Time to turn in—two more days left of this insanity," and throws a couple of sticks on the fire, turns and goes over to his silvery dome tent glowing in the moonlight.

After zipping shut the entry flap, Mike takes his boots and jacket off and climbs into his sleeping bag and settles in for the night.

The next morning, Mike awoke with a start to the howl of several large Wolves, and they didn't sound to far away.

Mike quickly put his boots on and rolled up his sleeping bag; after unzipping the entry flap, he crawls out of his tent to the chilly early morning air.

Shivering, Mike put his field jacket on and went over to the dead campfire; once he had the fire restarted, he walked over to the Yucca patch and plucked several banana shaped fruits, and after peeling them, Mike enjoyed a filling breakfast.

Getting the pot from his mess kit, Mike goes down to the stream to fill the pot with water.

While filling the mess pot from the stream, a shot of fear shoots through him as he sees not more than four feet away paw prints of several Wolves.

With uneasiness, Mike returns to his campsite, and with uneasiness he gets the water purifying kit and runs the water through the filter until the plastic bag attached to the bottom is full.

Discarding any remaining water in the mess pot, Mike empties the plastic bag into the pot and sets it on the fire.

While Mike waits for the water to boil, he puts the purifying kit away and starts dismantling his tent, all the while keeping an eye out for those Wolves.

After the fire had burnt out and the water had cooled, Mike refilled his canteen with the cool water and returned his mess kit to the backpack along with the tent pouch and sleeping bag; Mike is now ready to depart.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Mike lifted the backpack to his back, and making one last check to be sure the fire pit was out, he started out up the trail to the location of his mission objective.

After hiking another mile and a half, Mike arrived at the spring feeding the small stream, and there off to the side was the flagpole.

With a smile, Mike got the blue vinyl flag from his backpack, went over, attached it to the lanyard and hauls it up the pole; he then ties the cord off, securing it.

Stepping back, Mike smiles as he sees the flag flapping lazily in the breeze that's coming up the valley, and then he declares, "Mission accomplished," saluting.

Looking at his watch, it displays 1 PM, and exhaling, Mike says, "Better start back, gotta' make my old campsite by dusk if I'm to make it back to the pickup point in time."

So, Mike now starts his hike back down the trail, retracing his steps.

It was almost dusk and Mike was almost back to his old campsite when he saw something large coming up the trail; fear shot through him and he quickly looked around for a good size tree to escape too, because this thing wasn't no Wolf.

Mike froze when the huge animal kept coming, and when it was several yards away it snarled and rose up on its hind legs.

In fear, Mike was looking at the biggest Brown Bear he'd ever seen, as it towered above him; its huge open mouth displaying large white fangs and red tongue as it growled.

Mike panicky thinking, "Great—and I'm only armed with a the MH4 Hatchet and MK12 Knife! Now it would be a great time to have my M20. Gotta' make that tree over there and hope he can't knock me out of it or break it down, and then I would be in a world of hurt."

Then as Mike was about to make a dash for the tree, he heard snarls from behind him; turning his head he sees three huge gray Wolves cautiously inching their way down the trail towards him.

With a very bleak expression, Mike groaned, “Swell—now I’m about to be fought over for lunch.”

Mike slowly inched off to the direction of the tree; the bear drops down to all fours, and then the lead Wolf uttered a decisive howl and lunged toward the Bear.

Mike rushed to the tree and hopped to grab the lowest limb, grabbing hold he pulled himself up, and then he continued climbing from branch to branch, like doing the Monkey Bars, until he felt sure he was out of reach of either the Bear or the Wolves; and there he sat, watching the battle between the Bear and the Wolves unfold.

Mike now faced with the direst of emergencies was about to trigger the emergency transmitter when he noticed the lead Wolf has two white front paws and a white tip on its tail.

Mike smiles and his expression becomes hopeful and whispers, “Mister Kelso is that you—how did you get way up here?”

Nipping, biting and barking the three Wolves attacked the Bear from three sides while keeping out of the way from those massive powerful paws with curved claws.

With the battle at a standoff the Bear gave up and rushed off into the shadows, as the Sun had gone down behind the mountains and dusk had finally come.

After the Bear had gone, the three Wolves looked around for their dinner, following Mike’s scent trail to where he sat in the tree.

There, the three Wolves sat on their haunches looking up at Mike and growled; Mike shouted down to the lead Wolf, “Mister Kelso, Mister Kelso—it’s me, Mike—remember.”

The lead Wolf got up from his haunches and went over to the tree trunk, got up on its hind legs, put its front paws on the tree, looked up at Mike, and started wagging its tail.

Mike now beaming with inexpressible joy climbed down from his high perch, and after dropping to the ground, Mike got down on one knee, as the big Gray Wolf padded up to him.

Mike hugged the Wolf like a dog and like a big dog, the Wolf being happy to see Mike, began licking him all over the face while the other two Wolves, keeping their distance, looked on.

When the warm greetings were over it was time to make camp again in basically the same place that Mike did the previous night.

After the fire was built in the old fire pit, and the dome tent erected it was time to look for food.

Mike goes over to the nearest tree and chops a straight branch off, and after removing all the small limbs and leaves he screws the straight shaft into the end of his combat knife; now he's got himself a spear.

Picking up a rock, Mike hurls it into a nearby clump of bushes, just as he and Jeremy had done a year ago, and out scurries several Rabbits, a Ground Squirrel, and a Pack Rat.

One of the Wolves nabs the Pack Rat and another the Ground Squirrel; Mr. Kelso catches one of the Rabbits and Mike spears the second, looks like there'll be meat for all tonight.

After making a crude spit, Mike cleaned his rabbit and impaled a long stick through it and placed it in the crotches of the spit for roasting.

As the Wolves ate, Mike remembered the pack rat, so he got up, and with flashlight walked over to the stand of bushes and poked around, there in the center he found the Pack Rat's nest.

Breaking it open, Mike discovered a large hoard of Pinyon Pine cones. Grabbing a large handful, Mike walks back to the fire and the Rabbit; after depositing the pine cones nearby, Mike checks his roasting Rabbit and turns the long end of the stick, rotating the Rabbit, and then he puts more wood on the fire.

After putting a small amount of water in his mess pot, Mike takes the pot with him, goes over to a sage bush growing nearby, plucks several nice leaves, and puts them into the pot.

Then he goes back to the Pack Rat's nest, retrieves several mesquite pods, adds them as well, and then Mike walks back to the fire and turns the Rabbit again.

With the end of a large stick, he'd cut from making the spit, Mike mashes and stirs the contents of his pot until it becomes a mash, and then he puts it on one side of the fire.

For the next fifteen minutes, Mike stirs the contents in the pot and turns the Rabbit, and all the while the three Wolves watch from a distance fearful of the fire.

When the mixture in the mess pot was steaming, Mike began to slowly ladle it over the Rabbit with his large mess spoon, causing the fire to hiss and flicker when the stuff ran off the now browning Rabbit; "Soon," remarked Mike at the delicious sight before him.

Looking at the three Wolves lying in the distance, the flickering light from the campfire illuminating them, Mike asked, "What are you guys do

ing over there,” they raise their heads, their eyes shining like six jewels in the light; “Mister Kelso—come over here, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” said Mike patting the ground trying to entice the animal to come.

Finally the Rabbit is done and Mike removes it from the fire and lays it on a large flat rock he found when he built the fire pit, then using a stick he carefully removes the pot and puts it next to the Rabbit.

Removing his combat knife from the end of the stick and returning it to knife status, Mike used it to slice pieces of meat from the Rabbit and after dunking it into the mixture in the mess pot he put it into his mouth; a smile came to his face as he chewed, savoring the texture and taste.

As Mike cuts another piece, he remarks, “Lacks a bit of onion to make it perfect,” and puts the piece into his mouth.

After eating his fill, Mike uses his trenching tool (A folding shovel and pick.) to dig a small pit to bury his waste.

After emptying the remaining contents of his mess pot, which has now become cold and flat tasting, into the small pit, Mike sets it aside remarking, “I’ll clean it in the morning. With my three friends guarding the camp, old mister Bear or anything else won’t be bothering it.”

Returning to his campfire, Mike tosses several more pieces of wood onto the now almost out fire and sits down to enjoy the evening while munching on some leftover Rabbit and pine nuts.

Then he tries once again to entice Mr. Kelso to come over, “C’mon Mister Kelso there nothing to be afraid of,” patting the ground next to where Mike is sitting.

The large Wolf raises his head and starts wagging its tail, then Mike offers a bit of his leftover rabbit as an enticement, “Here boy, look what I’ve got for you—come on and you can have it,” holding the meat out to him.

The Wolf gets up, stands sniffing the air, and looking at the out held chunk of meat.

Mike beckons, “Come on—yeah, it’s for you—come and get it, Mister Kelso.”

The other two Wolves get up and sniff the air, Mr. Kelso cautiously starts to come towards Mike and the out held chunk of meat.

Finally, Mr. Kelso is very close to the meat, and the scent is strong and overpowering for the Wolf.

Now unafraid, Mr. Kelso comes up and grabs the meat, which Mike lets him have; the Wolf lies down next to Mike and starts devouring the meat.

Mike looks at him and smiles, and starts patting him on the back like a big Dog.

When the meat was gone the Wolf put his head on Mike's lap and Mike patted his head, just like a big friendly Dog, but Mike knew Mr. Kelso was no Dog, so he was careful.

The Wolf wasn't afraid of the campfire and Mike, and as they sat there enjoying the cool autumn night under clear skies, Mike started to worry about what he had done.

Mr. Kelso was no longer afraid of Humans and fire; would this new lack of fear now get him in trouble or worst, get him killed?

Then the big full October moon eased itself over the mountains, and when it was in full view, the other two Wolves got up and started to howl, and then Mr. Kelso got up and joined the chorus; it was a mournful howl with long notes with a few short ones thrown in here and there, as if they're mourning a lost member of the pack.

For awhile Mike sat there enjoying the canine cacophonous calliope, then he joined in and started to howl; the Wolves suddenly stopped and looked at him, probably wondering what's up with this stupid Human?

When no one but him was howling, Mike stopped, looked at them, and asked, "What? It's a big moon--can't I howl at it too?"

Then the Wolves started howling again, but when Mike joined in they stopped again and looked at him; Mike getting the message, grunted, "Ok—I get it—you don't want me messing up your song--Ok, Ok, I'll go to bed then—see you all in the morning," so Mike got up and went inside his tent and the Wolves went back to howling.

Mike fell asleep that night feeling safe, because he had three sentries outside, guarding his campsite.

It was still dark the next morning when Mike awoke with yelping and scratching on his tent door.

Getting up and putting on his boots, Mike gets his flashlight, goes and unzips the door, and there stands Mr. Kelso looking back at him wondering why he wasn't up yet.

Mike crawls out of the tent and issues a yawn, looking at Mr. Kelso Mike grumpily says, "The Sun's not up yet it's only 6 AM—I'm going back to bed," after looking at his watch, and then turning to re-enter the tent, but as soon as Mike got down to crawl back into the tent, Mr. Kelso growled and nipped Mike on the butt.

"OUCH!" Mike exclaimed in pain and got to his feet rubbing his butt, and then asked, "What did you go and do that for?"

When Mike got back down on his hands and knees to re-enter the tent, Mr. Kelso barked, Mike turned his head and looked at Mr. Kelso; Mr. Kelso growled, and Mike got back up.

“Ok, you win, I’m not going back to bed,” said Mike irritably while rubbing his butt some more, “You’re worst than my Platoon Sergeant—at least he doesn’t bite—are you in Army?”

So, Mike then grabbed his dirty mess pot and with flashlight headed down to the stream to clean the pot; on the way back, Mike stopped at the old Pack Rat nest and gathered up some more Pinyon Pine cones.

After dumping them on the others, he went back to the stream and filled the pot with water, and on the way back, he plucked several Yucca fruits commenting, “For breakfast later.”

When he got back, Mike was surprised to see that the three Wolves had left, so Mike started the campfire.

Next, Mike got the water purifying kit out and poured the water from the mess pot into it, discarding any remaining water in the pot.

When the plastic bag was full, he emptied it into the mess pot, and then put the pot on the fire to boil.

Then Mike proceeded to break down his tent and put it back into its pouch, by the time he had rolled up his sleeping bag, it was dawn and the water was boiling.

Taking the water off the fire, Mike set it aside to cool while he put the tent pouch and sleeping bag inside his backpack.

Removing the plastic bag from the purifying kit, Mike turns it inside out to dry; putting the kit back into the backpack, he then sits down to enjoy those Yucca fruits he plucked earlier.

As Mike ate his breakfast, Mr. Kelso returned with a Rabbit and settled down a short distance from Mike and began to devour his meal.

When Mike noticed the other two Wolves hadn’t return, he asked, “Where are your two friends, Mister Kelso?”

The Wolf looked at Mike and went on eating.

About an hour later and after the Yucca fruits had been eaten, Mike gets up and walks over to a group of Burdock plants and cuts a couple of large leaves.

After placing one of the leaves on the ground next to the pile of Pine cones, Mike sits down next to the Pine cones and Burdock leaf; putting his gloves on, Mike grabs the first Pine cone and begins to shuck it and the seeds fall onto the leaf.

When all of the Pine cones have been shucked, Mike tosses them on the fire causing it crackle and send sparks skyward; Mike keeps an eye on what happens to the sparks, so he doesn't start a wildfire.

Grabbing the plastic bag which is now dry, Mike returns it from inside out, and then he gathers up the Pine cone seeds and puts them into the plastic bag and after adding some Mesquite beans, he zips it up commenting, "Tasty trail-mix for the hike back."

With the water in the mess pot now cool, Mike pours it into his canteen, filling it up and puts the canteen into its holder.

Before Mike leaves his campsite, he gathers up any garbage lying about and dumps it into the hole he dug last evening, then feeling nature's call, Mike looks at Mr. Kelso and tells him, "Don't you look now," grabs the two Burdock leaves, walks over to the hole, drops his pants, drawers, and squats over the hole; with the Wolf watching all the while.

When Mike had finished using the two leaves, he deposits them into the hole with the excrement.

After Mike had pulled his pants back up, he noticed the Wolf looking at him, and in an embarrassed disgust he says, "Shame, shame—you were watching, weren't you? Shame on you Mr. Kelso," while wagging his upheld pointer finger.

Getting his entrenching tool, Mike goes back to the hole, and remarks, "Well, Mister Bear, you won't be digging in this hole, unless you want a snoot full, hee, hee, hee," giggling, Mike fills the hole with dirt, patting the top of the dirt pile with the back of the shovel to finish the job.

One last job before leaving was to make sure the fire was out, so with mess pot in hand, Mike makes one last trip to the stream; upon returning, he pours the water on the fire pit and stirs it with a stick until it was a muddy ashy mess, then tossing the stick aside, Mike puts the mess pot back into his backpack.

First grabbing the plastic bag of trail-mix and putting it into his cargo pocket, and finally, Mike grabs his backpack and swings it up onto his back; he's now ready to leave camp.

It was ten o'clock when Mike walked past Mr. Kelso shaking his head with, "Shame—shame—shame," and starts walking down the trail to the pick-up point; Mr. Kelso starts following staying a yard or so back.

After an hour or so, Mike looked back and Mr. Kelso was still following several yards back with his tail low; Mike feeling sorry, turned his head and told him, "Alright—I forgive you—come here you doofus," patting the side of his leg, the large Wolf raised his tail and hurried to Mike's side and

together side-by-side they walked down the trail, the Wolf now wagging his tail.

Around one o'clock or so, Mike arrived back at the small grove of Hol-lyleaf Cherry trees, and picked enough remaining fruits to have a filling lunch; Mr. Kelso caught himself another ground squirrel.

After taking a swig of water from his canteen, Mike starts down the trail to the pick-up point while snaking on his trail-mix from his cargo pocket; Mr. Kelso following at his side.

It was five in the afternoon, and the Sun was getting ready to slide down behind the mountains on the west side of the valley, when they arrived at the big boulder where he had rested on the first day; at the fire tower on the top of the mountain across the valley, the glass windows were shining brightly, reflecting the rays of the late afternoon Sun back.

With still almost a mile to go, and an hour left to reach the pick-up point and his ride back, Mike picked up the pace a bit.

The truck pulled to a stop at the location where Mike had gotten off.

It was now early dusk, the Sun had just set and it was six o'clock, 1800 military time, and Mike was late.

When Mike saw the truck parked, he started running waving his hands to get their attention.

The Sergeant, sitting in the front seat, saw Mike running towards them waving his hands, and then pointed to him, and announced, "Here he comes—almost on time."

Then the Driver pointed to Mike and asked, "What's that with him—a Dog?"

"What the---," said the Sergeant with an incredulous expression, "where in hell did he find the Dog?"

Mike now running, hurrying to the waiting truck and Mr. Kelso jogging beside him like a big friendly Dog.

When Mike reached the truck he was panting and out of breath, the Sergeant gets down from the passenger seat and hotly asked, "In the Sam hell, where did you pick-up the Dog?"

Mike smiles gasping and replies, "What Dog?"

"That one—are you blind?" Barked the Sergeant pointing at large animal.

"That's Mister Kelso, and he's no Dog," said Mike patting the Wolf's side, "this is a Gray Wolf."

The Sergeant held his breath and took several steps back in disbelief and says, “I don’t understand—how did you tame a Wolf?”

“He’s not tame,” said Mike with a smile, “on the way back I ran into a huge Brown Bear who wanted me for dinner, I was about to use the emergency transmitter when Mister Kelso showed up with two of his friends and saved my ass.”

Then Mike takes the emergency transmitter from this belt and hands it along with the map to the Sergeant who’s very confused and commands, “Say good-bye to your friend and get into the truck, unless you want to hike all the way back to Hunter.”

Mike nodded and bent down and gave the Wolf a final hug and told him, “I gotta’ go boy--you can go back and join your pack—maybe we’ll meet again some day,” Mike straightens up and points back up the trail and commands, “go now—run with your pack.”

The Wolf turns and starts trotting back up the trail, then he stops, turns his head, and looks back at Mike; Mike waves good-bye and the Wolf runs into a nearby grove and disappears.

Then Mike takes his back pack off, removes the three uneaten MRE’s and hands them to the Sergeant with, “Here—didn’t need em’—plenty of stuff to eat on the hike,” to the Sergeant’s surprise.

Then Mike tosses his backpack into the back of the truck, and then he gets in and sits down; the truck starts up and they head down the road to retrieve Roger, the last man.

A short time later, the truck stops and Roger gets in and now the truck heads back to the parking lot where the Bus awaits to take the Second Platoon back to Camp Roberts.

After another twenty-minute return Bus ride they were back at their barracks and standing in formation.

After Sergeant Axtell dismissed the platoon they rushed to the mess hall for dinner; the mess hall was open later then normal for the late return.

That night Mike laid in bed thinking about the PT test the next day; he finally fell asleep dreaming about how good it was to see Mr. Kelso again.

CHAPTER 11 -- Bad News.

When the last week in October had arrived, and early Monday morning the orders for Pegasus's transfer still hadn't arrived, Major Debolt went to see his Company Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Degrote.

Debolt enters the office of Lieutenant Colonel Degrote with the Lieutenant Colonel asking, "What can I do for you Major?"

"About five weeks ago I submitted a request to have Specialist Four, Michael Troff transferred to 128th from the 127th and I've haven't seen any orders come through. I was wondering if there might've been some problems," replied Major Debolt.

"Let me give Brigade G1 a call and see what's causing the holdup," announced the Lieutenant Colonel.

He picks up the phone and dials; a few seconds later he begins speaking, "This is Lieutenant Colonel Degrote over at the 128th and about five weeks ago we submitted a request for the transfer of Specialist Four Michael Troff from the 127th to our unit. Can you tell me the status of the request?"

"Let me pull up your request Sir—it should only take a minute," said the voice on the phone.

After the minute had elapsed the voice returned, "According to what I have on my monitor, your request was approved and orders issued three days after we received your request."

"Well—we didn't received the orders—are you sure the papers were sent out?"

"Let me see when they were faxed to your unit," said the voice on the phone and the line when on hold.

"They're checking to see when the orders were faxed to us," explains Colonel Degrote to Major Debolt while covering the phone's mouthpiece with his hand.

Then the voice came back, "Because there wasn't any priority on the request, it was given level six and is waiting to be transmitted."

"LEVEL SIX---WAITING TO BE TRANSMITTED!" Shouted the Lieutenant Colonel into the phone, "Just when were you people planning on faxing it to us?"

"Right after the higher priority orders have been faxed, it should be by the middle of November," explained the voice.

"BY THE MIDDLE OF NOVEMBER!" Shouted the Lieutenant Colonel into the phone, and then he commanded, "Put a level one priority on

it and get it faxed to me pronto—you hear?”

“Sorry Sir—I’m not authorized to change the status of the document,” responded the voice on the phone.

“Then put your Department Head on—let me speak to him,” ordered the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Yes Sir,” stuttered the voice on the phone, and then the Lieutenant Colonel was put on hold again.

This time the Lieutenant Colonel was put on hold for a quite while and by the time the Department Head came on, five minutes later, the Lieutenant Colonel was fuming.

“I’m Major Friary Head of G1—can I help you with something?” Said the new voice on the phone introducing himself.

“Yes you can—I need the transfer orders that’s been sitting in your department, since the first of October, faxed to me immediately,” replied Colonel Degrote trying to keep his cool.

“And what transfer orders are those?” inquired Major Friary.

“The ones to have Specialist Four Michael Troff in the 127th transferred to our unit, as I previously explained to your Clerk,” replied Colonel Degrote getting very annoyed with the incompetency that he perceives.

“Ok—let me check,” announced Major Friary, Colonel Degrote rolls his eyes and looks at the ceiling, and then he tells Major Debolt, “He’s checking,” and exhales.

After a short wait Major Friary came back on and begins explaining, “That document is a level six and is currently sitting in the queue awaiting its turn to be faxed.”

“I already know that, Major,” said Lieutenant Colonel Degrote clenching his fist.

“Then what’s the problem?” Asked Major Friary.

“The problem is, Major, I need you to re-prioritize them to a level one AND GET THE DAMN THING FAXED TO ME,” said Colonel Degrote losing his cool and resorting to shouting.

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line, and then Major Friary came back sounding peeved and huffishly said, “I’ll see what I can do—I’m making no guarantees—Sir.”

“Just do it Major, and if I don’t get those orders within the next two days you’ll be hearing from Brigadier General Burden—do you get my drift, Major?” Ordered Colonel Degrote in an angry tone of voice.

“Yes Sir—is that all Sir?” Responded Major Friary.

“Yes, that’s all Major—good-bye,” said Colonel Degrote, and then he firmly put the handset in the phone cradle.

Then Lieutenant Colonel Degrote looked at Major Debolt and remarked with a smile, “We’ll have the orders within the next two days—don’t be surprised if they happen to arrive this afternoon.”

“Sounds like you put the fear of God in them,” declared Major Debolt with a grin.

“Yeah, let’s just say I lit a small fire under them,” returned the Lieutenant Colonel.

“You sure did—I’d say more like a bonfire, Sir,” said Major Debolt and they both laughed.

That afternoon the transfer papers arrived by fax in the 128th HQ.

As soon as Lieutenant Colonel Degrote had the orders he called Major Debolt to his office.

When Major Debolt arrived, Colonel Degrote commanded, “Come in Dean, look what I’ve got,” holding the document up.

“You got em’ Sir!” Exclaimed Major Debolt with a big grin.

“Yeah—they arrived about an hour ago,” announced Colonel Degrote, “and I’m assigning Mister Troff to your Squadron, once he’s settled in we’ll get him scheduled for OCS. In the mean time I don’t see any reason why he can’t give classroom and simulator training, so let’s go over to the 127th and retrieve our new man.”

And together they walked out of the office and to a waiting car.

Pulling up to the front of the 127th HQ Company building, both officers get out of the car and enter the building; returning the salutes of several soldiers they meet.

As soon as they enter the orderly room attention is called.

First Sergeant Decker walks up to Lieutenant Colonel Degrote and salutes asking, “Is there anything I can help you both with—Sir?”

Before Colonel Degrote could reply, the HQ Company Commander, Major Higgins, comes out of his office and walks over to where Lieutenant Colonel Degrote, Major Debolt and Sergeant Decker are standing.

After saluting, Major Higgins politely asks, “Sir--is there anything we can do for you?”

“Yes Major,” replied Colonel Degrote in an authoritative tone returning the salute, and then hands the transfer document to him, “we’ve come to pick up Specialist Four, Michael Troff, --he’s been reassigned to our unit.”

Receiving the document the Major reads it, and then hands it to First Sergeant Decker telling him, “See to it Sergeant.”

“Yes Sir,” replied First Sergeant Decker taking the document, and then goes over to the Head Clerk Specialist Five Larek; Sp5 Larek enters the document information into his terminal and after a few minutes it comes up with negative information.

Sp5 Larek looks at first Sergeant Decker shaking his head with, “We have no one assigned to us by that name—sorry,” shrugging his shoulders.

Then as first Sergeant Decker walks back with the bad news, in walks Second Lieutenant Grier and Sergeant First Class Berkner from the Second Platoon.

As First Sergeant Decker approaches Lieutenant Colonel Degrote he loudly announces, “There’s no Specialist Four Michael Troff assigned to our company.”

Overhearing First Sergeant Decker announce the bad news to the Lieutenant Colonel, Sergeant First Class Berkner abruptly halts and announces, “Specialist Four Troff was transferred out about four weeks ago—he’s no longer here—what do you want him for?”

The four men look at Sergeant First Class Berkner with shocked disbelief.

Then Major Debolt replied, “We want him to give advanced flight training to our EXR Fighter Pilots.”

First Sergeant Decker and Major Higgins looks astonished, especially Sergeant First Class Berkner and Second Lieutenant Grier who were responsible for Mike’s transfer.

Then Lieutenant Grier asked, “Just how can a maintenance tech, who has very little to no flight training, be teaching advance flight training?”

Major Debolt looks to the Lieutenant Colonel with a very serious quizzical expression, and then Lieutenant Colonel Degrote closes his eyes and nods; Major Debolt turns to look at Lieutenant Grier and slowly replies, “Because that so called maintenance tech is also a highly skilled EXR Fighter Pilot with the call sign of Pegasus—does that answer your question Lieutenant.”

The two sergeants and the two officers stood there slack-jawed and unblinking.

Then Colonel Degrote asks, “Can anyone please tell me where was he transferred too, and why?”

“We have no idea where he was transferred to,” replied Major Higgins with the other three nodding in agreement, and then Major Higgins adds, “Maybe Brigade G1 can tell you.”

“Why in blazes was he transferred in the first place?” Asked Lieutenant Colonel Degrote.

“Because Sir, he wasn’t meeting expectations—his repaired aircraft was returning every few weeks for the same problems, so when the opportunity came we replaced him. Pilot or not, he was a maintenance tech and was expected to complete the necessary repairs in a quality and timely fashion—which he didn’t do,” replied Sergeant First Class Berkner with a firm nod.

“Sergeant,” begins Major Debolt, “Specialist Troff was giving flight training to a select few of our Pilots, and those aircraft were an excuse to allow him to secretly fly training flights, because he wasn’t a commissioned officer. He warned us about the heat he was getting, because of the repeated repair orders for the same aircraft’s. We ignored him, figuring the training he was providing was crucial to our mission, until he flatly informed us that he wasn’t doing anymore flight training, and that’s when we decided to have him transferred to out unit.”

“And why is he a maintenance tech instead of a Pilot and commissioned officer, if he was such a great Pilot?” Major Higgins bluntly asks.

“The Army makes mistakes—he fell through a administrative crack. We all make mistakes—*sigh*--. Rather then try to conduct secret training flights, I should’ve had him transferred at that time and none of this would’ve happened,” said Colonel Degrote lamenting.

“These training flights he was conducting, what’s so different about them verses the ones being taught in flight schools?” Asked Major Higgins.

“He can execute maneuvers no one has seen—he can fly at a skill level way above anyone else in this Brigade—probably in all the Army, Air Force, and Marines. Major, he saved his life and the life of Captain Wherley when he defeated a large group of enemy combatants back in September—I’m sure you must’ve heard about it—Captain Wherley isn’t Pegasus—he is,” explained Major Debolt; they all stood there looking astounded.

Then the Lieutenant Colonel looked at his watch and announced, “We should be getting back—I’ve got lots of work sitting on my desk to take care of including a call to Brigade G1.”

After a round of salutes, the two officers started to leave when First Sergeant Decker says, “Here Sir,” handing the Lieutenant Colonel the transfer document, “these orders are invalid, as we no longer have the man listed in our unit.”

The Lieutenant Colonel takes the document with a nod, leaves the room, and goes back out to the waiting car.

On the drive back, Major Debolt asked, “What good will that do if he’s back in the states—it’ll take an act of God to get him transferred back here.”

“Maybe he’s still in the Battalion and been transferred to 106th at Incirlik, if so, then it’ll be a simple job to get these orders amended to have him transferred back here,” explained Colonel Degrote.

“I hope you’re right Sir,” remarked Major Debolt, as they arrived at their building.

Entering his office Lieutenant Colonel Degrote goes to his desk, sits down, lays the document on the desk in front of him, picks up the phone, and dials Brigade G1.

After several rings, a young man answers, “19th Combat Brigade G1—Specialist Pherson speaking and how may I help you?”

“This is Lieutenant Colonel Degrote over at the 128th and I need some information concerning a recent transfer.”

“Can you give me his name and the unit he was in, Sir?” Requested Specialist Pherson.

“His name is Specialist Four Michael A. Troff. His serial number is US09999981253 and he was attached to the 127 Head Quarters Company. Can you tell me as to where he was transferred?”

“Yes Sir—give me a minute or so to bring up the transfer data,” replied Specialist Pherson.

Lieutenant Colonel Degrote sits there quietly waiting for several minutes, hoping for some good news when suddenly Specialist Pherson comes back on the line and says, “Sir, Specialist Four Michael A. Troff has been reassigned to Fort Hunter in California, and according to what I see, he going through four weeks of advanced combat training. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

After hearing the disappointing and shocking news, he then asked, “Can you tell me where he’ll be going after he completes the training?”

“Sorry Sir, I don’t have that information—all we have is what we got from Division. You may want to try them or CONUS Command in Washington. Is there anything else, Sir?”

“No, that’ll be all—thank you,” replied Colonel Degrote and hangs up.

Then Colonel Degrote dials Division Headquarters and asks to be connected to G1.

After a minute or so, female voice greets him, “4th Division G1—Specialist Four Amanda Lahr speaking—how may I assist you?”

“This is Lieutenant Colonel Degrote of the 128th EXR Combat Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Combat Brigade, and I was directed to you by Brigade G1. Specialist Four Michael A. Troff was mistakenly transferred from our Battalion and is now taking training at Fort Hunter in California. Can you possibly tell me where he’s scheduled to be assigned next? The man’s very important to our current mission and I would appreciate any information you can give me.”

“I’m not sure I can help you Sir, but let me check,” replied Sp4 Lahr.

After an extended period, while Lieutenant Colonel Degrote waited, tapping his finger tip on his desk top, she came back on the phone and said, “Sir, I’m sorry, but we don’t have that information. I spoke to my Section Head, and he told me if there was a mistake there isn’t anything we can do at this level, you must talk to G1 at CONUS Command in Washington, they’re the only ones who can help you now—is there anything else, Sir?”

“No, you helped me quite enough—thank you and have a good day Specialist Lahr,” returned Colonel Degrote and hangs up feeling low and depressed.

Sitting there mulling over what he has learned, Lieutenant Colonel Degrote feeling very low decides to give it one more try and reaches for the phone.

After dialing the number of G1 at CONUS Command in Washington he waits for someone to answer.

Finally someone answers, “US Continental Army Command, Administration and Personnel Office, Specialist Five Finseth speaking, how may I help you?”

“This is Lieutenant Colonel Degrote of the 19th Combat Brigade at the Cetin NATO Airbase in Turkey, and I need information on a recent transfer.”

“Can you give me a date and name, Sir?” Requested Sp5 Finseth.

“I don’t have an exact date, but an approximate date be around the last of September. His name is Specialist Four Michael A. Troff, and his serial number is US09999989253. I’ve been told he’s currently going through training at Camp Roberts, an annex of Fort Hunter. I understand he’s about to complete the training in the next week or so, and I would like to know where he’s going to be deployed too.”

“Please wait while I bring up his records,” replied Sp5 Finseth, and after a few seconds he comes back with, “yes, I have him listed as being currently assigned to 52nd Advanced Combat Training Battalion at Fort Hunter. May I ask as to why you need to know his future deployment information?”

“His transfer was a mistake and if he is redeployed to the 19th Combat Brigade I would like to know, so arrangements can be made to have him transferred back into the 128th EXR Combat Company,” explained Lieutenant Colonel Degrote feeling hopeful.

“The information you are requesting is currently classified, let me talk to someone and I’ll get back to you—please hold Sir,” said Sp5 Finseth and there was a click followed by classical music being played.

For the next five minutes, Lieutenant Colonel Degrote sat leaning back in his office chair with phone to his ear listening to Bach.

Several times a clerk quietly walked in and dropped papers into his inbox.

Finally after another five minutes, the music was interrupted by a click and Sp5 Finseth was back on the line with, “I’m sorry Sir, the deployment of Specialist Four Troff is classified and is on a need to know basis, but I can assure you of this much—he will not be returning to the 19th Combat Brigade—sorry Sir that’s all I’m allowed to tell you—is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, that’s about it—thanks for your help Specialist Finseth and have a good day—bye now,” said Colonel Degrote and hangs up.

With a look of disgust and shaking his head, Lieutenant Colonel Degrote mumbles, as he reaches for the first document in his inbox, “They don’t realize what they’ve done—this huge mistake is going to cost us,” and then he begins work on the awaiting stack of paperwork, hoping there isn’t anymore bad news today.

On Friday the First and Second Platoons were on the PT testing field, and when it was all finished, Mike and his Platoon had passed; this time, Mike almost finished the four laps on the Monkey Bars and almost max the test.

While doing them, Mike remembered the close call with the Bear and smiled when he recalled how he used the Monkey Bar routine to climbed high into that tree to escape, and of course the fun time he had afterward with his old friend Mr. Kelso whom with his two friends chased the Bear away.

When Mike came back to the test, he was on the last lap and heading home when he lost his grip and fell, ending the test.

When they got back to the barracks, Sergeant Axtell informed them that they will be processing out starting early Monday morning, “but on Saturday you have one final inspection and I suggest that you spend the evening

getting ready—which I believe you’ve already have planned,” looking at Mike standing at the head of his squad.

After spending Friday evening at a GI Party until lights out, Mike and the rest of the Second Platoon went to bed that night worn out and tired.

The next morning, Mike and Greg came to attention after Mike call attention, as Captain Pelkey, First Sergeant Kapler, and Staff Sergeant Axtell entered their room.

After examining Mike’s area, footlocker layout and wall locker, Captain Pelkey comments to the two Sergeants on how well everything looks, and then he steps in front of Mike; its question time and Mike feels confident and is ready.

Then Captain Pelkey asked the first question, “You’re in a small valley with a creek flowing nearby and you decided to make camp. Earlier you noticed storm clouds building to the west, now where are you going to pitch your tent, near that nice creek, under a nearby big pine tree, or on the side of the hill?”

Mike thinking, said to himself, “Not this again—when are they going to get over what happened in basic...” Mike was brought back to the present with Captain Pelkey asking, “Well, Corporal?”

“On the side of the hill, about half of the way from the top with the tent entrance facing down hill,” replied Mike, looking him in the eyes.

“That’s correct,” said Captain Pelkey with a smile, and then he added, “Of course you would know all about that—wouldn’t you Corporal Troff.

“Yes Sir,” replied Mike feeling resentful at the Captain’s insulting and mocking tone.

Then Captain Pelkey asked his second question, “Name three natural foods you might find on a bivouac here in Southern California.”

“Pine Nuts, the green pads and purple fruit of the Prickly Pear cactus—after they’re de-spined and cooked, and the banana shaped fruit of the Yucca plant,” replied Mike.

“Yes, quite correct, and were would be a good place to find Pine Nuts?”

“Besides the obvious under a Pinyon Pine tree, I’d look in a Pack Rats nest,” replied Mike returning a bit of sarcasm of his own.

Captain Pelkey with a sneering expression nodded with, “Yes, that’s correct and you’re quite knowledgeable on natural foods around here—very good Corporal Troff, now one final question. What is taught in training about contact with dangerous wildlife, such as Wolves, Bears, and Mountain Lions?”

Feeling annoyed and upset at the way the questions were going, Mike, expressionless firmly replied, “We’re taught to avoid contact with predators whenever possible—Sir.”

“That’s correct, but there are those who for one reason or another don’t listen and find themselves in mortal danger, isn’t that right—Corporal Troff,” said Captain Pelkey with a sarcastic grin.

“Yes Sir,” replied Mike straight faced looking him in the eyes.

Captain Pelkey hesitated a minute or so, and then he says, “Very well done Corporal Troff, excellent area and displays,” then he goes over to Greg.

After the inspection group left their room, Greg with a quizzical expression asked, “Man--what was that all about with those questions you were asked? I’m glad he didn’t ask me any of those.”

Mike shrugged his shoulders with, “Don’t have a clue and proceeded to close his open wall and foot lockers, and about then Sergeant Axtell loudly announce, “Everyone to the front of the barracks for some announcements.”

Mike shakes his head and mumbles, “Here it comes, the bad news.”

When everyone was gathered around Sergeant Axtell, he proceeded to inform them, “I have several announcements before I let you go for the weekend. First, you all did excellent on the inspection—no one got any gigs on your final inspection—well done, and that was your last inspection. Second, starting Monday you’ll begin clearing post and will be turning in your equipment. Wednesday you’ll finish clearing post and will receive your deployment orders and will be departing from Paso Robles Municipal Airport on an Air Force Troop transport plane—an Army Bus will take you there. Three, I strongly suggest that you take care of any laundry and start packing and cleaning out your wall lockers—you won’t have much time next week. Third, Sunday is Halloween, if you haven’t forgotten. You aren’t allowed off post, but you can go anywhere on post, and the USO and Service Men’s club are hosting parties for those of you who want to go. That’s all I have, any questions?”

Roger raised his hand and Sergeant Axtell pointed to him, and then Roger asked, “Monday is the first of November and Sunday is the last day in October—So when do we get paid?”

“Good question. Because of the bivouacs this past week, you’ll all get paid on Monday morning right after you turn in your equipment. Any other questions?”

With no other hands raised, Sergeant Axtell says, "Ok, you all have a great weekend and I'll see you all bright and early Monday morning," with a smile he turns and walks out of the barracks.

Mike, Greg, Pat and Roger walked back to their rooms, and when Mike got inside he opened his wall locker and got his duffle and civilian bags.

When Greg sees what Mike is doing he asks, "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning out my wall and footlockers and packing my duffle and civilian bags, then I'm doing my laundry—you heard Axtell, we're leaving next week and with clearing post we won't have much time to do laundry and packing, except in the evenings—I suggest you do the same."

Greg looks at Mike for a second or two, and then he slowly nods with, "Yeah, you gotta' point," so he goes to his wall locker and removes his duffle and civilian bags and begins unloading his wall and footlockers.

It was noon when Mike, now in civvies, walks over to Pat and Roger's room to see if they're still there and wants to see if they would like to go to lunch together; Greg joins him at the door.

"Do you think they're in there?" Greg asked.

"Don't know—let's see," replied Mike, and then he knocks on the door.

"COME IN," came Roger's reply.

"I guess they're in," remarked Greg, then Mike opens the door and they walk in finding both men busy unloading their wall and foot lockers; their duffle and civilian bags near by.

Mike turns to Greg and smiles, and then Mike asks Pat and Roger, "I see you guys are packin' too."

"Yeah, can't wait to get outa' here, and none to soon either," retorted Roger with Pat nodding in agreement.

"Well—I've got some bad news for ya', because I've got a bad feeling that where we're going is going to be ah' whole lot worse," remarked Mike with a serious look on his face, the others staring.

Then Mike says, "We came over here to see if you guys wanted to go to chow with us," pointing to Greg and himself.

"Pat replied, "Yeah, I'm starving and if I don't get something to eat I'll be lappin' up that can of shoe polish," pointing at the can of polish sitting nearby.

"Yeah—I'm with you," announced Roger, and so all four men walked over to the mess hall.

CHAPTER 12 -- New Sergeant.

Monday morning, the first day of November, and Mike was up and doing his early morning chores; today he begins clearing post, because he's now through Advanced Combat Training and will be leaving on Wednesday for who knows where.

Sergeant Axtell enters Mike's and Greg's room and informs them that they're to fall out at 0800 with all of their field gear; seeing Mike's and Greg's packed bags nearby, he remarks, "Nice to see you both took my advice—be sure to tell your Squads to fall out with all of their field gear, because you're turning it in this morning—any questions?"

"No Sergeant," replied Mike shaking his head, then Sergeant Axtell looks over to Greg.

"No Sergeant," said Greg shaking his head.

"Ok then, that's all I have," said Sergeant Axtell and walks out of the room.

Mike and Greg informed their Squads, and at 0800 they were standing in formation holding all of their field gear.

When all of the Platoon's had turned in the field gear, the M20's were next and by ten o'clock they had everything returned and were again standing at attention, because now it was time to get paid for last month.

And so, by Platoon they went into the HQ building, and there by Squad they entered the Orderly Room to get paid by Captain Pelkey.

At ten-thirty, Mike stepped up to the front of Captain Pelkey's desk, and standing at attention he saluted with, "Sir, Corporal Michael Troff reports for pay," and waits for Captain Pelkey to return the salute.

After Captain Pelkey returns the salute, Mike stands there waiting for Captain Pelkey to finish counting out the bills, and when he finishes, he reaches into an open desk drawer and produces an envelope and a small dark green box, and then he pushes the small stack of bills with the white envelope and dark green box on top to Mike.

Then with a smile, Captain Pelkey says, "Congratulations Sergeant Troff—of all the men in this Company, you're the most deserving—you excelled in every area, and I hope you'll give the job offer about remaining here as an instructor some serious thought, we sure could use you."

"Thank you Sir, and I will," Mike politely replied looking confused and reaches for the bills, envelope and the box.

After counting the bills, Mike salutes again and with a return salute, Captain Pelkey reminds him, “At your earliest opportunity, replace your insignia on your uniform. We don’t want to be caught out of uniform—now would we?”

“No Sir,” replied Mike and he then makes an about face and walks out of Captain Pelkey’s office.

On the way out of the Orderly Room, Mike had his data-link updated.

When Mike gets back to his room, he opens the box, and inside are three E5 Buck Sergeant insignias; he stands there staring at them in disbelief.

Then suddenly he realizes, he outranks everyone in the barracks—he’s a Sergeant!

Opening the envelope, Mike finds a three-page letter with a list of names in the Company who were also promoted; his name was near the top on the first page, with all of the new E5s.

This makes it official--Mike is now a Sergeant.

Sitting down on his bunk, Mike gazes at the metal insignia in the box, when in walks Greg also with an envelope and dark green box.

Seeing Mike sitting on the bed looking at the open box transfixed, Greg remarked, “I knew it--you too!”

Mike looks up unblinking and sees Greg with the same envelope and box and muttered, “You’re now a Sergeant too?”

“Like yeah,” huffed Greg, “and you better put em’ on before Axtell comes in and finds you outa’ uniform and has them taken away.

“Yeah—right,” answered Mike, and then got up and removed his shirt.

Both him and Greg then replaced the two chevron Corporal insignia with the three chevron Buck Sergeant insignia on both shirt collars and on the front of their caps.

Then Mike removes the top page and puts it into his wallet, discarding the old E4 orders.

Then Sergeant Axtell walks in and when he sees both men with their new insignia a big smile develops on his face; he extends his hand to Mike with, “Congratulations Sergeant Troff—after all you’ve been through in basic, and with your leadership this past month, it’s well deserved.”

Mike takes his hand feeling a bit emotional saying, “Thank you Sergeant Axtell—I’m kinda’ stunned and don’t quite know what to say, but thanks for all you’ve done for me this past month.”

“Well I didn’t do much—it was you who impressed the CO and the higher-ups,” Sergeant Axtell said composedly.

Mike slightly nods, then Sergeant Axtell looks over to Greg and offers his hand to Greg with, “Congratulations to you too, Sergeant Gressett.”

Greg takes his hand with, “Thanks Sergeant Axtell,” and they shake.

Then Sergeant Axtell informs the pair, “Now as NCOs you’re attributed some privileges, such as eating with myself and the NCOs in the NCO section in the mess-hall—if you want to. I know it’s rather sudden, so if you want to remain eating with your other two Squad Leaders, you may.”

“Thanks Sergeant,” Mike politely told him; Greg nods agreeing.

Then Sergeant Axtell walks out of the room.

Greg abruptly asks Mike, “Are ya’ goin’ to chow—I’m starved.”

Mike nods with, “Yeah, me too,” and they both walk out of their room.

As they walk through the barracks everyone was staring with surprise expressions.

In the mess hall, Mike heads for the table with Pat and Roger with Greg following, Pat and Roger are still E4 Corporals.

As soon as Pat sees that both Mike and Greg have been promoted, he extends his hand to Mike with, “Congratulations—been wondering when they’d get around to promote you—Boss,” and smiles.

“Thanks Littlefield,” replied Mike shaking his hand, and then Pat offers his hand to Greg with the same acknowledgment; Roger also shakes their hands.

After all of the hand shaking they start eating, then Roger nonchalantly asks, “So, --what are you two doing sitting over here—shouldn’t you two be sitting in the NCO section, now that you’re both Sergeants?”

“Axtell said we could eat with you guys if we wanted, besides, it doesn’t feel right sitting over there,” said Mike with a smile while pointing over his back with his thumb to the partition separating the two areas.

At 1300, the four Platoons headed out of the Company area and down the gravel path to Camp Roberts processing building.

By five that afternoon everyone was officially cleared from Fort Hunter and annex Camp Rogers and was marching back to their barracks with their 201 Data Disks.

At dinner that evening, Mike and Greg were once again sitting with Pat and Roger, and with a quizzical expression Greg asked, “Where are we going to be stationed next? I haven’t received any deployment orders and we’ve already cleared post.”

Pat, Roger, and Mike suddenly stopped eating and stared at Greg thinking he's right!

They all looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders, and then Mike piped, "Tomorrow—that's when we'll get the bad news."

"Bad new—what bad news?" Inquired Pat.

"I think we're headed for the Middle East to fight for real," replied Mike in a slow firm tone, "and some of us aren't coming back alive. I've already seen guys heading home in a box—my roommate was one."

With that revelation, they all had grim expressions.

For the rest of the meal, all four men ate in silence haunted by Mike's fatalistic prediction.

That evening in their room, Greg in a somber tone asked, "What makes you think we're going to the Middle East to fight?"

"Lot's of reasons. First, the way we were suddenly transferred from our units. Like me, Pat and Roger we're Spec fours and I'll bet there was others transferred the same way, and why, because they need men in a hurry. Second, some of the comments from the instructors like at the firing range when we were told that we wouldn't be throwing hand grenades or firing RPG's, because soon, we'll be doing it for real—remember?"

Greg looked back with a somber expression.

The next morning, all four Platoons were once again marching down the gravel path and arrived at that large building with the large double steel doors, which once again, were propped open and was lit inside.

As they filed in by Platoon and Squad, Mike was quite confused as to why they were attending another seminar, especially after having cleared post.

His answer came ten minutes later when a Captain walked onto the stage and begin speaking, "Men," he began with a smile, "you all have completed advanced combat training and yesterday you cleared post and now are wondering where your next duty station will be—I'll tell you."

He pauses for a full five seconds observing the many quizzical expressions etched on the faces of many of the men, and then the Captain began to pontificate, "Some of our allies are in a desperate state of conflict with the Islamic Alliance whose sole purpose is to overthrow the governments and install the dogma and laws of the Islamic Alliance."

Mike held his breath, because he knew what the Captain was hinting at, and said to himself, "Here it comes—I'm headed back to Turkey."

The Captain continued, "Two of those countries have gone to the UN and asked for help, and a third country, Turkey, is a NATO member and

will be defended with the help of its NATO allies. The other two countries, India and Israel are not NATO members and will be assisted by a UN coalition. We're part of that coalition, and you're all going to those countries to assist them in their conflict, so with that in mind, here's how you're going to be deployed. The First and Second Platoons are to be deployed to India, and will be stationed at Sitabuildi Fort, Nagpur. The Third Platoon will be deployed to Turkey, and be stationed at Incirlik NATO Airbase, Adana, and for the Fourth Platoon, its Israel, and Camp Anatot."

Looking surprised, Mike exclaimed, "I'm going to India—not Turkey!"

Then Mike thought at least it isn't the Middle East again and some hot desert, but someplace nice and green.

After the Captain had announced where they were going to be deployed, he added, "And because we're guests, we must abide by their laws and customs. Now I don't expect any of you to learn their language, because English is also spoken in all three countries, but you should learn a few words and phrases to interact with them out of courtesy. So, for the next three hours you all will attend training on the country you'll be going to—any questions?"

With no hands raised the Captain finished with, "That's all I have and good luck to all of you."

Attention was called, everyone rose, and then he walked off stage, and then a Sergeant First Class walked to the center of the stage and ordered, "The First and Second Platoons remain seated, as you'll remain here. The Third and Forth Platoons are to exit—they will go to other buildings for training on the countries they'll be going to—you may now exit," and the rest of the Company proceeded to filed out of the building with Mike thinking to himself, "Great—more training. I thought we were through with all of that!"

For the next three hours, Mike and his Platoon along with the First Platoon received instruction on the laws, customs, and some simple words and phrases in Hindu and a few other languages used in India, which Mike was quite surprised about, because he thought everyone in India spoke Hindu; several hand books were also handed out.

At eleven o'clock, Mike was back outside standing in formation with the rest of the Company.

Once everyone was at attention, the order was given to move out and they marched back to the Company area.

When they arrived, they came to attention and were told when they reformed at 1300 to have their bags with them, and then they were dismissed for lunch.

After locating an empty table the four Squad Leaders sat down to eat their last meal in this mess hall.

Watching Roger taking a big bite out of his ham and cheese sandwich, Pat remarked, "Enjoy your last ham and cheese sandwich, it's the last one you'll be having for a long time."

"And good ole' cheese burgers too," Pat added looking doleful.

"What ya' mean?" Roger gasped blinking.

"Weren't you listening," Greg argued, "India is mostly Hindu with lots of Muslims, and to Hindus cows are sacred, so no eating beef, and Muslims its pork—they considered it dirty and taboo.

"That's the least of your concerns," Mike piping up.

This time Greg asked, "What ya' mean? I always wanted to see India with the Taj Mahal and all of the Buddhist temples."

"Yeah—if the Islamic fighters don't destroy them first," said Mike matter-of-factly; the three men look at Mike stoned faced, Mike nodding his affirmation.

When they finished eating their last meal in this mess hall, they walked back to the barracks to gather up any remaining articles and store them in their bags, then looking around to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything, Mike gives a sigh and grabs his bags, and looking to Glen he says, "You ready?"

"Yeah, let's go," responds Glen with a nod, and out the door they walk.

When they walked outside, there were two large Army Buses waiting.

Taking their places at the heads of their Squad, Mike and Glen wait for Sergeant Axtell to call them to attention, which came ten minutes later.

The first two Platoons were told to board the first Bus, the other two Platoons were ordered to board the second Bus; Sergeant Axtell and the Sergeant from the First Platoon were the last to board the first Bus and sat in the seat behind the driver.

When both of the Buses were full, the doors shut and the two Buses drove out of the Company area and headed out of Camp Roberts towards Highway 101.

Taking the south entrance they head south to Paso Robles; about fifteen minutes later, the two Buses take exit 231 at Paso Robles and head for the Municipal Airport on Highway 46.

When they reach Airport Road, the two Buses make a left turn and head north; after another three or four miles they make a right turn onto a gravel road.

After another half mile, the Buses follow the road around a building and turn onto a tarmac in front of several buildings with vehicles parked in front.

Remaining on the tarmac, the two Buses pass by the first of two parked Air Force Transport jets and between them is an oval shaped grassy field; in fact, there are two more oval shaped grassy fields on other side of the second Air Force Transport airplane.

The two Buses pull up next to each other on the north end of the first oval grassy field and stop, then the doors are opened and the Platoon Sergeants disembark; when they get outside, they loudly order, “EVERY-ONE FORM UP—ON THE DOUBLE!”

Mike, Greg, Pat, Roger and their Squads exit the Bus and form up in front of Sergeant Axtell.

When all four Platoons had formed up, on the oval grassy field, the Company’s First Sergeant took roll and after everyone was accounted for, he commanded that the First and Second Platoons were to board the transport airplane behind them, and the Third and Fourth Platoons were to board the airplane in front of them, and then he ordered, “PLATOON SERGEANTS TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR PLATOONS.

Sergeant Axtell, along with the First Platoon Sergeant commanded their Platoons to execute an about-face, and now they were facing the Air Force Transport airplane.

Then by Squad, the First Platoon entered the airplane, and then after they had boarded it was the Second Platoon’s turn.

Mike takes a seat next to the aisle, because with him being a Squad leader, he is the last one to take a seat.

After the Second Platoon has been seated and buckled in, Sergeant Axtell Stops at Mike’s seat; he removes the Platoon roster from his clipboard and hands it to him, telling him, “You and Gressett are the two ranking men in the Platoon, and because of your record I’m placing you in charge of the Second Platoon.”

Mike looking aghast, gasp, “The whole Platoon! Aren’t you coming with us?”

“No—my job is here, and I’ve got to get back and take charge of another group arriving Saturday—you’re a Sergeant now, so get use to it.”

“Yes Sergeant,” Mike spluttered swallowing hard, and Mike takes the roster.

Then Sergeant Axtell informs Mike, “When you arrive at Fort Sitabuildi, hand this roster to the Sergeant in charge—you got that?”

“Yes Sergeant,” replied Mike with a nod and feeling relieved.

Then Sergeant Axtell turns to Greg and tells him, “Don’t think you’re getting by so easy. You’re are now in charge of the First Platoon,” then the other Platoon Sergeant hands him a roster for the First Platoon telling him, “here’s the roster for your Platoon—good luck,” and he and Sergeant Axtell exit the airplane.

Greg sitting in the aisle seat across from Mike, looking quite shocked earnestly remarks in a sarcastic tone, “Well—I guess we’re now Platoon Sergeants,” and gives Mike a big sarcastic grin; Mike looks back unpretentiously.

Fifteen minutes later a Master Sergeant came out of the flight cabin and announced, “In a few minutes we’ll be taxing to the runway. We should be in the air in about twenty-five minutes. Keep your seats upright and seatbelts buckled until you’re told otherwise. Once we’re in the air you may get up and stretch your legs and go to the latrine at the rear of the aircraft. You’ve all flown on a commercial jet, so you all should be familiar with how things operate—this aircraft is no different. If we run into turbulence, then you must be in your seat with your seatbelts securely fastened—any questions.

A hand went up near the middle of the Airplane; the Master Sergeant pointed to him, and he asked, “How long will this flight take, and will we be fed?”

“We will be landing in Guam at Anderson Air Force Base for fuel,” replied the Master Sergeant, “the refueling stop will take about an hour at which time you’ll be allowed to disembark and chow down—your Platoon Sergeants will be in charge—any more questions?”

While Mike and Greg sat there in shock with uncertainty after hearing the news, no one raised their hands, so the Master Sergeant went back into the cockpit and closed the door.

Ten minutes later the plane started moving and turned onto a service taxiway, a minute or so later the plane turn onto the main taxiway that ran parallel to the main runway.

Reaching the point where the taxiway intersects with the main runway 19, the plane comes to a halt at the holding line and waits for the tower to

clear them to proceed onto the runway.

Eight minutes later, the plane is cleared and moves out onto the main runway.

After another minute, Mike hears the engines revving up, then they start moving down the runway at an ever increasing rate until Mike feels a small thump which he knows is them leaving the ground; quickly gaining altitude the airplane makes a banking turn to the west and heads to the coast and out to sea.

After several more minutes, the airplane reaches cruise altitude and levels off; the Pilot comes on the intercom and announces that they may unbuckle and relax and it'll be four hours to Andersen Air Force Base in Guam.

For the next hour or so, Mike sat there quietly thinking about the days ahead and trying not to worry if he'll see his family, Bob, and Pam again—maybe it'll be his turn to go home in a box.

Trying to stop thinking about dying, Mike rises and leans over the next two guys to get a peek out of the window; the guy sitting next to the window is sound asleep as well as the guy in the middle seat.

Looking out, all Mike sees is some white puffy clouds below and an endless deep blue ocean all the way to the horizon, so with a sigh, Mike eases back into his seat and remarks, "Hope we don't have to ditch—I don't know how to swim. Guess I'll catch some shut-eye too."

After what seemed like he had just closed his eyes, Mike awoke to the sound of the Captain's voice coming from the intercom, "Welcome to Wednesday—we've just crossed over the International Date Line. The rest of the way to Guam is clear and smooth—enjoy the flight."

Mike's eyes pop open, because he'd forgotten about the date shift; then he smiled and closed his eyes.

Several hours later, a loud buzzer sounded along with a dinging bell; Mike awakens along with everyone else who's asleep and sees the 'FASTEN SEATBELT' sign illuminated and becomes a bit uneasy.

Then the dinging bell stopped and the Pilot's voice came from the PA, "We've arrived at Guam, and will be landing at Andersen in a few minutes. We should be there for about two hours while the aircraft is refueled for the remainder of the flight to India."

Twenty minutes later, the Airplane pulls up to the terminal area and stops.

The Master Sergeant steps out of the cabin and tells everyone, “You will be disembarking the plane while it’s being refueled. You have two hours to freshen up and grab a bite to eat in the cafeteria.”

Then everyone got up and filed off the plane in orderly fashion and formed up into the two Platoons; Mike took charge of the Second Platoon and Greg took charge of the First Platoon.

Mike informed his Platoon they were to reform when it was time to re-board the plane when it is time to leave, then he dismissed them and they went into the terminal to find the restroom/latrines and the cafeteria for something to eat.

Two hours later the PA blared, “ARMY PERSONAL EN ROUTE TO INDIA, YOUR PLANE IS NOW READY FOR BOARDING.”

After the two Platoons reformed, they reentered the Airplane and while they sat waiting on the runway, waiting for a clearance to takeoff, a B80 Bomber landed.

Once they got the clearance to takeoff, it wasn’t too much longer before the Aircraft was airborne, climbing to cruise altitude and heading to India; a few minutes later the Pilot informed them over the PA, “This is the final leg of your flight, there will be no further stops until we touch down at Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport at Nagpur India in about three hours, enjoy your flight,” then with a click the PA went silent.

Mike thought to himself, “Well this is it—I’m heading to India,” and then he closed his eyes and settled back into his seat.

In the middle of a dream kissing Pam, Mike was suddenly awoken by a loud buzzer along with a dinging bell and a lit sign with red letters informing them to fasten their seatbelts, then the Pilot said over the PA, “We’re coming into Doctor Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport and will be touching down in about twenty-five minutes—have a nice day.”

Mike straighten his seat, and buckled his seatbelt.

Twenty minutes later, the Airplane touches down.

Then the Airplane turned west unto a major taxiway, but instead of heading for the main terminal, they were headed to a concrete tarmac with several parked military Helicopters, of which to Mike’s surprise included three EXR’s, and there they came to a halt.

The Master Sergeant came out of the flight cabin and announced, “In a few minutes you can disembark and once outside your Platoon Sergeants will take charge until relieved. In-case you’re wondering why we’re here instead of the main flight terminal, it’s because you’re at an Indian Air Force

Base and under their command. Remember, you're guest here, so conduct yourselves accordingly—that's all I have—any questions?"

Five minutes later, the door opens and everyone gets up and exits the Airplane.

Some distance from the Airplane, Mike and Greg had their Platoons form up, then during roll call, a Bus pulls up and two Staff Sergeants get off.

One of the Staff Sergeants walks towards the Second Platoon and when he gets to Mike he introduces himself, "Sergeant Troff, I'm Staff Sergeant Lambert your new Platoon Sergeant," he and Mike look at each other, and then he commands, "You may rejoin the Platoon Sergeant."

"Yes Sergeant and here's the Platoon Roster I was to told to give you," replied Mike handing the sheet of paper to the Staff Sergeant, and then Mike goes over and takes his place at the head of the Third Squad.

After Mike had rejoined his Squad, Staff Sergeant Lambert announced, "Before I have you board the Bus for the company area at the UN Coalition Military Base I have a few words. While you're here, your Platoon Leader is 2nd Lieutenant Erickson, the First Sergeant is First Sergeant Farley, and your Commanding Officer is Captain Demaray. You're now the Fourth Platoon of Delta Company, part of the 39th American Expeditionary Battalion assisting the 118th Indian Infantry Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Landers is the Battalion Commander. Remember these people, because you will be asked at inspection time to name them. Now it's time to board the Bus to take you to your new home."

CHAPTER 13 -- Assistant Platoon Sergeant.

After a short ride from the airfield, the Bus turns at a wooden sign with, “Delta Company 39th American Expeditionary Battalion,” painted on it along with a large crest on the bottom.

The Bus pulls up and stops on a large asphalt lot with a large concrete buildings on both sides.

The Bus doors open and the two Staff Sergeants get up, and then Staff Sergeant Lambert announces, “Alright men, the party is over and it’s time to get to the dirty business of war—Fourth Platoon off the Bus.”

With a dishearten sigh, Mike gets up along with his platoon and disembarks; as they do, the other Staff Sergeant makes a similar announcement.

It was one o’clock when they formed up; two Lieutenants came out of the building in front of them and approached the two assembled Platoons.

As soon as one of them headed over to the Fourth Platoon, Staff Sergeant Lambert call his platoon to attention; the other Lieutenant went over to the other Platoon and they were also call to attention by their Platoon Sergeant.

Staff Sergeant Lambert smartly saluted the Lieutenant and he returned the salute, then Staff Sergeant Lambert went over and stood in front of the Fourth Platoon facing the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant called, “At Ease,” and everyone in the Platoon relaxed a bit with their attention squarely on the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant began to speak, “My Name is Lieutenant Erickson and I’m your Platoon Leader. You’re now members of Delta Company of the 39th American Expeditionary Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Landers is the Battalion Commander. Captain Demaray is your Company Commander, and Bob McFarly is the First Sergeant. I along with your Platoon Sergeant will be with you in the field. We have a dirty and dangerous job to do and some of you won’t be going home alive. A lot of the hostiles don’t wear uniforms, and when ordered to fire, any hesitation on your part will lead to your death and that of your fellow solders. This building behind me,” he turns and points to the large three-story building, “is going to be your base home for the next eighteen to twenty-four months. Most of you won’t be spending a lot of time there, because you’ll be rotating through one of several base camps situated near several communities around Nagpur. Your

job will be twofold: first, to defend the communities near the base camp, and second, to seek out and destroy the invaders by whatever means we have at our disposal. The rest of today you'll settle into your new barracks and get assigned daily chores to be performed, as well as some extra details that need to be done from time to time. Tomorrow, you'll be issued your field gear along with extra uniforms and your weapon. At this time that's all I have—any questions?"

With no raised hands, Lieutenant Erickson said, "Ok—A-ATTEN-N-TION! Sergeant Lambert, take charge of the Platoon."

They salute, and then the Lieutenant made an about face and walked back to the barracks; Sergeant Lambert smartly marched to where the Lieutenant once stood, made an about face and ordered, "AT-EASE! When I order you to fallout, you're to enter the building behind me and take the stairway directly in front of the main doors and go to the third floor—your new quarters will be on the far east end through the double doors—on that side," pointing to his left, "Ok—A-ATTEN-N-TION—FALLOUT!"

They grabbed their duffle bags and civilian bags, ran to the building, go through the front doors, and up the stairway to the third floor.

When Mike passed through the swinging double doors, he found himself in an area similar to what he had in advanced infantry training at Camp Roberts.

Locating the Third Squad's cubical at the right rear, he enters and places his bags on the nearest bottom bunk, claiming it as his.

Then Staff Sergeant Lambert enters with a new man, after everyone has already claimed a bunk, and announces, "Sergeant Troff—you're bunking with me in my room," to Mike's surprise.

"Corporal Masoner will be taking over as Squad Leader and Sergeant Troff you'll become Assistant Platoon Sergeant—any questions?"

Announced Sergeant Lambert to Mike's total surprise.

With no one raising their hand, Sergeant Lambert told them, "Ok then—get your gear stowed, and after I show Sergeant Troff to his new quarters I'll be back to take you down to the Quartermaster for bedding, and then to the Orderly Room to get you all checked in and assigned meal cards," and then he turns to Mike and orders, "Follow me Sergeant," and he exits the cubical with Mike in tow.

Sergeant Lambert led Mike out of the Platoon's barracks to the first door on the left; the door on the right was open and looked to be the latrine.

Sergeant Lambert opens the door and extends his hand with, “After you Sergeant,” Mike enters the room.

The room is about the same size as the one he had in Turkey, except it had a tan window shade pulled halfway down.

With only two bunks in the room, Mike didn’t have a choice, since Sergeant Lambert has already claimed the one nearest the door; Mike goes and puts his duffle bags and civilian bags on the bunk near the back of the room.

A table with two chairs was positioned next to the window.

A small desk with a chair was in between the two sets of wall lockers with just enough space to get the chair behind the desk; it seems that Sergeant Lambert has already claimed this as well, as there was a laptop computer and printer sitting on top.

No more had Mike set his two bags on the bunk, when Sergeant Lambert ordered, “C’mon, it’s time to get your bedding.”

So, Mike followed Sergeant Lambert back into the hallway where he halted and pointed down the hallway and announced, “The NCO latrine is the fourth door on the left—I don’t expect you to be using the Platoons,” then he heads back into the Platoon barracks.

When Staff Sergeant Lambert and Mike entered the barracks, Sergeant Lambert commanded, “Everyone—gather around,” and in a minute or so the entire Platoon was gathered in the aisle between the four cubicles and in front of Staff Sergeant Lambert, and then he ordered, “it’s time to get your bedding—follow me,” he turns and heads out of the Platoon’s quarters and to the stairway with Mike and the entire Platoon following.

In the Quartermaster Supply-room the Staff Sergeant and his assistant, also a Buck Sergeant, had the Platoon form two columns.

With the help of several Privates, it took only a matter of minutes and the entire Platoon was ready to head back to their quarters with an armload of two sheets, a pillowcase, and a blanket.

They were told by the Quartermaster Staff Sergeant that linen exchange will be every Wednesday morning before formation, then Staff Sergeant Lambert told the Platoon, “After you take care of your bedding, get your DD201 disk and gather at the Platoon’s doors—we’ll be going to the Orderly Room to get you all officially signed in and get your meal-cards,” then everyone headed back up to the Platoon’s quarters.

After depositing their bedding neatly stacked on their bunks, in inspection style, they regrouped at the Platoon’s doors with their DD201 Disks,

waiting for Staff Sergeant Lambert to arrive; a short time later, Staff Sergeant Lambert and Mike arrived, and then they headed down the staircase to the Orderly Room.

An hour later, the Platoon was back in their quarters minus the DD201 disk, which stayed in the Orderly Room.

Once again assembled in front of Staff Sergeant Lambert and Mike, who was standing at his side, the men in the Platoon waited for more instructions?

Staff Sergeant Lambert began to speak, “First, lights out at twenty-two-hundred. Reveille is at o-five-hundred, mess hall opens at o-six-hundred, and first formation is at o-eight-hundred—that gives you two hours to shit, shower, shave, get your assigned details done and your areas in order. There’s a formation at thirteen hundred and a final formation at seventeen hundred. Dinner is served starting at eighteen hundred—any questions?”

One of the men raised his hand, Sergeant Lambert pointed to him and he asked, “You mentioned details—what kind of details?”

“The general barracks details which are, sweeping the stairwell, the hallway to the fire-hose cabinet, the laundry and platoon day rooms, and the latrine; each squad will be assigned one of those details for a week. Each month a list will be posted as to what squad does what on a particular week, on our Platoon’s bulletin board,” he turns and points to the framed corkboard, mounted on the wall to the right side of the double swinging doors, and then Sergeant Lambert asked, “Any more questions?”

With no one raising a hand, Sergeant Lambert gave them some last minute advise, “Ok—you’ve got about an hour before the mess hall opens, I suggest you use that time to get unpacked, start setting up your wall lockers and get your bunks made—uniform for tomorrow will be woodland green BDU’s and boonie hats—any last minute questions?”

Again no one raised a hand, so Staff Sergeant Lambert told them, “If any of you have any questions or concerns, you can find myself and Sergeant Troff in the first door on the right—that’s all I have. Anything you want to add, Sergeant Troff,” turning to look at Mike, who is taken by surprise.

After a short pause shakes his head with, “No Sergeant Lambert, I have nothing at this time.”

“Ok then—carry-on,” said Sergeant Lambert, and with Mike, he exits the Platoon’s quarters.

When Sergeant Lambert and Mike returned to their room, Mike proceeded to make his bed while Sergeant Lambert sat at the desk and typed on

the computer; Sergeant Lambert was still on the computer when Mike began to unpack and setup his wall-locker.

Then as Mike was busy with the unpacking, the printer came to life and spits out a couple of pages, then Sergeant Lambert gets up and takes the two pages and turns to Mike and says, “Here’s the barracks detail listing for this month,” now holding the pages out to Mike, he tells him, “here--pin these up on the bulletin board.”

Mike takes the pages and replies, “Yes Sergeant,” and walks out of the room.

As Mike walks into the Platoon’s quarters, he’s thinking that he’s going to be Sergeant Lambert’s Gofer for the next two years.

After pinning the pages to the bulletin board, Mike returns to his room and informs Sergeant Lambert, “Sergeant Lambert, the detail roster is posted as requested.”

“Posted—as requested!” Sergeant Lambert exclaims to Mike’s chagrin.

“When we’re alone we don’t need to be so formal—you can drop the ‘as requested’ nonsense, you could’ve just said ‘it’s posted’ or simply ‘job’s done’,” explained Sergeant Lambert in a scolding tone.

Then with a change in tone and with a smile, Sergeant Lambert held his hand to Mike and said earnestly, “When we’re alone it’s on first name basis—I’m Carl—Carl Lambert.”

“And I’m Mike—Mike Troff,” says Mike taking his hand.

“Great Mike, its eighteen hundred—how bout some chow—I’m starved,” announced Sergeant Lambert in jolly tone.

“Yeah, me too, Carl,” said Mike and they walked out of the room.

After leaving the service line in the mess hall, Mike and Sergeant Lambert look for an empty table on the NCO and Officers side of the dining area.

Spotting a table with two Sergeants and two empty places, Sergeant Lambert heads for the table with Mike following.

When they arrive, Sergeant Lambert asked the other Staff Sergeant, “Dave, may we sit here?”

“Sure Carl, be my guest,” the Staff Sergeant replied in a cordial manner.

When Mike sees who the Buck Sergeant is, he smiles and sits down with the Buck Sergeant to his right; Sergeant Lambert sits down to the left of the other Staff Sergeant with Mike on his right.

As Mike sat down, he delightedly says to the Buck Sergeant, “Nice to see you Greg—you’ll never guess what my job is—I’m Assistant Platoon Sergeant—how about that!”

“Me too,” Greg heartily returns with delight with the two Staff Sergeants smiling.

When Mike addressed the Buck Sergeant as Greg, both Staff Sergeants were quite surprised.

Then Sergeant Lambert remarked, “Since some of us know some of us, but not everyone, I think it’s time for some introductions. I’ll start with myself and go around the table. I’m Staff Sergeant Carl Lambert—Fourth Platoon Sergeant,” he looks to Mike, a queue to introduce himself.

“I’m Sergeant Mike Troff—Assistant Fourth Platoon Sergeant.”

“I’m Sergeant Greg Gressett—Assistant Third Platoon Sergeant,” announced Greg, being it was his turn.

Finally, the other Staff Sergeant introduced himself, “I’m Staff Sergeant Dave McCaffrey—Third Platoon Sergeant.”

Then Greg looks to the two Staff Sergeants and asks, “So—what’s on the agenda for tomorrow?”

“Issue weapons and field gear, a couple of new BDU’s followed by a trip to the infirmary to get your vaccinations up to date and finally orientation at fourteen hundred—after that its details until it time to move out into the field,” answered Staff Sergeant Lambert.

“You mentioned Details—what kind of Details?” Inquires Mike with a grimace.

“Well, for the two of you,” Sergeant Lambert looking at Mike and Greg, “it’s CQ (Charge of Quarters) from seventeen hundred to o-eight-hundred the next morning—weekends included. And on weekends, it’s for the entire day. You’ll be rotating with the other E5’s in the company—I think there’s fourteen E5’s in the company—right Dave,” looking over to Staff Sergeant McCaffrey, he nods with, “Right.”

“So, that means, you’re on CQ about every other week or so.”

“Yeah, and you’ll also be in charge of work Details, and of course Platoon assignments and such,” added Staff Sergeant McCaffrey with a smug grin.

Mike and Greg sat there quietly eating with melancholy expressions while Staff Sergeants McCaffrey and Lambert talked.

Finally it was time to leave; Sergeant Lambert looked at Mike and asked, “You ready to head back?”

Mike nods and drinks the last of his milk, and then he and Sergeant Lambert get up, grab their trays and head for the disposal window, Greg and Staff Sergeant McCaffrey follow shortly there after.

The next day, as Staff Sergeant Lambert had previously said, both Platoons received their M20 rifles/weapons and their field gear, which didn't including a chameleon outfit, this was puzzling to Mike; one would think this piece of hi-tech gear would be indispensable for keeping one alive in a combat zone, let alone the advantage it offered.

Mike asked Sergeant Lambert, that evening, why the chameleon suit wasn't issued; Sergeant Lambert replied, "Because, if that suit got into the hands of those insurgents can you imagine the damage they could inflict, let alone the terror they could unleash upon the Indian people. No—it's best that this piece of hi-tech gear remained out of this war, we got plenty of other hi-tech stuff to use."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, besides we have the M20 and the EXR Helicopters," Mike remarked, and then added, "Anyway, —the suit has a bad flaw."

"It does!" Exclaimed Sergeant Lambert looking surprised, "What kind of flaw?"

"I thought everyone by now had been informed," inferred Mike, "a friend of mine discovered it when we were in basic training. The suit has a spatial displacement problem, and if you know what to look for, you can spot someone hiding in the field wearing one."

Sergeant Lambert again looked surprised and just stood there and looked at Mike stone-faced.

The next day, both Platoons were issued three sets of BDU's and another pair of combat boots, jungle style.

That afternoon they were marched over to the infirmary for checkups and to update their medical records; Mike needed several new shots and two boosters.

Mike returned to his room that evening with two very sore arms; the new shots were administered with those damn guns.

Friday morning, the mess hall was decorated in black ribbons, and in the rear of the dining room a table stood next to the wall covered with a black cloth.

On the table, and leaning against the wall, was four portraits of men in class A' uniform; two large white candles burned, one on each side of the portraits.

That morning there was a solemn uneasy quietness in the dining room where usually it's quite noisy with everyone talking; this morning everyone

talked in hushed or whispered speech.

Mike softly asked, “What’s going on?”

“We and the British were call in to aid two Platoons of the Indian Infantry at Gharpad trying to repulse a large group of insurgents trying to take the town. We lost four men—the four in those pictures over there,” said Sergeant Lambert pointing to the black cloth covered table with the four portraits.

Mike choked, remembering his roommate in Turkey, the funeral procession at the airport, and how close he came to being killed himself with Captain Wherley in the EXR Helicopter.

Then Mike softly mumbled, “Four guys heading home in a box,” and then he asked, “How old were they?”

Sergeant Lambert shrugged his shoulders with, “Don’t know—maybe nineteen or twenty.”

Mike then softly said, “I hope I make it to twenty-one—it would be a real hummer to go home in a box at twenty.”

“Yeah—that it would—that it would,” sighed Sergeant Lambert.

That morning in formation two men from each Platoon was chosen as part of the funeral detail with the other sixteen men coming from Bravo and Charlie Companies.

As Assistant Platoon Sergeant, Mike lucked out and wasn’t included, but Greg was, he was one of the four Sergeants in charge of six pallbearers; a Lieutenant was in charge of the entire group.

With the weekend coming up and the first week in November behind them, Mike was thinking of Thanksgiving and the upcoming holidays.

With Thanksgiving being an American Holiday, would it even be celebrated here?

Then he wondered about Christmas, would that be celebrated, with India being a Hindu country an all?

New Years should at least be celebrated, because there’s nothing religious about the beginning of a new year; at least Mike didn’t think there was.

That evening Mike asked Sergeant Lambert, “Say Carl—does the Company celebrate Thanksgiving and what about leaves for the Christmas Holidays?”

“Well—kinda’,” Sergeant Lambert acknowledged with a grimace.

“What ya’ mean, kinda’?”

“Just that its handled as a normal duty day—you don’t get time off like back in the States,” explains Sergeant Lambert, “since its only observed in

America no one here has it off, so we don't either. The mess hall will have a special noon meal and there will be a party in the Company Day Room on the main floor. As for Christmas, the Christians in India do celebrate and so do we, so you'll get the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off, but forget about any leaves—there won't be any granted—remember, we're in a war. Of course, those who have extra duty will be expected to work—does that answer your questions?"

Looking forlorn, Mike nods with, "Yeah, sure does."

On Monday morning of the following week, the duty roster was posted on the Company bulletin board and Mike was on the list for the first time; he's been assigned CQ duty for Wednesday evening starting at five o'clock in the Company Orderly Room.

Sergeant Lambert was also on the list for the following Tuesday for Battalion NCO.

So when Mike returned to his room, Monday afternoon, he inform Sergeant Lambert that he's got CQ duty Wednesday evening, and then he remarked, "I see you've got extra duty too," and then asked, "What's Battalion NCO?"

"That's similar to CQ, that you'll perform on Wednesday night, but for the entire Battalion," Sergeant Lambert explained, then he added, "except I'll be at Battalion Headquarters all night, so like you I'll have the next day off."

"So, if you have the next day off, who's in charge of that Thursday's formations?" Mike asked matter-of-factly.

"The Assistant Platoon Sergeant, which is you," Sergeant Lambert emphatically replied; "While I'm gone you're next in command."

With some uncertainty, Mike mouth, "Ok..."

On Wednesday after returning with two Squads of men from a cleanup detail at the Airbase, Mike went to the Orderly Room to report for CQ duty.

There, a Staff Sergeant in charge of S3 took Mike over to a desk with a computer terminal and told him to take a seat at the computer terminal, he then explained his duties, "You're to log each hour and what transpired, latrine breaks excluded, but all other breaks must be recorded into the computer terminal, including meals. You're also required to make rounds every two hours throughout the Company, checking each Platoon Quarters for anything out of order, et cetera."

Then the Staff Sergeant went over to a cabinet, unlocked it, removed two small devices, and returned to Mike.

He handed Mike the larger of the two and said to him, “This is a data logger. There are logging stations throughout the Company area which you must visit every two hours. There’s a bar-coded marker at each of these stations which you must scan with that device,” pointing to the device that Mike is holding, “just hold the front of the device to the bar-coded marker and push the big green button. When you get back, put the device into that cradle and push the blue button on it and all the data inside will be downloaded from the device into the terminal—that’s all there’s to it—really simple. Just be sure to make your rounds on time or you’ll be in major trouble—you got that?”

Mike nodded looking a bit worried.

Then the Staff Sergeant went over and got a small gray ring binder and handed it to Mike telling him, “Inside you’ll find a map to the Company area and the location of all the logging stations. You’ll also find a description of your duties, emergency numbers, and the number of the Officer of the Day, and NCO at Battalion HQ. One last bit of information, the Officer of the Day and NCO may drop in unannounced—don’t get caught nappin’ or screwing off—any questions?”

Mike looked at him with a worried expression and shook his head with, “No Sergeant, I’m sure I’ll find everything I need to know in here,” tapping the gray book, and before the Staff Sergeant left, he handed Mike the other device he got from the cabinet with, “Here’s a cell phone in-case you need assistance while out on your rounds—don’t push the red button unless it a dire life or death emergency—you got that?”

Mike nodded again with, “Got it Sergeant.”

“Great—have a peaceful night and I’ll see you in the morning,” said the Staff Sergeant with a smile, and then he turned and walked out of the office.

An hour later all the office workers had left except three men, a Corporal and two Privates to assist Mike; one was a duty driver, his vehicle was parked outside.

That night, Mike made the required rounds every two hours, hitting all of the logging stations and touring all of the Platoon Quarters in the company.

When morning came he was very tired, and after getting relieved, he headed to the mess hall for breakfast.

After returning from the mess hall, Mike goes up the stairs to the third floor and enters the hallway, which is being swept; there he met Staff Sergeant Lambert coming out of the Fourth Platoon Quarters.

Staff Sergeant Lambert grinning asked, “How was your first CQ duty—no problems I hope?”

“Naaa—was a quiet night,” Mike replied with a yawn.

“Well—you better catch some shut-eye, because tomorrow you have a small mission,” announced Sergeant Lambert.

“Yeah, *yawn*--I hope they don’t inspect our room, I don’t wanta’ get in trouble,” Mike remarked, too tired for the mission information to sink in.

“You’re fine, if anyone inspects the room just be sure you’ve properly taken care of your old uniform and boots—you’ve been marked down as having worked all night,” Sergeant Lambert informing; Mike gives a small nod and goes into the room.

CHAPTER 14 – Mission to Ladapur.

At the Thursday's formation, Staff Sergeant Lambert announced, "We've been assigned a support mission to Ladapur, which is about hundred and fifty miles southwest of here. After you're dismissed, Third and Fourth Squad along with Sergeant Troff are to report to the briefing room. Lieutenant Erickson will brief you. A-ATEN-N-N-TION—DISMISSED."

Mike, along with the Third and Fourth Squad, reentered the building and proceeded to the briefing room.

Upon entering the briefing room, Lieutenant Erickson was up front by a wall mounted map, and when he saw the men enter he told them, while pointing to the rows of chairs in front of him, "Take a seat men—we've a few things to go over," Mike and the two Squads settled into the first two rows of chairs.

After everyone had been seated, the Lieutenant walks over to a small lectern sitting on the back of a table and starts the briefing, "On Monday a group of about fifty insurgents entered the small farming village of Ladapur and began terrorizing the villagers. Yesterday, two Platoons from the 118th Indian Infantry Battalion, arriving by highway from the north and south, retook the village and freed the people. The Insurgent's fled into the forest to the south, from where they came, and a small group of Insurgent's fled to a wooded area to the northeast. After leaving a Squad in the village to protect the villagers, the rest of the Indian Infantry pursued the larger group of Insurgents that headed south. Our job is to flush out the small group of about ten to fifteen Insurgents that fled to the northeast and make sure they don't return. Men, this should be an easy mop-up mission, and you should be back sometime tonight or tomorrow morning—Sergeant Troff will be in charge of the detail. You'll go by Helicopter to the LZ just outside of the Village. One EXR Helicopter will provide cover and some air support. You're to report at ten-hundred hours in the assembly area with field gear and weapons—any questions?"

"Yeah," Mike spoke up with raised hand, and the Lieutenant pointed to him.

"Sir—if we happen to run into trouble, how long will it be before help arrives?" Asked Mike.

"You'll have to make do for about twelve hours at most and six hours at the least," Lieutenant Erickson replied, "this is a simple clean-up mission, there shouldn't be any problems—the Indian Infantry that was dispatched

will have it well under control—I see no issues here.”

“Why so long—Ladapur is only hundred-fifty miles from here?” Mike questioned out of curiosity.

“Because,” began Lieutenant Erickson, who’s now beginning to sound irritable, “the two transport Helicopters that’s taking you to Ladapur will remain there until you complete your mission, which should take no more than four to six hours after which you’ll return. To send additional men will require two or more Helicopters to be sent from New Delhi and to use ground transportation will take at least four to six hours—anything else?” Mike shook head with a worried sigh.

“Let’s not mess this up Sergeant,” warned Lieutenant Erickson, sternly looking at Mike.

“No Sir,” Mike smartly replied.

With no questions, Lieutenant Erickson said, “Ok then, that’s all I have—good hunting and good luck—you’re dismissed.”

Everyone got up and filed out of the room and headed to their quarters to get ready.

Thirty minutes later, the two Squads were standing outside of the Quartermaster to obtain their M20’s and ammo.

At ten-o’clock, Mike and his men were at the assembly area and boarding two trucks to take them to the airfield.

When they arrived at the airfield, two Air Transport Helicopters were waiting with their engines running; an EXR Helicopter was sitting off to one side with its engines running and blades spinning.

As soon as the trucks came to a halt, Mike jumped down and commanded, “Everyone off the trucks—on the double.”

As the men dismounted, Mike ordered pointing at the first Helicopter, “Third Squad to that Helicopter,” and then pointing to the second Helicopter he ordered, “Fourth Squad to that Helicopter—now move it—move it—move it, we don’t have all day.”

After the two Squads were on the Helicopters, Mike gets in the first Helicopter and tells the Pilot, “Ok—everyone is loaded—let’s go.”

The three Helicopters lifted off to the standard five-foot hover and waited for a departure clearance from the control tower; once clearance was given, they quickly gained altitude and departed to the west, on their way to Ladapur.

A short while later they approached a small village of jumbled dwellings with fields to the east, north, west, a large forest to the south and a large wooded area surrounded by fields to the northeast.

Black smoke was billowing up from several areas in the village and people were hurrying away across a field to the north and west.

They made one high level pass over the village and didn't see any activity.

Mike commented to the Pilot, as they approached the LZ (Landing Zone), "Something doesn't feel right—where's the Squad of Indian Soldiers that's supposed to be in the village, and why did all the people leave?"

The Pilot nods and calls the EXR Helicopter to do a recon of the village and nearby area.

Both transport Helicopters circled the LZ until the EXR Helicopter reports that it's clear.

The EXR Helicopter circled the village and the nearby forest for any signs of the Insurgents; after a few minutes and several passes, the EXR Helicopter reported everything appears quiet with no sign of any Insurgents anywhere.

The two transport Helicopters were about to set-down when Mike tapped the Pilot on his shoulder and said, "Wait—reconfirm the information about no sign of Insurgents—he should see some signs of them to the north-east where they were reported to have fled."

The Pilot radioed to the EXR Pilot to reconfirm his findings.

The EXR Helicopter made several more passes and reported back that he couldn't find any signs of the Insurgents.

Mike looking very worried said, "I don't like this—if there isn't any Insurgents around, then why did the villagers leave?"

The Pilot shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I don't know—that's your job to find out—my orders are to deliver you and your men to the designated place and wait until you complete your mission, and then return with you and your men to the base—and that's what I'm going to do, Sergeant," so, he and the other Helicopter approach the LZ for a landing and set down.

As soon as the Helicopter was on the ground, Mike ordered his men to disembark and take a defensive posture.

With both Squads hunch down with weapons pointed towards the village and the wooded area to the northeast everything seemed peaceful with no signs of aggression, maybe the EXR Pilot was right and the Insurgents gave up and dispersed into the countryside.

As Mike pondered on why the Villagers had left, both Pilots powered down their Helicopters, because they weren't going anywhere until Mike

and his men had completed their mission; then the EXR Helicopter came in and landed nearby and also powered down.

Now the more Mike pondered on the fact that the Villagers had left, the more he felt that something isn't right, so Mike decided to check the village out.

Then suddenly as Mike was about to head to the village with a Squad of men a single shot was heard and the Pilot of the second Transport Helicopter fell with a bullet hole in his chest.

Mike hollered, "HIT THE DIRT—WE HAVE INCOMING FIRE!"

And everyone was on the ground including the remaining two Pilots.

As Mike lay there scanning the nearby buildings for activity, he mumbled to himself, "No Insurgents huh—looks like they overran the Squad of Indian Soldiers and are now back inside the village, that's why the Villagers left—simple cleanup mission—yeah right."

Then Mike looks over to where the Pilot lay and loudly ordered, "SOMEONE CHECK ON THE DOWNED PILOT," a soldier nearest to the Pilot crawled over and checked for signs of life, finding none he shouts back shaking his head, "HE'S GONE SERGEANT."

Mike sighed and said to himself, "First blood—been here no more than ten minutes and already lost one man, and now we're short a Pilot—now how are we to get both Squads back?"

Mike motions to Corporal Masoner to bring the hand-held (Two-way radio.) to him; the Corporal gets the radio from one of the men and crawls over to Mike.

As Mike waits for the radio, he looks at the EXR Pilot officer, and wonders, is he now in command of this mission, or me?

Then Mike looks back at the village and sees a flicker of light coming from the roof of one of the nearby buildings, as if something has reflected Sunlight, so he brings up his M20, points the weapon at the source, and looks into the scope.

There, Mike sees a Sniper looking in his viewfinder and zeroing in on someone in Mike's group.

Mike hollers, "Get down low—there's a Sniper on a rooftop and he's getting ready to fire," so with fear in everyone's heart they get as close to the ground as they possibly could.

Then a shot is heard followed by, "I'm hit!"

Mike quickly looks around hoping it wasn't one of the Pilots, and it wasn't; it was one of the men from the fourth Squad, he was holding his bleeding left thigh.

Mike ordered, “Someone help him,” feeling relieved that no one was killed this time.

Then Mike ordered, “Someone bring me a RPG round.”

As the RPG round was being brought, Mike reacquired the Sniper lying on the roof and he was trying to zero in for another shot, Mike knew he must take him out or they won’t be going back alive.

Mike knew he couldn’t take him out with regular rifle-fire, but maybe he could keep him from targeting anymore of his men.

So, Mike quickly zeros his M20 on the Sniper and fires a round before the Sniper has time to zero in on another man; the round lands very close to the Sniper and he lowers his weapon and tries to crawl away.

Mike mumbles, “No you don’t,” and fires again.

This time the round lands very close to where the Sniper is trying to crawl, he abruptly stops and starts crawling in a different direction, but Mike lands another round in that location causing the Sniper to change direction again.

Finally with all avenues blocked with rifle-fire, the Sniper lays there with his arms over his head knowing he’s finished, so he begin praying.

Mike huffily remarks, “Paybacks are hell, aren’t they—now you know how it feels ass-hole.”

Then the RPG round arrived as well as the radio and the EXR Pilot.

Mike mounts the RPG round on his M20 and zero’s in on the rooftop and sees the Sniper is still there hunkered down, but since it has been awhile since any rounds have landed, he decides to give it another try and escape; Mike sees him starting to crawl away and launches the RPG, a couple of seconds later a large explosion and there’s nothing left but a huge hole in the roof where the Sniper once was.

With the immediate threat eliminated, Mike takes the Radio and contacts Lieutenant Erickson at Headquarters.

Mike fills the Lieutenant in about the ambush and losing the Transport Pilot and also tells him, “To overcome a Squad of trained Infantry there had to have been a quite good size group of Insurgents. Either the group that fled to the northeast was larger than reported, or a sizeable group that headed south had circled back. So when can we expect a replacement Pilot or another Transport Helicopter to get us back?”

There was a pause from the Lieutenant’s end, so Mike asks, “Sir—you still there? When can we expect a replacement Pilot or a ride back?”

“Sergeant,” said Lieutenant Erickson very slowly with a sigh, “not soon enough for all of you I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean, Sir?” Asked Mike with a foreboding feeling.

“I’ve got some good and some bad news,” said Lieutenant Erickson, “first, the good news. There’s a Company of the 28th Indian Infantry on their way to help. Now for the bad news, it’s going to be about eight to ten hours before they’ll arrive—they’re coming from New Delhi by ground transportation. If that isn’t bad enough, two Iranian Destroyers and an Aircraft Carrier are position off the coast in the Arabian Sea and several more are on their way—they basically caught us napping. We have two Aircraft Carriers and several Destroyers on the way, but it’ll be a couple of days before they arrive. The Indian Air Force and our Fighter Squadrons are on full alert. This has all the signs of a major invasion by Pakistan from the west with Iranian support, so the entire Indian Military is on full alert.”

“What are you suggesting, Sir?” Mike reluctantly asked.

“In plain English, and considering the enormity of what’s happening—the brass considers, with the exception of the EXR Helicopter and Pilot—that you and your men are expendable. So, with that in mind, the mission has been aborted and you’re to load one Squad into the one usable Transport Helicopter and return with EXR Helicopter to the base—unless you can come up with a better plan,” replied Lieutenant Erickson very firmly.

Mike was shocked and outraged by what he was told, and then he had an idea—a plan, so he said on the radio, “You said I could use a better plan, —well, --I think I have an idea of how to get us all back—it might involve breaking some Army Regs.”

There was a pause on the Radio, and then Lieutenant Erickson said, “In time of war, any plan that involves saving lives and equipment trumps regulations—good luck, over....”

Mike handed the Radio back to Corporal Masoner and asks the EXR Pilot sitting there listening, “Well Sir—I guess you’re in charge and you heard what I was told by HQ—so, what’s your orders?”

“You told them you had some plan—let’s hear it,” said Captain Deniger.

“Well Sir—I can fly a Helicopter—I have a Civilian Pilots license,” Mike announced as he began to explain his plan, “and my plan is simply to fly the other Transport Helicopter.”

Captain Deniger gazing intently at Mike and didn’t respond, he just looked at Mike, then Mike asked, “Well Sir—can I fly the Transport Helicopter or not?”

Captain Deniger slack-jawed, slowly shook his head, then Mike asked, “Why not, I said I can fly?”

“Because you’ll be breaking at least two Army Regs,” replied Captain Deniger with a shake of his head.

“You heard the Radio, in wartime, saving lives and equipment trumps Army Regs,” Mike reminding him.

Then Captain Deniger intently argued, “I’m not going to be responsible for you killing eight men and yourself, plus destroying an aircraft,” firmly shaking his head again.

“I’m not going to kill anyone or crash the Helicopter—I can fly that thing—trust me,” Mike pleading.

“No—you’re not going to risk the lives and equipment and that’s my final decision—the subject is closed,” Captain Deniger firmly telling Mike.

“So, it’s Ok for me and eight men to be killed and that Helicopter captured or destroyed,” argued Mike intently while pointing to the Transport Helicopter, “is that what you want?”

With an unblinking expression, Captain Deniger softly replied, “No...”

Then Mike softly asked, “Then, I can fly the Transport Helicopter?”

Captain Deniger looked at Mike and once again shook his head, and then with a sigh he said, “No—I’ll fly the Transport Helicopter and we’ll destroy the EXR Helicopter so the other side can’t get their hands on it.”

Mike looked at him with disbelief and quipped, “Destroy the EXR Helicopter.”

Captain Deniger nods, and then Mike takes a deep breath and announces, “Great decision—now we won’t have any protection.”

For a few moments, Captain Deniger looked back stoned-faced, and then he slowly said, “We’ll just have to hope we’re not fired upon—we have no choice if we all want to get out of here.”

Now it was Mike’s turn to look stone-faced, then he abruptly said, “Great decision—I guess you forgot about the MIG’s that’ll be coming from the enemy carrier in the Arabian Sea.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” Captain Deniger hotly returned.

“Believe me Sir, I’ll put money on it that there will be a group of MIGs arriving within an hour or so,” Mike declared with a fixed expression.

Straight-faced, Captain Deniger sat there looking somber, and after several minutes, he slowly said, in a low tone, “Then we die—you heard what the Radio said—we’re expendable.”

“That’s just great,” Mike angrily barked, “I’ll fly the EXR Helicopter—what’s the worst that can happen? I’ll crash like you think or I’ll get shot

down, either way the Helicopter gets destroyed and the men are returned safe—problem solved, you win.”

“But you’re also killed in the process—problem not solved,” retorted Captain Deniger.

“Yes, that’s true, but if you remember, you just got done telling me we’re all expendable, and if it means that my men get back alive, then my death won’t have been for nothing,” Mike solemnly moralizes with a somber expression.

After Captain Deniger mouthed, “Ok,” Mike got the Radio and said, “HQ--this is the ‘Cleanup Crew’--over.”

“HQ here and we were about to give you a call—there’s three—repeat three Iranian Fighters headed in your direction and they should be there in about fifteen minutes—we advise that you get out of there now--do you copy?”

“We copy and we’re all coming back—over.”

Then Mike handed the Radio back to Corporal Masoner and telling him, “Get your Squad loaded and tell Corporal Asbury to do the same with his Squad.”

As Corporal Masoner heads to his Squad, Captain Deniger looked at Mike and said in circumspect, “I still don’t like your idea, I still think we should destroy the EXR Helicopter and we all head back.”

“Didn’t you just hear the Radio—there’s enemy Fighters on the way and if they catch us, then we’re all dead. I’ll use the EXR Helicopter and lead them away. They’ll be more interested in me than in you,” Mike defiantly arguing, and then he smiled and nonchalantly remarked, “I don’t plan on getting killed—I know how to fly the EXR2—I’ve had training,” and he gets up and starts walking to the EXR2 with Captain Deniger sitting there astounded, and then he gets up and hurries after him.

When Captain Deniger catches up to Mike, he earnestly asks, “Just when and where did you receive this training?”

“That’s not important right now,” Mike tells him as they arrive at the EXR2, what’s important is for you to get our men back to the base in one piece. I’ll linger here a bit to draw their attention while you head for home. Be sure to stay low so you’ll appear as ground clutter on their radars—now please Sir, you better get going, we don’t have much time.”

Captain Deniger nods and says composedly, “You won’t stand a chance against Jet Fighters—an EXR2 is no match for Jet Fighters.”

“Where did you hear that,” Mike responds with a smile as he puts the helmet on and climbs into the EXR2 Helicopter; Captain Deniger looking

reproachful shakes his head and walks to the now loaded Transport Helicopters.

As Mike starts up his Helicopter and brings it up to operational status, the other two Helicopters lift off and head back towards base.

Next, Mike takes inventory of the weapons systems to see what he has to fight with, and to his dismay, out of the sixteen missiles four are PL9's.

"That's all I need four useless missiles—when are they going to learn," Mike grumbles, and then he lifts off and flies toward the wooded area north-east of the village, where he figures to use the landscape to his advantage, just as Larry Clark taught him several years ago.

When the Insurgents saw the three Helicopters leave, they came out of the village and stood in the open area and began cheering and firing their weapons into the air in victory.

Mike watched in disgust on his infrared display as the Insurgents celebrated, and was shocked at the number of Insurgents he saw, because there were far more than what he was told at the briefing.

Mike having witnessed enough got a targeting solution on the group on his computer, selected a PL9 missile, quickly popped up from behind the trees, and fired; several seconds later a huge white explosion.

When the choking white chemical cloud had settled, there were several Insurgents lying about either dead from the shrapnel from the missile or unconscious from the blast, but most were coughing and stumbling around, trying to comprehend what had happened, and all of them were covered in white powder; Mike began laughing, and with cynicism he said, "Enjoy—you bastards deserved that."

Then suddenly, Mike's friend or foe warning system sounded and Mike looks at his radar indicator and sees three blips coming from the southwest.

Mike drops back down behind the trees and gets ready to do battle; remembering what Larry Clark taught him about being patient, cunning, and stealthy, Mike waits with firm resolve knowing this time it's for real and his life is on the line.

Mike watched the three hostile blips on his radar indicator move steadily closer, and when the blips reached the zero point on the radar indicator the three MIG Fighter Jets fly over, without even noticing he was hiding there, and head after the other two Helicopters.

Mike comes out from his hiding place from behind the trees and heads out after the jet Fighters; approaching them from their six o'clock blind

spot.

Getting a targeting solution on the leading MIG in the vee formation, Mike gets a lock on him and fires his first missile; the two outside wingmen, quickly bank and turn.

The lead MIG is slower to react and with brilliant fireball becomes Mike's first kill.

Mike's radar indicator now shows two blips circling around to come in behind him; Mike responds with, "Don't you try and pull that old maneuver on me," and pulls the EXR2 into a hover and swings around to face the one on his right, like he did in the encounter with the three F30's back in California several years ago.

Then a smile graced his face when he chose a PL9 missile after remembering the warning Larry Clark gave him about using PL9's on Jet Fighters and remarks, "There's no nice runway down there--let's see how well you can and handle a permanent flare-out and a dead-stick landing."

After getting a solution for a point of intercept some distance in front of the MIG, Mike launches the PL9 Missile, and then said, "Let's see just how good a Fighter Pilot you really are."

Then Mike swings his EXR2 around, and as Mike gets a firing solution for the third MIG, three more blips appeared coming from the northwest.

With sweat now starting to show on Mike's brow, he locks on to the third MIG and fires another missile.

Swinging his EXR2 to a direction so he can view his two launches, the PL9 missile detonates into a large white cloud; the MIG is moving to fast to avoid the cloud and flies into it.

Mike smiles when he sees the MIG's engines puff out, then the MIG starts to fly erratically and descends.

Then a bright flash to Mike's right; he looks over and a big fireball is all that's left of the final MIG.

Now Mike turns his attention to the three in-coming Fighters and prepares to do battle; Mike gets a targeting solution on the lead jet, then he hears on his radio, "Hey Nutcracker—did you see that—that EXR Helicopter just took out those three MIG's!"

"Yeah, and now we don't have anything to shoot at—bummer," a second voice remarked, "I wonder who he is—boy is he good."

"Watch yourselves—he might think we're also hostile," said the first voice.

“Well, Sandman, he’s an EXR2, so he’s on our side,” remarked a third voice.

“Until we can determine his intentions—stay out of his firing range,” said the first voice.

“Sandman, I think you should try and make contact with him, before things get out of hand—I’m not keen on killing a friendly,” the second voice suggesting.

“The way he fight’s I think it’s us that should worry—personally, I don’t want to be killed by a friendly,” announced the third voice.

Mike relaxed at the sound of the English chatter on his radio, and watches the three blips start to circle beyond his targeting range, so Mike canceled his target solution, because they sounded like three American F30’s.

Suddenly, on Mike’s radio is the voice of the first F30 Pilot, “Friend, this is Sandman and we were sent to intercept some MIG’s from an Iranian carrier. We’re from the our UN Coalition Airbase at New Delhi—who are you?”

Mike hesitates not sure of how to responded.

Not knowing what Captain Deniger’s call sign is, he can’t use it to reply, so what to do?

As time is running out, Sandman is waiting for an answer; now Mike must answer quickly or they might think he’s hostile and will try to engage, and Mike defiantly doesn’t want to kill American Pilots.

Mike now has no choice but to use his call sign, so he key’s the mike and responds, “I’m Pegasus and I don’t want to fight you—thanks for coming and now I must go and finish escorting my charges back to our airbase before they run into more trouble,” Mike releases the key, turns his EXR2 towards the direction that the Transport Helicopters are flying, and starts after them.

Then Sandman’s voice comes back over the radio, “Congratulation, nice piece of work—you just scored three kills—that’s more than any of us. And by the way, using a PL9 as a weapon will certainly interest the Brass—catch ya’ another time—bye now,” and the radio went silent.

When Mike heard that, he looked back and saw the MIG was sitting with its nose on ground, wings crumpled and billowing black smoke, and remarks to himself, “Guess he wasn’t such a hotshot Pilot after all.”

Then Mike remembered the rest of the message and mumbled, “Looks like another tale in the making—the legend keeps growing, shit--,” shakes his head and starts to worry again.

CHAPTER 15 – BUSTED!

After Mike and the Transport Helicopters had landed at the Indian Air Force Base, Mike with helmet in hand walks over to where the two Helicopter Pilots were standing.

The two Squads of Infantry were forming up a short distance from where two trucks were parked.

Handing the helmet to Captain Deniger, Mike softly asked in an anxious tone, “You didn’t hear any of that radio stuff—did you?”

Captain Deniger looked at Mike for a few quiet seconds and then a smile broke out and he replied, “Pegasus, my call sign is Griffin--now I know why you were intent on flying the EXR2--thanks to you we’re all back safe and sound, including the EXR2,” turning his head to look at the Helicopter sitting a short distance away; upon hearing Captain Deniger’s reply, Mike drops his head knowing the cat is now out of the bag.

After shaking both Pilots hands, Mike walks over to where the two Squads have formed up and calls them to attention, and then he orders them onto the waiting trucks.

Arriving back at the Company they unload and go into the building.

When Mike enters his room, Staff Sergeant Lambert was at his laptop computer, and when he sees Mike enter the room he asks, “Well, how did it go—we lose anyone?”

“Went like shit, and yeah we lost one of the Pilots,” Mike replies, “we were lucky to get out of there with our lives.”

“How so?” Asked Sergeant Lambert looking quizzical.

“The Intel was wrong—there were a lot more insurgents than we were told—plus, Iran had moved a fleet of warships and a Aircraft Carrier into the Arabian and launched several MIG Fighters,” explained Mike, “we were lucky to escape with our lives. I’m sure you’re going to hear more about it very soon.”

“Sounds like they’re trying to establish a forward base,” Sergeant Lambert, speculating, “with the Naval Fleet in the Arabian just off the Indian Coast, I think they may be preparing for a big operation and I wouldn’t be too surprised if we don’t return to that village with a full Company.”

Mike looked at him with a somber expression, and then he removed his field gear and returned it to the large drawer of his wall locker.

By the time Mike had gotten cleaned up and into a clean uniform it was time for the final formation of the day and chow afterwards.

That night Mike dreamt of the Sniper and the subsequent confrontation in the air, and awoke when Sandman's words 'nice piece of work—you just scored three kills—that's way more than we, and by the way, using a PL9 as a weapon, will certainly interest the Brass' replayed in his dream.

That next morning, at the o-eight-hundred formation, First Sergeant McFarly announced, "The only announcement I have is for Sergeant Troff to report to the Orderly Room right after this formation.

A-ATEN-N-N-TION—Platoon Sergeant's take charge of your Platoons for the day's details," and then he makes an about face and goes into the building.

Then Staff Sergeant Lambert points to Mike and orders, "You heard him, Sergeant Troff, --report to the Orderly Room," then after Mike falls out and hurries to the building, Staff Sergeant Lambert marches the Platoon out of the Company Area.

Mike enters the Orderly Room and stops at the head clerk and tells him, "I was ordered to report here."

The Clerk looks up and sees 'Troff' on Mike's nametag and tells him, Sergeant Troff you're to report to Battalion G2 for a debriefing on yesterday's mission—please have a seat, your ride will be here shortly to take you to Battalion HQ," pointing to one of several chairs next to the wall.

Mike gives a nod and goes over and sits down.

Ten minutes later, a PFC walks in and asks the Clerk, "I'm to pick up a Sergeant Troff and take him to Battalion HQ," the Clerk points to Mike.

The PFC turns and approaches Mike and says, "Sergeant—lets go," Mike gets up and follows the PFC to a waiting vehicle parked outside.

Mike gets in on the passenger side and the PFC slides into the drivers seat, and after they both buckle-up, the PFC starts the vehicle, backs out of the parking spot and drives out of the Company area.

Arriving at the Battalion complex the PFC pulls up in front the main Headquarters Building, stops and announces, "Here you be Sergeant, Battalion HQ," Mike gives a nod, unbuckles and as he gets out he says, "Thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome—no problem, and have a good day."

"I will—thank you," Mike replies with another nod and heads up the sidewalk to the entrance of the Headquarters Building.

After entering the Headquarters Building, Mike sees a large sign on the opposite wall of the large corridor he's in and walks up to it.

Now Mike hasn't a clue as to where G2 is, and this large sign has a list of offices and room numbers along with a small arrow showing which direction it's located.

Reading down the list, Mike locates the G2 Office to his right, so he heads in that direction until he arrives at an open door with a sign overhead reading, 'G2 Intelligence and Security'.

Mike enters and walks up to the first desk and tells the Sp5 sitting there looking through some papers, "I'm Sergeant Troff, and I was told to report here for a debriefing."

The Sp5 looks up and says, "Just a minute Sergeant."

Picking up the telephone, he softly talks for several seconds, and then with a nod he returns the handset to its cradle, gets up, and orders, "follow me Sergeant," using his finger, he motions for Mike to follow.

Mike follows him to a door near the back of the room; pausing, the Sp5 opens the door and motions for Mike to enter.

Mike enters the room and the door is closed behind him.

In front of him, are two tables, the most distant is a long table with three Officers sitting there, one is a Lieutenant Colonel and two Majors; one sitting on each side of him.

A short distance in front of the three Officers is a small table with one chair.

Mike smartly walks up to the small table, comes to attention next to the chair and salutes the Lieutenant Colonel with, "Sergeant Mike Troff reporting as ordered, Sir."

The Lieutenant Colonel returns the salute with, "Please take a seat Sergeant," Mike sits down in the chair.

Mike sits there nervous and feeling a bit warm, as this reminds him of the debriefing he witnessed in Powder Horn almost two years ago.

The Lieutenant Colonel pages through a stack of documents and periodically speaks to one or both Majors.

Finally, folding his hand on top of the documents, he looks at Mike and says, "In your own words describe the events from the time you departed the airbase to the time you returned."

So, Mike began to relate the events as he remembered them; of course leaving out the parts where he flew the EXR2 Helicopter, launched a PL9 Missile into the cheering Insurgents, and downed the three MIG jets.

Mike ended with, “That’s it Sir—everything that I can remember.”

The Lieutenant Colonel starts speaking softly to the two Majors, first speaking to one and then to the other.

Then the Lieutenant Colonel starts paging through the documents in front of him, finally settling on a particular page, he places it in front of him and looks at Mike and asks, “Are you sure that’s the way you remember it happening and you haven’t omitted anything?”

The Lieutenant Colonel’s voice now taking on the tone of an Inquisitor and Mike starts to sweat.

The Lieutenant Colonel looks for another page and after finding it, he lays it on top of the others, quietly reads several passages, and then turns to the Major on his left and whispers something to him.

When the Lieutenant Colonel finishes, he turns to Mike and asks, “Sergeant, are you sure you haven’t forgotten any detail?”

“No Sir,” Mike replied.

“Tell me Sergeant, did you lose any men and were anyone wounded?” Asked the Lieutenant Colonel in a most suggestive way.

Mike hesitated, and then nodded with a flushed face.

The Lieutenant Colonel then asked, “Well Sergeant, how many men did you lose and how many men were wounded?”

“We lost one man and one man was shot in the left thigh,” Mike nervously replied, and then quickly added, “But he didn’t die.”

“The man who was killed, he was one of those under your command?” The Lieutenant Colonel asked.

Mike shakes his head with, “No Sir.”

“Then if he wasn’t under your command, then under whose command?” The Lieutenant Colonel asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Mike, and then he added, “He was one of the Helicopter Transport Pilots and a Officer.”

“I see,” The Lieutenant Colonel remarked, “then answer me this, if there are three Helicopters and now only two Pilots, how do you explain how all three Helicopters returned safely to the airbase, Sergeant.”

Mike is now really nervous and sweating profusely.

Feeling that the Lieutenant Colonel knows everything, Mike decides to come clean and tell everything—well, almost everything, “I flew the EXR2 back and Griffin—I mean Captain Deniger flew the other Transport Helicopter back.”

“I see—you flew the EXR2—is that correct?” Asked the Lieutenant Colonel in an implicating tone; Mike nods with, “Yes Sir.”

“Since you’re not an Officer, I assume you’re not a Military Pilot, is that a correct assessment, Sergeant?”

Asked The Lieutenant Colonel in an accusing voice; Mike nods again, and then he piped up with, “I have a Commercial Civilian Helicopter License.”

“I see,” remarked the Lieutenant Colonel with a somber expression, “for your information a FAA Pilots License isn’t valid in Indian airspace unless it’s for a US airline landing at one of their major airports.”

Then as the Lieutenant Colonel gathers up his documents, Mike is very worried he’ll be arrested for flying the EXR2 back to the airbase.

When the Lieutenant Colonel had finished reordering the stack of documents, he looks up and smiles with, “We’re finished for now and if we have anymore questions or concerns we’ll get a hold of you—a piece of advice—the next time, don’t exclude or embellish any details during a debriefing—this isn’t a legal proceeding and no one is going to get into trouble for telling the truth—you’re excuse Sergeant Troff.”

With a big weight lifted, Mike feeling much better gets up and salutes the Lieutenant Colonel, after the Lieutenant Colonel returns the salute, Mike makes an about face, and marches out of the room.

On Monday, Corporals Asbury and Masoner were called, during the o-eight-hundred formation, to report to the Orderly Room; it seems they also were to go to Battalion Headquarters for a debriefing.

On Wednesday morning, Mike was in charge of the entire Platoon, because Staff Sergeant Lambert had Battalion NCO duty Tuesday night, so he’s off and in the sack sleeping.

The first thing Mike did Wednesday morning, even before breakfast, was to go to the Orderly Room to get the Platoon’s duty assignment for the day.

At o-seven-thirty, Mike made a quick inspection of his Platoons quarters to be sure everything was in order, and it was.

At o-eight-hundred, feeling a little nervous, Mike called, “FALL OUT,” and the entire platoon hurried out to the assembly area and formed up.

After he call Attention, he conducted the roll-call of the Platoon; shortly after making an about face and standing in front of the Platoon, the First Sergeant requested from each Platoon Sergeant, the roll-count, Mike reported the Platoon was all present or accounted for with a salute.

With no morning announcements, the Platoons were returned to the command of the Platoon Sergeants for daily duty assignments.

For the rest of that day, Mike commanded Fourth Platoon on their assigned details until he dismissed them in the afternoon.

Mike was back in his room by seven, and when he walked in, Staff Sergeant Lambert was at his laptop computer.

Staff Sergeant Lambert looks up with a grin and inquires, “Well—did you have any problem commanding an entire Platoon?”

Mike looks at him, and for a moment he didn’t say a word, then he responds, “Nope—did like you and everything went fine—was a bit apprehensive in the beginning, but after awhile that disappeared.”

“Well, you better get used to it—you’ll be takin’ charge more often from now on.”

Mike looking expressionless just looked back, and then got a magazine and lay down on his bunk.

The next morning in formation, his name was call again to report to the Orderly Room; when Mike heard his name being called the first thing entering his mind was the debriefing he had last Friday.

After stopping at the Company Clerk’s desk, Mike says, “I was told to report here.”

The Sp5 nods with, “The CO wants to see you—follow me Sergeant, and gets up; Mike follows him to a door with a sign that reads, “COMMANDING OFFICER,” opens the door and motions for Mike to enter.

Mike enters and smartly walks up to Captain Demaray’s desk, comes to attention with a salute, and smartly says, “Sergeant Troff reporting as ordered—Sir.”

A Master Sergeant stood to one side as Captain Demaray looks up from the document he’s reading and returns the salute with, “At ease Sergeant,” Mike takes an at ease posture with hands clasp behind his back.

Captain Demaray with a serious expression said, “Sergeant Troff I’m looking at several serious charges filed against you. I’m afraid this is out my hand’s for any corrective action on my part, so you’re to accompany the Master Sergeant to Battalion Headquarters for punitive administrative action.”

Mike stood there shaken and in disbelief as the Master Sergeant walks over and stands by his side; Mike now has a foreboding feeling he’s going to jail.

Then Captain Demaray asked, “Any questions, Sergeant?”

“What are the charges, Sir?” Mike asked looking very worried.

“I’m not at liberty to tell you at this time, but to say they’re very serious,” replied Captain Demaray, “when you get to Battalion Headquarters they will inform you of the charges and your options. Any more questions?”

Mike shook his head with, “No Sir.”

Then Captain Demaray said, “That’s all—you’re dismissed.”

Mike came to attention with a salute and after Captain Demaray returned the salute, Mike made an about face and both he and the Master Sergeant marched out of the office.

Arriving at Battalion Headquarters, Mike and the Master Sergeant entered the building and instead of going into G2, they continued down the hall and entered through an open door with a sign above which read, ‘GI PERSONNEL AND ADMINISTRATION’.

After entering this large room with men and women working in cubicles, they continue on to another door where the Master Sergeant opens the door and motions for Mike to enter.

After Mike enters the office the Master Sergeant comes in, and then they walk up to a desk with a Major sitting behind reading a document from an open file folder.

They both come to attention and the Master Sergeant salutes with, “Sir, I’ve brought Sergeant Michael Troff as requested.”

After the Major returns the salute he says, “Thank you Sergeant and you both may stand at ease,” the Master Sergeant goes over to one side and stands at ease and Mike takes an at ease poster.

The Major in a very firm official tone begins informing Mike, “The reason you were brought here is because of recent actions on your part. I have before me documents describing several serious infractions and they are one, under section twelve-subsection six—operation of a military aircraft without approved authorization. Two, under section twelve-subsection eight—operation of a military aircraft in controlled military airspace without prior approved authorization. Three, under section twelve-subsection nine—entry into controlled military airspace without prior approved authorization. Do you understand the charges?”

Mike nods feeling devastated and looking aghast, replies, “Yes Sir.”

“Very well,” the Major responds, “Before we continue, I want to make it clear that this is an administrative hearing and not a court marshal, and I’m limited by the uniform code of military justice as to what kinds of punishment I can impose at this level. If you feel that you’ve been incorrectly accused, then you may request a general court marshal and you will be allowed counsel. I wouldn’t advise you go that route, because to do so, would

expose yourself to a greater range and severity of punishment—do you understand?”

Appalled, Mike responds with, “Yes Sir,” with a nod.

“Fine,” said the Major, and then he continued, “Before we proceed, is there anything you don’t understand?”

“No Sir,” Mike replied.

Then the Major cracked a slight smile and said, “Let’s take these infractions one-by-one. The first one, operation of a military aircraft without approved authorization. I see here in this debriefing document—in your own words gave verbal account of flying an EXR2 Helicopter back to the Indian Air Force Base. To fly a military aircraft requires a warrant or commission ranking or with direct supervision by such a person of that rank. From what I understand by reading this document you’re an enlisted non-commissioned officer and was flying solo—is that correct?”

“Yes Sir,” Mike replied, and then added, “but I had authorization, Sir.”

The Major looked surprised and abruptly asked, “Who gave you the authorization?”

“My Platoon Leader Lieutenant Erickson and the EXR2 Pilot Captain Deniger,” replied Mike; the Major pages through his documents and when he can’t find any reference to the authorization he picks up his phone and tells the person on the other end, “Get a hold of Lieutenant Erickson in Delta Company and tell him to immediately call me—also get a hold of Captain Deniger and also have him call me—bye,” then he hangs up.

After writing some notes on a yellow legal-pad, the Major says, “While we wait for those return calls, we’ll continue on with the second infraction--operation of a military aircraft in controlled military airspace without prior approved authorization. Only fully authorized Pilots may operate a military aircraft in controlled military airspace—unless of course you also had approved authorization for that as well. This authorization must come from G3—did you have G3 authorization?”

Mike shook his head on that one and the Major made another entry on his legal pad, and then he said, “Let’s continue on to the third and last infraction, entry into controlled military airspace without prior approved authorization, which is flying into a military airport. I assume you obtained permission from the control tower to enter the airspace around the airport and to land—is that correct?”

Mike nods, and then the Major asked, “But--did you inform them of your military flight status, which you lacked?”

Mike shook his head on that question, and then the Major wrote some more on his legal-pad, then the phone rang; the Major picks up the handset and begins to converse with the other party, “I have an NCO here who is telling me that you gave him authorization to operate a military aircraft.”

The party on the other end speaks, and then the Major says into the phone, “Sergeant Troff.”

The Major nods and says, “Yes, he says that you authorized him to fly the EXR2 Helicopter.”

The other party speaks again followed by the Major nodding and writing on his legal-pad and ending with, “Yes—I see, and thank you Lieutenant, and have a nice day—bye now,” the Major hangs up the phone.

Mike is beginning to feel sick as this is rapidly turning into a very bad day.

The phone rings the second time, the Major picks up the handset and says, “This is Major Boettcher at Battalion G1.”

The party on the other end speaks, and then Major Boettcher speaks, “Ah’ Captain Deniger, I’m trying to clear up some discrepancies in some information that you might have some knowledge of—it concerns a statement made by Sergeant Troff of being authorized by you to operate a EXR2 Helicopter—I would appreciate any information you can give me on the matter.”

The party on the other end spoke for a period of time, while the Major wrote on his legal pad and flipping to a new page when the previous one was filled.

When the party was finished speaking, the Major finished with, “Thank you—what you told me was of great help—have a good day Captain Deniger—good-bye,” he returns the handset to the cradle and looks at Mike with a stern expression; Mike now feels all is lost and he’s really screwed this time.

Major Boettcher now referring to his legal pad began summarizing what he learned, “From what Lieutenant Erickson told me, he didn’t authorize you to fly military aircraft, let alone the EXR2 Helicopter.”

“But Sir,” Mike pipes up, “he told me in time of war, saving lives and equipment trumps regulations...” Mike catches himself incriminating himself.

“Ah’ you knew you were breaking Army Regulations,” declared Major Boettcher.

“But Lieutenant Erickson told me in time of war it was sometimes Ok,” Mike earnestly argued in his defense.

The Major shakes his head and counters with, “We’re not at war—not officially, that is. Sergeant, we’re part of a UN Coalition to assist India—they’re the one at war, along with several other countries at the moment. Until the Congress of the United States declares war—we’re not at war Sergeant. Yes, I realize lives are being lost, but until war is officially declared we must operate within the guidelines set forth in the Regulations otherwise there would be chaos.”

As Mike languishes the Major sighs and adds, “If this would’ve been in actual wartime, you would be receiving a medal instead answering for infractions. Now what Captain Deniger tells me—you basically talked him into letting you fly the EXR2 back to the airbase. He was very reluctant and had told you twice that the EXR2 was to be destroyed, but you kept insisting until he gave in, that kind of attitude borders on insubordination, which I’m taking into consideration in determining any action against you, and Captain Deniger, will also have to answer for his actions. And for what it’s worth, neither Captain Deniger nor Lieutenant Erickson had the authority to allow you to fly any military aircraft solo—that authority must come from Brigade, Group or Washington. The best they could’ve done is to allow supervised flight—are we clear on those points?”

Mike weakly nods with, “Yes Sir.”

As Mike stands there languishing his fate, the Major goes over his latest notes and the documents before him, after about ten minutes, he gets up and walks over to his bookcase and gets a book and returns to his desk.

After reading several paragraphs, he looks up and firmly announced in a firm official tone, “I’ve considered all of the evidence and have arrived at a decision, and that decision is, I find you, Sergeant Michael Anthony Troff, in violation of Army Statutes section twelve-subsection six, subsection eight, and subsection nine, and having authority under Section 815 Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, to impose a reduction in pay and rank to that of an E4 and lose leave and pass privileges for sixty days, and this is to become effective immediately. Maybe after this you’ll learn to obey Army Regulations and respect your superior officers and NCOs. Corporal Troff—if you want to fly military aircraft, then apply for a flight school and go through the proper training—heaven knows we need Pilots. One more thing, be sure to change your insignia—you’re now out of uniform—that’s all I have—you’re dismissed.”

Mike comes to attention and salutes, after the Major returns the salute, Mike makes an about face and with the Master Sergeant marches out of the office.

CHAPTER 16 -- From Bad to Worst!

When Mike returned, he removed his Sergeant's insignia and put his Corporal insignia back on.

When Staff Sergeant Lambert returned, he firmly said, "You know—you can no longer remain in this room."

"Yeah—I know," Mike muttered in a dejected tone, then he asked, "So, when do I leave and where do I go?"

"You can start by unloading your wall-lockers and packing your duffle bag," replied Staff Sergeant Lambert, "tomorrow you'll be told where you're reassigned, until then, enjoy your last few hours of privacy."

That night, Mike had a restless night with all kinds of nightmarish dreams.

Awaking the next morning, Mike now stood in line, second, next to Corporal Asbury who was the leader of the Fourth Squad; the Fourth Squad now has more men then the other three, and at breakfast, Mike now had to sit with the rest of the men in the mess hall.

After breakfast, Mike was now in command of a mop and broom and assigned to help clean the hallway to the fire cabinet, which was halfway down the hall, as well as the stairwell to the next floor.

At the o-eight-hundred formation, Mike was ordered to report to the Orderly Room.

In the Orderly Room the head clerk with a smile on his face said, "Corporal Troff—you've been reassigned to the Second Platoon. Sergeant Baumgart is your new Platoon Sergeant," nodding to the Staff Sergeant waiting nearby.

Staff Sergeant Baumgart steps up to Mike and orders, "Come with me Corporal and we'll get you situated," and so, Mike follows Staff Sergeant Baumgart out of the Orderly Room and to the stairway; they go up the stairs to the first floor.

Turning to the right, Staff Sergeant Baumgart leads Mike into the Second Platoon's quarters and informs him, "I'm assigning you to the Second Squad, where we have an opening for a Squad Leader, the previous one rotated out last week."

Entering the Platoon Quarters, they enter the first cubical on the right with Staff Sergeant Baumgart remarking, "Here you are—use the rest of the

day to get setup and get acquainted with your new Squad,” Mike nods and Staff Sergeant Baumgart walks out.

The only open wall locker and bunk is at the front of the cubical where the previous Squad Leader had vacated; so, Mike spent the next few hours transferring his bedding and bags from the room on the second floor to his new home.

By eleven-thirty, Mike had his new bunk made and was well into setting up his wall locker, when in walked a couple of PFC’s.

One of them, who looked to be fifteen with very light auburn hair, extends his hand and introduces himself, “Hi—I’m Brian Coles,” Mike takes his hand and they shake.

Then Brian remarks, before Mike has a chance to introduce himself, “I hope you’re not the bossy kind like the last guy,” he gets an elbow to the ribs from his friend and responds with, “Owww’—that hurts!”

His friend quickly offers his hand to Mike introducing himself, “And I’m Ken Fessler, senior PFC and was temporary Squad Leader—and who might you be?”

“I’m Mike Troff—I’m not that bossy—at least I try not to be,” Mike tells them with a slight grin, and then he asks, “Brian—just how old are you?”

“I’m nineteen,” Brian replied affronted.

“You sure don’t look it,” remarked Mike with a skeptical expression.

“Yeah—that’s what I keep hearing.”

Then two more Privates entered the cubical, these were single stripe E2’s, and when they saw Mike they stopped and joined Brian and Ken.

One of the Privates said, “Hi—I’m Finn Green—who are you?”

“Mike—Mike Troff,” Mike replied, “I’m your new Squad Leader.”

The other Private, looking bug-eyed, declared in astonishment, “You’re not the guy who just got busted for flying a Helicopter back to the airbase.”

“Yeah—that’s me,” confirms Mike, thinking that it didn’t take long to make the rounds, and then asks, “How did you find out—I thought that’s confidential information?”

“Are you kidding?” Declared Finn, “It’s all over the Company—heard about it at breakfast.”

“Can you really fly a Helicopter?” Asked Orville Griggs the other Private E2, and before Mike could answer, Finn interrupts with, “Not any Helicopter—he flew an EXR2 Helicopter.”

Then three Corporals entered Mike’s cubical; one of them said, “Couldn’t help overhearing Finn here announce you were the one who got

busted for flying a Helicopter—is that true—you can fly?”

Mike nods with, “Yeah—somewhat,” trying to play down the role, and then he asks, “What are your names? Since you already know who I am.”

“Howard Bramstad, First Squad Leader,” replies the one who just asked if Mike could fly.

“I’m Tom Carter, Third Squad Leader,” announced the next one.

“Rich Richter here, I’m the Fourth Squad Leader,” said the last Corporal introducing himself.

Mike begins shaking their hands when someone yelled, from the Platoon’s door, “MESS HALL’S OPEN.”

“Say Mike, why don’t you join your fellow Squad Leaders for lunch,” invited Corporal Howard.

“Yeah--sure--why not,” replied Mike and he closes his wall locker, and then follows the three Squad Leaders out of the cubical and together they walk to the mess hall.

Jeff Troff walks into his room, in the Officers Quarters on Ramstein NATO Airbase in Germany, from his latest flight transporting Soldiers back from Incirlik NATO Airbase in Turkey.

Second Lieutenant Gene Hoelzer, also a Pilot, remarked, “Man—you look pathetic—probably shouldn’t ask how the flight went.”

Jeff just looked at him with blood-shot-eyes and groaned, and then he muttered, “It was really boring—I joined the Air Force and went to the Academy so I could fly B80 Bombers not L2212’s. If I wanted to do that, I wouldn’t have joined up, I would’ve gotten a job with the airlines--glad my family didn’t hear me complain, I’d never hear the end of it.”

“You’ve got a college degree out of it, so what are you complaining for,” Gene reminding him, “besides, with all the experience you’re getting, when your commitment is up you can easily get into the airlines--they’re always looking for seasoned Pilots.”

“I know, I know, but I still want to fly B80 Bombers--that’s what I trained for,” Jeff bemoans.

“Just be patient, your time will come, eventually,” Gene sympathizing, and then he asked, “Have you heard any news about your transfer request to the 450th Strategic Bombardment Group?”

Jeff shakes his head and remarks, “I assumed when they reactivated the 450th and placed it under the 86th Air Wing I’d get assigned to them—an-other mis-assumption.”

“If you haven’t forgotten, you must be at least a Captain to fly Co-Pilot on a B80—they don’t let second Louie’s fly as Co-Pilots unless it’s a training flight,” Gene reminding Jeff.

“Yeah, I’m well aware of that, but flying training missions is a hell of a lot better then shuttling GI’s to and from combat zones,” argued Jeff.

Gene just smiled, and then changing the subject he asked, “Did your leave come through? Got mine this morning.”

“Don’t know haven’t check lately—been to busy flying troop transport missions I didn’t have time,” replied Jeff.

“Well, you better check—you need to get your ducks in-a-row if you plan on going home for the Christmas Holidays,” Advises Gene; Jeff nods with, “Yeah—I’ll go and check on my way to chow before HQ closes.”

So Jeff changes into his regular duty uniform and heads to the 86th Wing HQ, and when he gets there, he asks a Senior Airman sitting at a desk entering data into a computer terminal, “I applied for a two week Holiday leave—can you tell me if it has been approved?”

“Just a minute, Sir,” said the Senior Airman as he types on the computer; a few seconds later the screen refreshes and the Senior Airman nods with, “Yes Sir, it’s been approved.”

“Thank-you, Airman” said Jeff with a big grin.

Then the 86th Wing Commander comes out of his office and sees Jeff, he raises his hand and hails him, “Lieutenant Troff, just the man I was looking for—I need a few minutes of your time in my office.”

Jeff wondering what’s up heads over to him as the Colonel drops a vanilla file on one of the desks with a Staff Sergeant who’s arranging papers in another file; as Jeff approaches, the Colonel is softly speaking to the Staff Sergeant.

After Jeff got to where the Colonel was speaking to the Staff Sergeant, the Colonel told him, as they walked to the office, “This way Lieutenant and I presume you’re satisfied with your flight assignment, because what you’re doing is very important to our mission and to the defense of our friends and allies.”

After hearing those words, Jeff nods agonizing with a forced smile and despondently gives the Colonel the answer he wants to hear, “Yes Sir—very satisfied.”

The Colonel opens the door and with his hand he motions for Jeff to enter with, “After you Lieutenant,” Jeff enters the office followed by the Colonel.

After closing the door, the Colonel walks over to his desk, goes behind and sits down in his large chair; Jeff walks up to the desk and stands at ease waiting for whatever the bad news is, because whenever something like this occurs its always bad news.

The Colonel looks at Jeff and tells him, “Lieutenant please relax and have a seat,” motioning with his hand to a nearby chair, “you’re acting like this is an inquisition—we’re just two gentlemen having a friendly chat.”

The Colonel smiles as Jeff sits down and tries to relax, thinking the Colonel is setting him up for some really bad news.

The Colonel leans back in his large chair and starts a cordial conversation, “You’ve been with us for over six months now and I would like to know more about my Pilot Officers, so tell me a little about yourself—your family.”

“Well Sir--,” Jeff began somewhat confused by this sudden interest in his personal life, “there isn’t much to tell you—my Father is an Air Force full Colonel, he went to the Academy like me and they live in Victorville California. My older Brother, Brian, is a Marine Pilot and is an instructor at Miramar, is married and has a baby daughter. My younger Brother, Mike, was drafted into the Army and is in India—he likes computers and motorcycles, and that’s about it.”

“I see--,” said the Colonel, “but, you haven’t told me anything about yourself—are you seeing anyone—someone from back home?”

“No,” Jeff replied shaking his head, “there’s no one at the moment. I like aircraft and like flying them—someday I would like to design them—that’s one of the reasons why I went to the Academy, the other reason is to learn to fly the large bombers.”

The Colonel nods his head, sits up, and moves closer to his desk, there he opens a file folder that’s lying in front of him and looks at Jeff and says,

“What I have here is the original orders for the 450th Bombardment Group. There have been some changes to the original orders—it now seems as if they’re going to bomb targets in Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan along with their original missions to Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria and Egypt. The new orders include dropping special munitions on special targets in Iran and Pakistan. The four Squadrons have each been reassigned to two of the eight primary countries. The 720th has Syria and Egypt, the 721st has Libya and Algeria, the 722nd has Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the 723rd, has Iran and Pakistan. As you can guess from its assignment, the 723rd’s missions involve deploying the special munitions.”

Jeff blinking with shocked abhorrence sputtered, “You’re not suggesting using nukes—are you?”

“Why—you got a problem with that Lieutenant Troff?” Barked the Wing Commander glaring at Jeff; Jeff looking somber replied, “Yeah—just a little bit.”

The Colonel glaring, harshly tells him, “You will carryout any orders given to you by command—if that includes dropping nuclear munitions, you will carry out those orders—is that clear, Lieutenant Troff?”

Jeff looking faint swallows hard and nods with, “Yes Sir—quite clear.”

“Good,” the Wing Commander responds sharply, and then in a modified tone he added, “The special munitions I was referring to isn’t nuclear, it’s a extremely large ground penetrating ordnance, in fact, it’s so large at around 40,000 pounds and 30 feet long that neither the B2 or the B80 can carry one, so the Air Force is sending us five B52I’s, they can carry one of those mothers and fly above thirty thousand feet.”

“Why are you telling me this,” interrupted Jeff, “I’m assigned to the 76th Airlift Squadron, not the 450th Strategic Bombardment Group.”

“Because, I’m reassigning you to the 450th Strategic Bombardment Group and you’re to be assigned to the 723rd Bombardment Squadron—isn’t that what you requested?” The Wing Commander asked, holding up a document; Jeff nods delighted with a big smile.

The Colonel lays the document down on his desk and announces, “This is to become effective right after the Holidays—I’m also assigning you to one of those B52I’s as a Co-Pilot and you’re to begin training, starting right after you get settled into your new quarters at the 723rd. That’s why I had you flying the massive L2212’s, they’re somewhat close to how the B52I will handle.”

Then he open’s his top front desk drawer and removes a small blue box, and then gets up and walks over to where Jeff is sitting.

Jeff shockingly expresses his displeasure, “Sir, that bomber is antiquated--it’s over a hundred years old!”

When Jeff sees him walk over to him he also gets up, and as the Colonel approaches, he sympathetically says, “Yeah, I know—but it’s the only aircraft in our arsenal that can carry a MOP (Massive Ordinance Penetrator) and its been updated,” and then the Colonel hands him the small box and says, “Since Second Lieutenant’s aren’t allowed to Co-Pilot a heavy bomber, like the B52I, well—here’s your silver bars Captain Troff and congratulations,” extending his hand.

Jeff takes the box with his left hand and shakes hands with his right, and then asks, “What happened to First Lieutenant Sir?”

“Let’s just say in your case it was bypassed and I guess that about does it, Captain, --you’re dismissed.”

Jeff walks out of the office and heads back to his quarters where he replaces his gold bars with the silver double ones; he’s now a Captain.

When Gene enters his room and sees Jeff wearing the double silver bars, he asks, “When did you get the promotion?”

“About an hour ago,” replied Jeff, “and I’m not going to be flying anymore troop transport missions—after the Holidays I’m been reassigned to 450th Strategic Bombardment Group, and start training in a B52 no less—can you believe that?”

Gene looks shocked and shakes his head with, “No—my God, B52’s are old outdated bombers—have they gone bonkers?”

“According to our Wing Commander, we’re going to start flying bombing missions to Iran and Pakistan,” Jeff explains, “and according to what I’ve been told, they’re the only plane we have that can carry MOP’s.”

Gene looks up shaking his head in disbelief, and Jeff with disappointment written on his face said, “The whole point in joining the Air Force and going to the Academy was to fly the B80 and now I’m back flying a turn-of-the-century aircraft which is antiquated. I’ve had enough bad news for one day—let’s go to the mess hall and have some dinner—I’m starved.”

Gene sighs and together they head over to the mess hall.

First Lieutenant Brian Troff enters Lieutenant Colonel Sam Whalen’s office, the Commander of the training center, and comes to attention in front of his desk and with a salute he smartly says, “Sir, Lieutenant Brian Troff reporting as ordered.”

Lieutenant Colonel Whalen returns the salute and tells Brian, “At ease Lieutenant,” Brian assumes an at ease stance.

Lieutenant Colonel Whalen leans back in his chair and with his left hand on the armrest he begins to pontificate, “Lieutenant, the Middle East is starting to really heat up. Spain, Italy and France are on full alert for an invasion from North Africa, and Israel is being attacked from all three sides and is in need of our help, and that is where you come in. Yes I know--you were there a while back and your flying skills there landed you a job here, training our best fliers, but now you’re skills are needed once again, so with that being said, you’ve been ordered to take command of a Squadron on the same aircraft carrier that you were on once before--the Nimitz.”

This announcement brought back bad memories of losing Dale on that fateful day, and then Brian asked, “A First Lieutenant as a Squadron Commander is lowering the bar a bit— isn’t it?”

Lieutenant Colonel Whalen leans forward and opens his upper left desk drawer and withdraws a small brown box and places it on the front of his desk replying, “That’s why you’re not a First Lieutenant anymore, Captain Troff.”

Brian reaches down and takes the box, opens it, and inside is set of silver double bars; the insignia of a Captain.

Now looking a bit worried, Brian asked, “When do I leave Sir?”

“The Nimitz and her escort vessels will be docking at Norfolk within the week,” replies Lieutenant Colonel Whalen, “you’re to report for duty by Wednesday of next week.”

“Next week!” Exclaimed Brian, “I was hoping to spend the Holidays with my Wife and child at my parents home in Victorville.”

“Sorry Captain—you have your orders,” Lieutenant Colonel Whalen solemnly tells him, “by time the Holidays are over our Country might be at war along with the rest of our NATO Allies, so make whatever arrangements you need for your Wife and child.”

“Yes Sir—is that all, Sir?” Asked Brian.

“Yes Captain—that’s all I have—you’re dismissed.”

Brian comes to attention salutes, and when Lieutenant Colonel Whalen returns the salute, Brian makes an about-face and marches out of the office feeling very disheartened about being away from Family this Christmas.

When Brian got home, he informed his Wife about the bad news, and then he called his Parents to inform them that he wouldn’t be home this Christmas.

Maria, his Mother, answered the phone, “Hello, Troff residence—Missis Troff speaking.”

“Hi Mom—this is Brian and I have some bad news to tell you.”

“Bad news—,” gasped Maria holding her breath.

“Yeah Mom,” said Brian, “I’ve been reassigned to the carrier Nimitz and will be leaving immediately—I’m to report next Wednesday. Looks like my easy duty is over and I’m heading back to the Middle East. I guess things in the World are going from bad to worse—sorry Mom.”

There was a long pause and Brian was about to speak when she said, “I’ll tell Henry that you’ve been reassigned and won’t be home this Christmas. Be sure to email us often and be careful dear--remember what happened to your friend the last time you were over there.”

“Yes Mom I will, and wish everyone a Merry Christmas for me, and before I forget, Brenda and little Mary will be flying out there to be with you for Christmas, so don’t forget to pick her up at the airport.”

“I won’t forget,” replied Maria, and then she said sighing, “I guess Jeff will be the only one coming home—Mike emailed us to say he won’t be able make it either—he’s in India. I guess we’ll try our best to make this bad situation somewhat tolerable—I hope it don’t get any worse.”

“I’ve gotta’ go, Brenda’s got dinner ready and I’ve got lot’s of packing to do,” Brian tells her, “oh, and by the way, tell Dad that I’ve been promoted to Captain and been put in command of a Fighter Squadron on the Nimitz, I guess that’s the only good news out of this—good-bye Mom—I’ll email you as soon as I get settled in.”

“Good-bye dear, and I’ll be waiting to hear from you,” returned Maria, and as she closed her cell phone and put it into her pocket a tear runs down her cheek.

The following Wednesday, Brian boarded the Nimitz, which was docked at the Naval port at Norfolk and reported to the ship’s Captain; subsequently, he was put in charge of the Green Squadron of young Pilots just out of flight school.

Those bad memories returned and Brian went to his Group Commander and requested several experienced Pilots to augment the greenhorns and the request was granted, but only for one, Joel Reese, Mike’s high school classmate.

With a worried expression, Brian returned to his quarters remembering his last experience aboard the Nimitz; Brian bemoans, “How can this get any worse?”

By the end of the week, the Nimitz and its escort vessels set sail for the Mediterranean.

By Thanksgiving, the Nimitz and it escort were in the Mediterranean and Brian was conducting combat sorties in the defense of the carrier fleet.

Anchoring off the coast of Israel, the Nimitz is now ready to provide air support for Israel.

On the second day, the Nimitz comes under fire from Egyptian fighters; all four Squadrons, Red, Blue, Green and Yellow Squadrons are launched in defense of the fleet.

Remembering the tactics used by Syrians the last time, Brian prepared himself and his Squadron for the worst, and then a Squadron of B80’s flew over and headed for Egypt’s airfields, the Egyptian fighters broke off and

took off to intercept the bombers, then the Red and Blue Squadrons flew after them in hot pursuit; Brian's Green Squadron, along with the Yellow Squadron were ordered back to the Nimitz to defend the fleet.

For the next few weeks right up to Christmas, Brian didn't associate with his Pilots; and because of what he went through with Dale, he kept his relationship with his men strictly on a business level.

Two days before his leave was to start, Jeff went to the passenger terminal to make arrangements for his flight back to the States and to Victorville.

On the way out of the terminal three B52I's made a landing and taxied over to one of the hangars.

Jeff stood at one of the large windows watching as the massive aircraft taxied to a stop, their huge wings drooping and if it wasn't for the small outrigger wheels they probably would've touched the ground.

Jeff just stared astonished; he's never seen a real B52 before.

He's seen them in books and in the movies, but never for real, this close, and now he's expected to help fly one.

After spending several minutes intently observing them, he finally turns and walks out of the terminal shaking his head in disbelief.

The day before his leave was to start, Jeff goes shopping for some new civilian clothes and later he packs his bag for the trip home for which he's looking forward too, because he hasn't seen his family since he graduated from the Air Force Academy.

Later that evening after chow, Jeff packs his large travel bag with the new civilian clothes he just bought; he'll be wearing his class 'A' uniform, because he knows his Mother wants him to wear it when he attends Christmas Eve services.

Jeff also packs a small carryon bag with his shaving kit and several small snacks, as this is going to be a long flight across the pond to the United States.

CHAPTER 17 -- Medical Emergency.

Shortly after midnight two police cars were parked on each side of a two-lane highway leading to the town of Steegen Germany.

It was a cold night in late December, the surrounding woods was incased in a deep blanket of snow; the limbs of the hardwood trees had six inches of snow still on them from the last snowstorm two days ago.

As a pair of headlights appeared in the distance, the two police cars, with four men in each car, pulled across the highway from each side, blocking the highway.

As the headlights got closer, the police car's colored warning lights were turned on; the flashing warning lights strobe the white forest with a colorful surrealistic display.

The eight men got out of the police cars and stood behind the two cars with assault weapons pointed towards the approaching headlights; two of the men were in delivery service uniforms.

As the headlights approached, it was a large delivery truck and one of the police officers boldly stepped out in front of the police car and with a flashlight shining with a red light cone, he waved it for the truck to stop.

With the hiss of air brakes the large truck pulled to a stop in front of the roadblock.

After the truck had stopped, four of the police officers approached the truck, two on each side of the truck; there were two men in the truck's cab wearing delivery service uniforms.

The police officer on driver's side, in German, ordered both men to dismount, when they hesitated, the assault weapons were pointed at them and the command was harshly repeated much louder.

Then as the two men got out a second large truck of the same type pulled up behind the first; it also had two men wearing the same delivery service uniforms.

When the two men in the first truck saw the other truck with the two men wearing their uniforms they were confused, then both assault weapons spit fire and the two men fell.

The four police officers slung their assault weapons over their shoulders and picked up the two dead men; one police officer grabbed the shoulders of one of the dead men and other one grabbed the feet and started carrying him to the back of the truck and the other two police officers did the same with the other dead man.

As the two men were being carried by four of the police officers, two of the four remaining men behind the police cars wearing the same delivery service uniforms, got into the first large truck; the remaining two police officers got into the police cars and drove them off of the highway and onto the shoulder, stopping with engines running.

After the bodies of the two men had been put in the back of the first truck, it was now free to continue and started down the road with new men inside.

As the first truck pulled forward the lights of one of the police cars lit up it's side and revealed it was painted green and blue with big letters painted on it reading, 'C&D Prepariert Tiefkühlkost'.

Now the second truck, it too, headed down the road following the first truck; after the four police officers got into the two police cars, the flashing lights were turn off and they drove off in opposite directions.

Several kilometers further down the road, the first large truck turns off onto a secondary road and disappears into the night.

And thirty minutes later, the second large green and blue truck backs up to the Lufthansa loading dock at the passenger terminal at Ramstein Air-base.

At eight o'clock on the morning he's supposed to go on leave, Jeff puts his class 'A' uniform on and grabs his two bags and walks out of his quarters and heads to the Orderly Room to sign out.

After Jeff had signed out, he goes to the pay phone in the hallway and calls for a taxi; ten minutes later a taxicab arrives and Jeff gets in telling the driver to take him to the airport passenger terminal.

Arriving at the passenger terminal, Jeff pays the cabby, gets his bags and enters the terminal concourse.

After passing through security check, and then German Customs, Jeff walks up to the Lufthansa check in, sets his large bag on the baggage platform, and hands the clerk his ticket folder.

The Clerk informs him his flight to the United States is on time and will be departing from gate two at ten o'clock; Jeff nods with a smile, and then handing his ticket folder to him the Clerk tells Jeff to wait in the passenger lounge until his flight is announced that it's ready for boarding, pointing with an upheld hand to the area with lounge chairs.

Jeff takes the ticket folder, inserts it inside his uniform coat, and cordially says, "Thank you," and with his small carry-on bag walks over to the lounge.

At nine-thirty, it was announced in several languages, including English, that the flight to the United States was now boarding, so Jeff gets up and walks over to the boarding ramp number two; Jeff gets into a long line of people and other military men waiting to be allowed to board the plane.

Slowly, Jeff moves up as two stewardesses check the tickets and allows them to continue.

When Jeff's turn came, he handed the ticket folder to one of the stewardess; she looks at it and tells him he can proceed.

Jeff walks down the boarding ramp and enters the aircraft where another stewardess looks at his ticket and informs him, he's sitting in the coach section in seat H22, in the rear section of the aircraft.

Jeff nods with a smile and heads to the rear of the aircraft looking for seat H22; since this is an L2212 locating the seat was no problem, because Jeff knows this plane very well, as he's flown a similar one many times.

After placing his carry on bag in the overhead compartment, Jeff removes his uniform coat, and after neatly folding it up, he places it next to his carry on bag in the overhead compartment, putting his cap on top; settling into his seat, he buckles his seatbelt and prepares for the very long flight back to Victorville, with a change over in New York.

The flight got airborne on schedule at ten-o'clock and headed for the Atlantic coast; they reached the coast just before eleven-o'clock and it was a smooth flight with blue skies.

The Airman sitting in the seat next to Jeff was a Captain, and from the insignia on his uniform, he was a Medic.

Before Jeff arrived, the Captain had removed his coat and cap and put them into the overhead compartment; in fact, there were quite a few Airmen in this section of the airplane.

Now with the exception of the Captain sitting next to Jeff and another officer sitting two seats forward, they were all enlisted men.

The third person sitting in Jeff's row was a Civilian Woman in a blue dress.

Jeff offers his hand to the Captain sitting next to him and introduces himself, "Hi, I'm Captain Jeff Troff."

The Captain took his hand and replied shaking hands, "I'm Captain Paul Mathre—pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"I noticed from your insignia that you're a Medic," Jeff cordially remarked.

"Actually, I'm a Doctor at the Base Hospital, and what line of work are you in?" Inquired Captain Mathre.

“I’m a Pilot and suppose to fly B80 Bombers, but I’ve been assigned to Co-Pilot an old B52 when I get back from leave,” replied Jeff.

“I see—so if you’ve haven’t been flying B80 Bombers up till now, and when you return from leave you’ll be flying B52’s, so, up till now what have you been flying?” Asked Captain Mathre.

“L2212’s, like this one we’re in now,” replied Jeff.

“I don’t understand,” said Captain Mathre, “how can you drop bombs from a passenger plane?”

Jeff giggled shaking his head, and then explained, “You don’t—I was shuttling GI’s to and from combat zones.”

“Oh I see—kind of boring—want something more important and exciting like dropping bombs, huh,” remarked Captain Mathre with a smile; Jeff nods his head, and then he turns and looks out of the window.

Captain Mathre turns to the Woman next to him and they get acquainted.

At noon, Jeff reached under his seat and got his small bag and removed the snacks he had packed; Captain Mathre had the same thoughts and he too, got several snacks from his bag.

Most of the passengers were doing the same thing.

After being refreshed, Jeff getting bored asked the flight attendant for a pillow, hoping to sleep through this boring flight.

After getting the small pillow, Jeff adjusts his seat back as far as it will go, which isn’t far, and lays the pillow against the cabin wall and the back of the seat, stuffs his head into the pillow, closes his eyes and tries to get a few hours of sleep.

Up in first-class, two Flight Attendants were serving trays of food to the passengers along with soft drinks and milk for those who wanted milk; a Flight Attendant also gave a food tray to the Pilot and Co-Pilot.

At around two in the afternoon, moaning and groaning is heard coming from the first-class section in the front of the airplane.

With some concern, Captain Mathre asked one of the Flight Attendants passing by if something is wrong and she replied, “A couple of the passengers have gotten sick, there’s a Nurse who’s looking after them and everything is under control.”

Captain Mathre nods, and then he adds, “I’m a Air Force Doctor and if I can be of any help let me know.”

“Thank you Doctor, I’ll let the Nurse know,” replied the flight Attendant, “but I’m sure the Nurse has everything under control,” then she

continued about her duties, and Captain Mathre puts his seat back and lays back and closes his eyes joining Jeff in sleep.

Up in first-class, the Nurse was attending to three passengers when several more passengers suddenly got sick; she goes and attends to them.

An hour later one of the three original passengers suddenly passes out, the passenger next to her looking faint herself, called for help; the Nurse hurries over.

Finding the passenger was unconscious, she exclaimed, “I can’t do this by myself—I need help!”

Then the Nurse stood and loudly cried out, “IS THERE A DOCTOR OR ANOTHER NURSE ON BOARD!”

Three young men stood and announced that they were Paramedics and told her they could help, and then an older man stood and announced he was a Doctor.

The Nurse was relieved and said the passenger she had been attending was unconscious; the Doctor hurries to her side while the three Paramedics start attending to the other passengers who now also have become sick.

Examining the barely conscious passenger, the Doctor sharply announces, “This Woman needs to be in a Hospital immediately—there isn’t much I can do here, but to administer Oxygen.”

“I’ll go and have the Captain release the Oxygen masks,” announced one of the Flight Attendants and quickly heads for the flight deck.

When the Flight Attendant opens the door and steps inside, she held her breath with a look of shocked surprise and put her hand to her mouth, because the Co-Pilot was slumped to one side of his seat and the Pilot didn’t look very well.

The Flight Attendant says, “Captain, there’s lots of sick passengers and the Doctor has asked if you could release the Oxygen masks.”

The Pilot nods and reaches up and flips a switch, and then he says, “I don’t feel good—I don’t know if I can continue to fly this aircraft—let alone land it at JFK. For now it’s on autopilot and we’re Ok, but eventually it’ll have to be manually flown.”

With a worried and scared look, she nods, turns and exits the Flight Deck, closing the door behind her.

When the Flight Attendant re-entered the first-class cabin all of the Oxygen masks were hanging down and the Doctor, Nurse, and the three Paramedics were putting the Oxygen masks on the sick passengers.

Then one-by-one the passengers began to fall into unconsciousness, the Doctor said to the Nurse and Paramedics, “I need to figure out what caused these people to get sick—from the initial symptoms it looks like a very virulent flu virus and if that’s the case then we’re all been exposed and will soon join them.”

Then the Doctor asks the Flight Attendant standing nearby, “Do you remember if any of the Passengers looked sick when they boarded?”

“No Doctor,” She replied, “everyone was healthy looking.”

“Well, we can assume then it isn’t an airborne virus,” concluded the Doctor, “I need access to a modern lab.”

Then the Flight Attendant that was just in crew cabin looking very scared anxiously announced, “The Captain is sick and the Co-Pilot is unconscious.”

The Doctor looked at her unblinking and abruptly said, “That does it—I can’t treat all of these people and at the same time try to figure out what these people got sick from—not without help from another Physician.”

“There’s an Air Force Doctor in the coach section,” one of the other Flight Attendants piping up.

“Yes, yes—go get him,” the Doctor commanded, “and also see if any of those passengers are sick; the Flight Attendant hurries to the coach section.

Back in the coach section all of the passengers are surprised, talking and pointing at all of the oxygen masks hanging down and wondering why.

The Airmen and the a third Air Force Officer are very confused, and look around to see what the emergency was.

The Flight Attendant surveys the cabin and sees no one in here is sick; she then hurries to where Captain Mathre is sleeping and gently shakes him.

After a few shakes and nudges, Captain Mathre opens his eyes and raises his head and asks, “Yes—what is it?”

“Doctor,” the Flight Attendant anxiously said, “we have an medical emergency up in first-class—can you please come?”

“Yes of course,” said Captain Mathre, and he unbuckles his seat belt and follows her to the front of the airplane.

When Captain Mathre entered the first-class cabin, he couldn’t believe his eyes; the Flight Attendant takes Captain Mathre to where the other Doctor is treating a passenger.

When they get there, the Flight Attendant announces to the other Doctor, “Doctor—here’s the Air Force Doctor I told you about and there’s no one sick in the coach section.”

The other Doctor straightens up and extends his hand introducing himself, “Doctor—I’m Doctor Robert Hayden and I am sure glad to see you, as I sure need your help.”

Captain Mathre takes his hand, and while shaking Doctor Hayden’s hand he says, “I’m Doctor Paul Mathre and Air Force Captain—I’m happy to help.”

Then Captain Mathre asks, “What have you diagnosed is the problem here?”

“Well--,” began Doctor Hayden, “it appears to be a very virulent flu virus, as it came on very suddenly, but without lab equipment I’m only guessing.”

Captain Mathre nods and looks around and asks, “What are you treating them with?”

“Just Oxygen and what’s in the airplanes first-aid cabinet which is basically aspirin,” replied Doctor Hayden, and then he adds, “I’m afraid we lost several—it seems after they become unconscious it’s only a matter of an hour or so before they died.”

Then Doctor Hayden looks astonished as he remembered hearing the Flight Attendant say that no one in the coach section was sick, and then he quickly looks around and notices quite a few passengers are not ill.

Scratching his head Doctor Hayden announces to Captain Mathre, “I don’t think it’s a virulent flu virus, because if it was, everybody on this airplane should be sick now, including you and me, and there are passengers in here that aren’t sick and the Flight Attendant just informed me that no one in the coach section was sick—I’m totally stumped!”

“Well, what ever sicken these passengers in here must be something they have in common,” surmised Captain Mathre; Doctor Hayden nods, and then Captain Mathre asks, “What can I do to help?”

Doctor Hayden remembers the crew cabin and says, “The Pilot and Co-Pilot are sick—go with the Flight Attendant and see what you can do for em’.”

Captain Mathre nods and follows the Flight Attendant to the flight deck.

When they entered the cockpit both Pilots were unconscious; the Co-Pilot was slumped to one side and the Pilot was slumped forward and both were on Oxygen.

The Flight Attendant held her breath and put her hand to her mouth in horror.

Captain Mathre quickly went over to the Co-Pilot, checks him and discovers he’s dead, then he goes and checks the Pilot and finds him still alive,

but barely, and mutters, “If he wasn’t on Oxygen he would be dead too.”

Captain Mathre looks at the Flight Attendant and announces, “Looks like there’s no one to fly this plane—we’re all dead unless we can find a healthy Pilot,” then Captain Mathre remembers Jeff telling him he was bored flying the L2212 and orders her, “go to the coach section and in the seat next to the one I was sitting in there’s a young Air Force Pilot who can fly this airplane—bring him here and hurry.”

The Flight Attendant turns, leaves the flight deck, and hurries to the coach section of the airplane.

Jeff is soundly sleeping, unaware of the drama unfolding in the front of the plane.

The Flight Attendant, that Captain Mathre has sent from the cockpit, hurriedly enters the coach section of the airplane; she quickly locates the Airman that Captain Mathre had told her about and fervidly tries to wake him.

After repeated shakes and nudges calling, “Sir—Sir—wake up!”

Jeff finally arouses and opens his eyes and moans, “Yeah—are we there?”

“No Sir!” The Flight Attendant exclaimed.

“Then what is it?” Inquired a dazed Jeff and turns to her.

“We need you up front—it’s an emergency,” the Flight Attendant explains.

“An emergency?” Jeff asked coming out of his stupor.

“Captain Mathre has asked for you—he’s with the Pilot in the cockpit of the airplane,” explained the Flight Attendant, “please come with me.”

Jeff looks to where the Captain was sitting and the seat is empty, but the lady on the outside seat is still there; Jeff looks at the Flight Attendant and nods with, “Yes, of course,” and he gets up and follows the Flight Attendant to the front of the airplane.

When Jeff enters the first-class section he’s shocked by all of the sick and unconscious passengers.

When Jeff entered the cockpit he’s slack-jawed at the seen; both the Pilot and Co-Pilot appeared to be dead.

Captain Mathre looking grave said, “Captain—boy I’m glad to see you, and as you can see we have a bit of a problem here.”

“Are they dead?” Asked Jeff.

“The Co-Pilot is dead--the Pilot is unconscious and may soon be,”replied Captain Mathre, “we need you to fly this airplane—you told me you

could.”

“Yes—I’m certified to fly this make and model,” Jeff confirms with a nod, “but we need to get both of these men out of the seats they’re in before I can.”

So, with the help of Captain Mathre, they remove the two Pilots from the cockpit and put them into two vacant seats reserved for Flight Attendants in their compartment, just forward of the first-class cabin.

Then Jeff slides into the Pilots seat and begins to examine the instruments and controls; seeing that everything is Ok and the airplane is on autopilot, he next examines the flight-plan documents on a clipboard.

After getting familiar with the flight-plan, Jeff turns to the Flight Attendant and tells her, “I’ve got it from here you may go about your duties,” and then pointing to the two dirty food trays, he adds, “Don’t forget those.”

She and Captain Mathre both look at the trays, and then as she stoops to retrieve them, Captain Mathre suddenly called, “Wait! Was Lunch served onboard, and why weren’t the passengers in the rear of the plane served?”

“Yes—but only the first-class passengers and the Pilot and Co-Pilot were served lunch,” replied the Flight Attendant.

“Was beverage also served?” Asked Captain Mathre, the Flight Attendant nods adding, “Yes—they were offered a soft-drink, water, or milk.”

“Did the Pilot and Co-Pilot have the same beverage?” Asked Captain Mathre.

“No,” replied the Flight Attendant, and then added, “The Pilot had a soft drink and the Co-Pilot had a small bottle of milk.”

Then Captain Mathre looking meaningful asked, “How many different kinds of food were served?”

“Just two,” replied the Flight Attendant looking quizzical.

“And, what were they?” Captain Mathre asked with a searching expression.

“One was chili with macaroni and the other was a hot ham sandwich with mashed potatoes and dressing,” replied the Flight Attendant looking puzzled.

“Did the Pilot and Co-Pilot have the same dish?” Captain Mathre further asks, but before the Flight Attendant could answer, Jeff piped up with, “What are you suggesting?”

Captain Mathre raised his hand to Jeff in response and said, “Just a minute and we’ll see,” then he turns to the Flight Attendant and repeats, “Did the Pilot and Co-Pilot have the same dish?”

The Flight Attendant nods and adds, “They both ordered the chili with macaroni dish.”

Then Captain Mathre tells her, “Put those two trays into a plastic bag and seal them up, then go and find out what the passengers who are sick had for lunch.”

The Flight Attendant nods and takes the two dirty trays and leaves the cockpit.

“You’re not suggesting that they got salmonella poisoning—are you?” Asked Jeff in a suggestive tone.

“Could be,” says Captain Mathre with a hunted expression, “or this could be something else more sinister, but we won’t know for sure until the trays are tested in a lab.”

“That’s why you had the Flight Attendant seal them in plastic bag,” surmised Jeff; Captain Mathre nods, and then adds, “I think you should notify flight control at JFK that we have a medical emergency onboard this aircraft and need several ambulances ready as well as notifying the FBI.”

“The FBI?” Asked Jeff looking surprised.

“Yeah, depending on what the lab finds—this could be an act of terrorism,” replied Captain Mathre, “either way, this is a Federal matter and they need to know—and, and you better prepare yourself for a swarm of Popperazzi and Reporters, because looks like we’ll be on the evening news from coast-to-coast.”

Jeff looked at him stoned faced, while Captain Mathre just made a sarcastic grin and gave a nod.

Jeff got on the radio and reported that they have a medical emergency onboard their aircraft and that he’s now flying the airplane.

Jeff landed the airplane at JFK Airport in New York, and when he taxied to the terminal building, there were five ambulances and several police cars parked nearby with flashing lights.

While the Paramedics from the ambulances attended to the sick passengers, Jeff secured the airplane, and then he got up and walked back to his seat; no one was allowed to disembark until the Paramedics had removed all the sick passengers.

Then the Police and FBI started to interview the two Doctors and Jeff; when they had finished, one of the FBI agents told all three men that if they need more information they would get in touch.

Then Jeff made a request, “Sir—could you keep the three of our names confidential?”

The two Doctors nodding in agreement, and then the FBI agent who's in charge replied, "As you wish, but just so that you're aware—the news media will be digging to find out what happened and who the three of you are," the three men looked at each other and nodded.

Then one of the FBI agents carrying the sealed plastic bag with the two dirty trays exited the aircraft; the Police followed them.

Jeff walked to his seat and put his uniform coat on followed by his heavy winter coat; grabbing his small carry-on-bag and his cap, he was ready to disembark; Captain Mathre did the same.

Now the heavy winter coat only displays insignia of rank on the shoulder epaulets and nothing else; the enlisted men's heavy winter coat displays their insignia on their sleeves.

Finally the passengers in the coach section were allowed to disembark; Jeff filed out of the airplane with some of the enlisted men and civilians, the two remaining officers filed out with the rest of the enlisted men and civilians.

When Jeff entered the main terminal there were lots of Popperazzi snapping their pictures and Reporters trying to grab a few passengers to interview, but Jeff just kept walking, looking for the baggage pickup terminal; he wanted to find a place to hide until his next flight takes off.

After retrieving his single bag, Jeff begins looking for a good place to lay low and holds his breath when he sees several reporters interviewing some of the enlisted Airmen; Jeff now figures the news media has learned an Air Force Officer piloted the airplane.

Jeff now knew he had to quickly find a quiet secluded place to wait, so he looked for the USO lounge.

When Jeff located the USO lounge, he hoped there was a place to change clothes.

After entering the lounge, Jeff found that it had a restroom, so he went in to change and freshen up; several other men were doing the same thing, changing into civilian clothes.

After putting on his blue jeans, a blue plaid shirt, and athletic boots, Jeff folded his uniform and put it into the large travel bag, then he went and shaved; since the last time he'd shaved was early this morning and he was beginning to display a nice five-o'clock shadow.

Jeff finds a spot on a sofa in front of a wide-screen TV and settles in until it's time for his flight to Victorville is boarding.

The TV has a national news station on and there's a break with an announcement that a Lufthansa flight from Ramstein Germany to New York JFK had a medical emergency onboard.

A reporter standing inside the terminal with people walking by in the background said, "From what I've been able to ascertain is that in the first-class section of the aircraft a noon lunch was served. Two different kinds of meals were offered and one of them was contaminated causing those passengers to become very sick and that also included both Pilots. I also learned that several of those passengers may have died. I have just discovered that the plane was flown by an Air Force Pilot who happened to be sitting back in the coach section. None of the Passengers in the coach section had been served lunch—only the first-class passengers and the Pilots got served lunch. I guess in this one instance it paid to have gone second-class. As of now, we still haven't been able to locate the Air Force Pilot or know who he is. As soon as we get any further information we'll let you know—this is Gene Breidel with NCN news," and main anchorwoman returns, and Jeff has a moment of deep concern.

At four-o'clock, Jeff gets up, and after removing his civilian winter coat, stocking cap, and gloves from his bag, he stuffs the gloves into the pockets of his coat, and then with his two bags walks to the ticket counter to check in.

After checking his bags a second time, Jeff is told his flight will be boarding at four-thirty barring any delays, and was told to wait in the boarding lounge.

Sitting in the lounge, Jeff is a bit nervous and each time he sees a news reporter or a group of Popperazzi walking by, he starts to sweat.

Finally at four thirty-five, Jeff's flight is announced for boarding; Jeff gets up, grabs his coat, the small carryon bag, and hurries to his boarding ramp.

Giving the Flight Attendant his ticket, She looks at it and Jeff is then allowed to proceed.

Entering the airplane, Jeff locates his seat, which is next to the window again; he puts his carryon bag in the overhead compartment, and then Jeff stuffs his coat in the overhead compartment next to his bag, then he sits down and buckles his seat belt.

Jeff can now relax, because he's free from all of the Popperazzi and Reporters swarming all over the terminal.

Finally at five-o'clock his aircraft is heading down the runway and soon will be airborne; as the aircraft banks and heads west, Jeff hopes this flight

doesn't have a medical emergency, because he isn't to sure if he can fly this one, as this plane isn't a L2212.

A little over three hours later, Jeff's flight arrives at Victorville and lands without incident.

After the aircraft had pulled up to the boarding ramp and stopped, Jeff gets up, puts his coat and stocking cap on, and after grabbing his small carryon bag, Jeff exits the airplane and worry-free walks down the boarding ramp and into the terminal, because there's no Popperazzi and Reporters here, he hopes, and heads over to the baggage terminal to retrieve his single bag.

With his bags, Jeff exits the terminal and hails a cab to take him home.

CHAPTER 18 -- A Lonely XMAS.

At eight o'clock a cab pulls up in front of the Troff residence and after paying the fair, Jeff walks up to the front door and rings the doorbell; a minute or so later the door opens.

Colonel Henry Troff is standing there and when he sees Jeff a smile come to his face.

Jeff responds, "Merry Christmas Dad—can I come in?"

"Yes--yes of course," replied Henry stepping aside; Jeff enters the house as a woman's voice calls, "Who's here dear?"

"It's Jeff—he's home for the Holidays," Henry loudly answering her.

A very short time later, Maria Troff enters the room and hurries to Jeff with open arms.

Jeff tells her, "Great to see you Mom and Merry Christmas," then another very young woman carrying a year-old girl enters the room.

After giving his Mother a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek, Jeff says, "It's great to be home and I missed the Family."

Then he looks at the young woman standing a short distance away, and breaking away from the warm hug, he says to the young woman, "Merry Christmas Brenda," and she replies, "Merry Christmas to you Jeff."

Jeff walks over to her and gives her a peck on the cheek, and then asks, looking at the little girl, "Is this my Niece Mary?"

Brenda looks at the little girl and nods smiling and tells her, "Say hi to your Uncle Jeff."

Jeff looks into her angelic face with sparkling blue eyes, pink cheeks with dimples, but Mary just stares at this strange man who's looking at her.

Jeff says to her, "Hi Mary—I'm Jeff—your Uncle—can you say hi to me?"

Mary remains silent and keeps staring back confused, then Jeff asks Brenda, "Did Brian come too?"

"No," Brenda replied, "He's on the Nimitz in the Mediterranean—I'm here with Mary to spend the Holidays with the Family."

Then Maria pipes up, "Mike won't be coming either, he's in India, so it's just going to be the five of us this Christmas," and then with a sigh Maria says, "It's going to be a lonely Christmas without them."

Everyone looks at her with cheerless expressions.

Henry looks at the way Jeff is dressed and asks, “How was the flight over, and are you trying to imitate your Brother Mike by wearing civvies?”

“Yes dear—where’s your uniform?” Asks Maria.

“Its in my travel bag,” replied Jeff pointing to his large bag, and then looking at his Father, Jeff told him, “The flight over was rather exciting to say the least, and no, I’m not trying to be like Mike—I had to wear these, because that’s the only way I could get out of the airport terminal without getting snagged by the news media—they were looking for a guy in an Air Force uniform.”

Henry, Maria, and Brenda looked at him with confusion written on their faces; seeing the confused expressions, Jeff remarked, “Haven’t you guys seen the news tonight?”

They looked at him and shook their heads, and then Henry inquired, “What are you trying to tell us?”

“There was an incident aboard the aircraft on the way over, and I had to fly it,” Jeff informing them, “the Pilot was incapacitated along with some Passengers, the Co-Pilot and several of the Passengers died. There was this Air Force Captain on board with me who was a Doctor—there also was another Civilian Doctor, as well as a Nurse and three Paramedics. Anyway, the Captain figured it was food poisoning, but had implied that it might also have been a terrorist attack—they’ll know for sure after the food trays are tested.”

Maria put her hand to her face and gasped in shocked horror.

Jeff firmly announced, “Dad—I don’t want to be on the news,” as Henry quickly went over to the TV and turned it on.

“If what you say is true, it’s a miracle that you were on that flight, otherwise everyone on board that aircraft would be dead now,” declared Henry, “I think that Captain’s assessment is correct—it was a terrorist attack and you’re now a hero.”

The TV came on with a news flash, “The Congress of the United States has just voted in favor of a declaration of war between the United States of America and Iran and its allies. The President of the United States has proclaimed a state of war now exists between Iran and its allies and the United States and its NATO members.”

The news anchor for a few minutes was silent, and then he took a deep breath and commented, “The Senate voted on the declaration of war tonight before adjourning for the holidays—wow—what a Christmas present they-gave us and the world—wow!”

Upon hearing this, Maria sat down and began weeping; Henry sat down next to her and softly said, “Now Hon’ everything will be just fine—you’ll see.”

She looks at him and blubbers, “No it won’t, *sob* —Brian and Mike are already over there, and Jeff will be flying over there dropping bombs. *Sob* --They all can be killed! *Sob*, *Sob*, *Sob*. I’ll never see them again, *sob*, *sob*, *sob*. Christmas this year will not be merry, *sob*, *sob*.”

Henry takes her in his arms and gives her a kiss.

Then the news anchor said, “Now on to some other news. The Lufthansa flight from Ramstein Germany, that landed at JFK International Airport this evening, had a great number of passengers that suddenly got ill including both Pilots, and we just learned eight of the passengers had died including the Co-Pilot. We also just learned that an abandoned catering van was found in a section of woods just north east of Ramstein Airbase with two dead men inside—the word now has it that this could be the making of a terrorist incident. We still don’t have the name of the young Air Force Pilot who flew the airplane and landed it at JFK—he saved nearly a hundred lives and has been declared a hero by all those onboard that flight, and I agree—he’s a true hero.”

“I didn’t do anything special,” Jeff declared matter-of-factly, “I fly planes like that one almost everyday.”

Henry put his finger to his lips to be quiet, and then he pointed to the TV as the news anchor added, “All we know about this mystery man is that he’s an Air Force Pilot, is about five feet-five inches or so, and may have red to reddish brown hair.”

As several pictures and videos are shown of the passengers departing from the arrival gate, several show military personnel in two groups, and in the first group, Jeff is seen.

Maria point’s at the TV and exclaims, “There’s Jeff!”

“See—that’s why I wasn’t wearing my uniform,” Jeff declares pointing at the TV.

The next morning, Jeff enters the kitchen and sits at his old place; Maria places a hot bowl of oatmeal in front of him remarking, “I hope the Air Force hasn’t changed your tastes.”

“Nope—hot oatmeal is my still my favorite, but yours is still the best,” Jeff telling her, as he added a bit of brown sugar, a dash of cinnamon, and some milk; after stirring the mush up, Jeff starts eating.

Looking over to his Father who's finished eating and has his head buried in the mornings newspaper, Jeff asks, "Anything about whether the news media is still looking for me."

Henry reaches around his open paper, picks up his coffee cup, takes a sip, sets it back down and replies, "Nope—nothing further is mentioned, but that doesn't mean they've given up—you know the news media, once they get your scent they never give up until they get what they want."

"Yeah, well, if they find out who I am and where I live, they'll be swarming all over this place trying to find out everything and anything they can about all of you," Jeff warns, and then imitating he says into his back of his spoon held up to his mouth, as if he's holding a microphone, "This is the home of Jeff Troff the Pilot of that flight—his Parents also live in this house, lets see if we can get a few words from them."

Henry lays the paper down and they all stare at Jeff and Jeff nods back mouthing, "Yup."

"Well then, lets hope they never learn who the Pilot was," Henry solemnly retorted, and then he takes another drink of coffee and after setting the cup down, he changes the subject and announces, "Since Jeff is home early, he's just in time to go Christmas shopping with us, unless of course you've already have finished with your shopping," looking at Jeff.

Jeff shakes his head saying, "Nope, haven't done any yet"—was hoping that you haven't done any shopping either."

"Great—and this year Brenda and little Mary can come," Henry tells them with a big smile, "So, let's all get ready—the van is waiting."

Sitting in a briefing room on board the Nimitz with three other Squadron Commanders, Brian listens to Wing Commander Lieutenant Colonel Lee Kreps, "As you've all heard, last night our Commander-in-Chief had informed the world that the United States has declared a state of war. So, Israel is no longer just a friend, she's now our Ally and has requested several of our fighter Squadrons to join hers, therefore, we're sending a Squadron from Nimitz and the Carrier Saratoga is sending one. The Air Force will be sending an entire wing and the Army will provide a Battalion."

Then Lt. Colonel Kreps looks at Brian and announces, "Captain Troff, you've been selected to take your Squadron from the Nimitz to Israel. Tomorrow at dawn you're to take your Squadron to Tel Nof Airbase, which is located just south of Rehovot. You will be stationed there until notified to return, so tell your men to pack their bags—you won't be coming back anytime soon. When you get there report to Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa

of the 106th IAF Squadron—you'll be attached to them as a separate unit until we get a proper unit setup. Your bags will be airlifted, so they should arrive shortly after your Squadron touches down. You may take a small duffle bag with you or what will fit in the cockpit of your aircraft—just make sure it's well secured in case you may need to fight—personally I wouldn't recommend it—any questions?"

"Sir, whom do we take orders from and who's doing the maintenance on our aircraft?" Brian asked.

"You'll be under the command and taking orders from Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa until we can get a command structure setup. Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa has the same rank as a Major," explains Lt. Colonel Kreps, "and as for aircraft maintenance, until we get a support unit put together, your aircraft will be maintained by the IAF—any more questions?"

Everyone shook his head, so Lt. Colonel Kreps said, "Captain Troff you have your orders, and for the rest of you, flight briefing for tomorrows other missions will be in here at 0800—that's all gentlemen."

The next morning just before the Sun came up, Brian leading his Squadron was the first to take off and head for the Israeli coast, soon the rest of his Squadron joined him and in formation they flew to their new home at Tel Nof; arriving just as the Sun started to ascend in the sky, they landed one after another until all the F30's in Brian's Squadron had touched down and taxied to the area next to a row of IAF F30's and metal Quonset buildings.

After climbing down, everyone had brought an extra small duffle bag; not taking the Wing Commanders advice.

Walking in a group with Brian in the lead, with each man carrying his own helmet and duffle bag, approached an IAF Pilot Officer.

Brian, setting his duffle bag down extends his hand saying, "I'm Captain Troff Squadron Commander—sorry, I don't speak Arabic or Hebrew."

"That's Ok," returned the IAF Officer with a smile taking his hand, "we all speak English here, some more than others and welcome."

"That's great and thank you," said Brian shaking his hand, and then he said, "I'm supposed to report to Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa."

"Ah—so you're the ones that will be joining the 106th," the Officer remarked.

"Yes, I do believe so," replied Brian nodding.

"Good—I'll take you to our Chief Commander—this way please," the IAF Officer replied and motioned with his opened hand towards several large concrete buildings painted blue; an Israeli flag was flying on a pole in

front of the center building.

As they approached the entrance a group of F30's passed over on approach to one of the two parallel runways.

The IAF Officer points to the landing F30s and remarks, "Your friends have arrived—now you're all here."

Reaching the door he opens it and tells them, "After you."

Brian nods and walks through followed by the others.

The IAF Officer leads them into a busy room where people in Israeli uniforms are working at desks with computer terminals.

The IAF Officer stops at one of the desks and says something in a language which Brian didn't understand; he points to Brian and his men.

The Soldier looks at the group of American Pilots, and then he picks up a phone and after speaking for a minute or so he hangs up and tells the IAF Officer something followed by the IAF Officer nodding, then the IAF Officer motions with his hand for Brian and the others to follow.

Arriving at a door with a placard with Hebrew, the IAF Officer knocks and a few seconds later a loud reply in that same language is heard.

The IAF Officer opens the door and steps through followed by Brian and his men.

At one end sat another IAF Officer with different insignia on his shoulder epaulets and a large pair of wings over his left pocket, just like the IAF Officer with Brian.

When the IAF Officer sitting behind the desk sees Brian and his men, he gets up and says in very good English, "Gentlemen, I'm Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa and welcome to Israel and Tel Nof."

The Chief Commander comes around from behind his desk with extended hand; Brian sets his small duffle down, switches his helmet to his other hand, and takes the Chief Commander's hand and replies, "Thank-you Sir, we're happy to be here to assist in any way possible."

Then the Chief Commander shakes the hand of each pilot after which he goes back to his desk and sits down in his chair and informs them, "Until your country sets up a proper organization, you're to be attached to the 106th as a separate unit. For the time being, you'll be known as the 218th--the Eagle Squadron, and Captain Troff, you'll be its commander. The other group will be known as the 218th--the Falcon Squadron and Captain Warfield will be the commander, when he gets here—any questions?"

Brian has a surprised expression when he hears his old friend Javelin is here, and will be commanding the other American Squadron and replies, “Well Sir, with Christmas only four days away, are we allowed to leave the base?”

“Yes—but I would advise you go with IAF personal, especially if you can’t read Hebrew or Arabic—we wouldn’t like having any of you getting lost—now would we?” Advised Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa; Brian and his group shook their heads, and then Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa said, “If you’re in need of a Christian Church, there aren’t any per se, but there are several places of worship in Rehovot—whither these hold Christian services I can’t say. Once again—don’t go exploring by yourselves, go with an IAF or IDF individual—any other questions?”

“Yes,” Brian piped, “when will our gear arrive? All we brought with us was our uniforms, a change of underwear, and shaving kit.”

“Your duffle bags should be here later today—any more questions?” Asked Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa.

Brian and his men shook their heads, and then Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa said, “Fine—Deputy Benassi will show you to your quarters and where you eat, et cetera—you’re dismissed.”

Then they saluted the Chief Commander, and after the returned salute, they turned and walked out of the office and followed Deputy Benassi, whose rank is equal to a First Lieutenant, to their new quarters.

After showing Brian to his room he then shows the other seven men to their rooms; two men to a room.

Once everyone was assigned to a room, Deputy Benassi shows them where the Latrine, Day Room, Reading room, Laundry room, and where the Mess Hall is located.

Finally Deputy Benassi takes them back to the 106th’s Orderly room to get them signed in and to receive Id’s for use on base and in the mess hall.

After returning to his room, Brian changes out of his flight suite, puts it into his built-in wall locker, which is more like a fancy closet with a lock, and puts his helmet on the top shelf.

Then with the change of underwear, a towel, washcloth, his shaving kit, Brian slips into his shower shoes and heads for the latrine.

Thirty minutes later, Brian returns to find he has a roommate; his old friend from Top Gun School, Bill Warfield.

Bill delightfully remarks with out held hand, “Troff—it’s really great to see you—so you’re my roommate—huh?”

“Yeah, it’s me—just like back in Top Gun,” Brian replied shaking his hand.

“This is great,” Bill excitedly says, “we’re flying together again—I’m in command of the Squadron now.”

“Yeah—the Falcon, but I’m in the Eagle,” remarked Brian.

“The Falcon,” repeated Bill looking confused, and then he asked, “Then why did we get assigned to the same room?”

“Because my dear friend, I’m in command of the Eagle Squadron,” Brian replied with a sarcastic grin with Bill looking at him with an incredulous expression.

Then Bill changed the subject by remarking on an observation, “Say, you know, Christmas is only four days away and there’s no decorations anywhere, especially in our Day Room—not even a Christmas tree—don’t these people celebrate Christmas?”

“Nope,” Brian abruptly replied, “They don’t recognize Christmas—for them its Hanukkah. And don’t bother looking for a Christian church, because you probably won’t find one—unless of course you want to worship in a Synagogue—there’s plenty of those around, I’m afraid this Christmas is going to be quite lonely.”

“Ok then, lets make our own Christmas,” Bill suggesting, “let’s get our Squadrons and decorate our Day Room—we can have a Christmas Eve service and sing carols in there.”

“Christmas Eve service—we don’t have a Minister,” Brian pointing out.

“We don’t need one,” Bill argues, “we’ll appoint someone to read from a Bible, and see if several of our men can play instruments for the music—it’ll be great.”

“And just where are we going to find all of this stuff in four days?” Brian asked.

“Hey—be optimistic, you’ll be surprised what we can scrounge up,” Bill replied with confident exuberance; Brian looks at him skeptically, and then finally giving in sighs with an approving nod grunting, “Ok, lets give it a try, otherwise it’s going to be a rather lonely Christmas for the all of us.”

“All-right—lets get our Squadrons together in the Day Room and get this show on the road,” Bill jubilantly announced with a clap of his hands and a big smile on his face.

An hour later, the two Squadrons gathered in the Day Room where Bill and Brian explained how they were going to make this a great Christmas.

They learned that three men from Bill’s Squadron were Musicians and could play Guitars and Drums; a fourth Musician who could play a key

board was in Brian's Squadron, and two of the Musicians had instruments with them on board the Carrier Saratoga, so all they would have to scrape up was a set of Drums and a electronic keyboard.

For the next several days the American fliers with Deputy Benassi drove into Rehovot to find stuff to use as Christmas decorations and to locate a set of drums and an electronic keyboard to play Christmas music.

By the time Christmas Eve arrived, the Day Room took on a Holiday look; there even was an artificial tree which they stumbled across in a dusty little shop in Rehovot that needed a little work to make it look nice.

On Christmas Eve one of the Pilots in Bill's Squadron just happened to be a Divinity Student before he joined the Marines, so he stood in front and read from the Bible of the Nativity while the Musician on the electronic keyboard played, 'O' Little Town of Bethlehem', 'Silent Night', and 'Hark the Harold Angles Sing'; a Choir of five sang off to one side while the rest of the men stood and listened to the words from the man reading the Bible.

That night, Brian still felt lonely; because he missed his Family back in California, especially his Wife Brenda and his little Daughter Mary.

Now Jeff and the rest of the Troff's, during the Christmas Eve services, felt very lonely, because they missed Brian and Mike; especially Brenda, she really missed Brian.

Now Maria knew, she must learn to accept the fact that they'll never be as one Family again, because everyone has finally moved on; Brian has his own Family now, even if Brenda and Mary are here celebrating Christmas Eve services with them this year, they probably won't be with them next year or the year after that.

Who knows where Jeff will be next year or even Mike, he isn't with them this year and he probably won't be with them again next year; Maria now knows that only Henry will be with her in the years to come, and a sad lonely tear trickles down her cheek, which she quickly wipes away with a white cloth that she's holding in her white-gloved hand.

The next day while sitting in the reading room with his Father eating nuts and hard candy, Jeff remarked, "You know Dad, the main reason I joined the Air Force was to fly the B80 Bomber—now I was just informed before I went on leave that I will be flying Co-Pilot on a old B52 and dropping special munitions on Iran and Pakistan—this is really a bummer."

“That’s a highly prized assignment,” stated Henry in a sincere tone, “only the best hand picked Pilots and crews were chosen for that mission.”

“Yeah—I’m flattered,” said Jeff reprovingly, “but the B52—now really.”

“Don’t knock that old bird,” rebuked Henry, “she maybe old, but she’s one tough old girl. At nearly hundred years old, She’s still useful—like to see the B80 make it to that rip old age—even the mighty B1 couldn’t make it past forty, besides, she’s the only Bomber we have that can carry our current MOP’s.”

“You know about the MOP’s and the mission I’ll be flying?” Jeff asked shockingly?

Henry just smiles with finger to his lips; Jeff stares in amazement.

Now Mike spent Christmas Day in the Day Room watching TV and laying in his bunk trying to make the most of this boring day, because he’s been denied pass privileges for the next two months, so he couldn’t go anywhere; for Mike it was a very lonely Christmas indeed.

On Tuesday, he was in the mess kitchen up to his elbows in soapy water washing dirty greasy pots-and-pans; his first stint of KP duty since he left his unit in Turkey, at least he didn’t have to worry about CQ anymore—that particular duty is in the past.

New Years Day was just as boring and lonely, and the day was spent watching the news on TV and it wasn’t good; Terrorist attacks were happening throughout Europe, Israel, and here in India.

Pakistan was invading Punjab Province in northwestern India and Iran was conducting air assaults on southern India.

NATO had moved a large Navel fleet’s into the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas.

Finally the long lonely Holidays are over for the Troff’s for another year, Jeff in civilian clothes so the news media wouldn’t recognize him, flew back to his Airbase in Germany to start flying the B52 Bomber, and Brenda flew back to her home leaving Henry and Maria alone once again in their large home in Victorville.

Brian started flying missions into Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

The Holidays have gone, but the dark clouds of war had come once again, the New Year looked very bleak.

CHAPTER 19 -- Return to Ladapur.

By the second week in January, Pakistan had airdropped several groups of advanced Infantry Platoons into several villages in southwestern India; one of them being Ladapur, which has been occupied with a large group of Insurgents, since the aborted assault by two Squads from the Second Platoon of Delta Company of the 39th American Expeditionary Battalion, back in December.

As Jeff's B52 drops the huge bombs on targets in northern Pakistan with earth shaking results, which are felt as far east as New Delhi and to the south in Islamabad, plans are being made to assault and retake Ladapur.

On the morning of January fourteenth, as Mike stood in formation, a major naval battle was taking place in the Arabian Sea between NATO forces of US, French, and English warships and Iranian and Pakistani warships.

Captain Demaray of Delta Company announced that they are going back and retake Ladapur, with EXR air support from the Indian Air Force.

With a feeling of apprehensiveness, Mike realizes his worst nightmare is happening; he's going into combat as an Infantryman carrying an assault weapon and not as a Pilot of an EXR Helicopter.

Finally, Captain Demaray orders, "Platoon Leaders take charge of your Platoons and have them gear up and reform in one hour—we're moving out in ninety minutes," the Platoon Leaders and Captain Demaray exchange salutes.

Second Platoon Leader, Second Lieutenant Geller, makes a snappy about face, and facing the Second Platoon he orders, "Platoon Sergeant, have the men fallout, get geared up and form up back here in one hour," Platoon Sergeant Baumgart replies with a salute, "Yes Sir."

Then Staff Sergeant Baumgart makes an about face and commands, "You heard the order—FALL OUT!"

As Mike ran to the barracks he mumbled, "Damn—should've listened to Captain Clark, Mom and Dad."

Remembering back to his Advanced Training at Camp Roberts when Greg told him, "Man—you sure don't see your ship at the dock," Mike now finally understood what Greg meant.

As Mike gets into his combat gear, he's angry with himself for being so stubborn and mumbles, "I'm so stupid—I should've taken the Instructor job back at Camp Roberts—I'd be there now, instead of here and about to get myself killed."

After getting issued six, twenty-round ammo-magazines, and four hand-grenades, Mike was back outside standing in formation and waiting for the order to move out, which wasn't to long in coming.

In formation, like in Basic Training and again in Advanced Infantry Training, they marched to the airfield one Platoon after another.

With apprehensiveness and his heart beating heavily, Mike marched fully loaded for the next fifteen minutes until they arrived at the airfield where eight Transport Helicopters are waiting.

Loaded with all four Platoons, the eight Transport Helicopters are heading for the LZ (Landing Zone) at Ladapur.

As Mike flew to Ladapur, his thoughts are about the previous month and his first encounter with the Insurgents; he was brought back to the present when hearing the words, "LZ in four minutes—be ready to disembark!"

When the first of the Helicopters set down, they were taking incoming fire, so several EXR's cleared the nearby area.

Then as the first Helicopter took off two more Helicopters landed; this time the Helicopters weren't hanging around, the Men were on their own.

When Mike's Helicopter landed, Mike with a rapid beating heart, said to himself, "Well, this is it—it's now for real," and he quickly dismounts and runs over to join the rest of his Squad.

As three EXR Helicopters over-flew the village, they took fire, and then suddenly a rocket launch and another launch; everyone took cover thinking they were the targets, two explosions with two large white clouds.

When Mike looked up, one of the EXR helicopters flew right through the cloud and a short time later a puff of smoke from both engines.

First Sergeant McFarly asked Captain Demaray, as the EXR headed toward a clearing on the other side of a row of trees in a controlled forced landing (Auto-Rotation), "What the hell was that?"

"Don't know," replied the First Sergeant, "some new kind of weapon."

As Mike just shook his head, his Platoon Leader and the Platoon Sergeant came over, and Lieutenant Geller said, "They're using some new kind of munitions—it might be poison gas—so be ready to don your gas masks."

“No Sir,” Mike piped up, “it’s a PL9 anti-aircraft round and it isn’t poisonous—I think we’re now on our own—no more air support.”

Lieutenant Geller and Staff Sergeant Baumgart looked at Mike slack-jawed.

Then Lieutenant Geller asked, “How do you know what it is?”

“It’s taught in EXR Support School,” replied Mike.

They both stared back with quizzical expressions.

When Mike could see their confusion, he told them, “If you had looked at my 201 file, you would’ve seen that I have a EXR Helicopter Repair MOS.”

“So why are you here and not in a EXR Support unit?” Asked Lieutenant Geller.

“That’s a long story that I’d rather not get into at the moment, Sir--,” replied Mike.

“Then you could conceivably repair the down EXR Helicopter,” inquired Lieutenant Geller.

“Yes Sir, if the proper stuff is on the EXR Helicopter and the Pilot didn’t get injured or damaged the Helicopter on the landing,” replied Mike with a nod.

“I’ll tell Captain Demaray that we have someone who can conceivably repair the EXR Helicopter, so we can have air support, because I think we’re going to need it,” remarked Lieutenant Geller and Mike shook his head.

“Now what?” Barked Lieutenant Geller, “You’re not going to repair it?”

“Yeah—I’ll repair it, but unless we take out that missile launcher, he or his buddies aren’t coming back,” Mike replied with a straight serious face.

“Ok then—that’s what we gotta’ do,” announced Lieutenant Geller with a nod, and then he added, “I’ll go and inform Captain Demaray of what I learned, and Corporal Troff, you stay put until I return.”

“Yes Sir,” Mike smartly returned, and then Lieutenant Geller keeping low hurried over to where Captain Demaray and First Sergeant McFarly were huddled.

Captain Demaray was on the radio and he didn’t look to happy as he sputtered into the radio very flustered, “What do you mean Sir—no more air support, but Sir...”

Then Lieutenant Geller arrived and a very upset Captain Demaray barked, “Yes Lieutenant and what do you want?”

Taken aback, Lieutenant Geller replied, “I don’t want anything, but I just might have a way to get us some air support.”

“Well—let’s hear it,” Captain Demaray pointedly barked.

“First we fix the EXR Helicopter—if it’s not too badly damage: Second, we need to take out the rocket launcher,” explained Lieutenant Geller.

For a minute Captain Demaray looked at Lieutenant Geller with a fixed expression, and then he retorted, “Fix the Helicopter?”

Lieutenant Geller nods with a smile, then Captain Demaray glaring back exclaims, “Look around Lieutenant—do you see a repair facility with parts or a repairman? As for taking out the rocket launcher—well, that’ll take an act of God without air support, and without air support we can’t get close enough to take out the rocket launcher—a catch twenty-two. And, even if we manage to get someone close enough, that someone will have to be a sniper—sorry Lieutenant, without a armored personal vehicle or a tank we’re at an impasse.”

“Sir—I was told the items required to repair the Helicopter might be in the Helicopter, and as for a repairman—we have one in my Platoon,” announced Lieutenant Geller, “and I’m also sure we have a man in our Company that is a good enough shot that can qualify as a sniper—the only question being, is, can he get close enough to take out the rocket launcher.”

“There’s a EXR Helicopter repairman in your Platoon?” Captain Demaray skeptically repeated; Lieutenant Geller nods with, “Yes Sir—Corporal Troff.”

“Corporal Troff,” repeated Captain Demaray sounding incredulous; Lieutenant Geller nods again, and then First Sergeant McFarly pipes up, “He’s right Sir—I remember seeing an entry in his 201 file referring to an EXR Helicopter repair MOS.”

“Well Sir—should I have Corporal Troff try and repair the EXR Helicopter?” Asked Lieutenant Geller.

Captain Demaray covered his mouth with his hand contemplating, while Lieutenant Geller and First Sergeant McFarly look on.

Then after several minutes of contemplating, Captain Demaray comes to a decision and announces, “Ok—if you think Corporal Troff has any chance of fixing the Helicopter then, let’s do it. Without air support we can’t retake the village and it’ll be at least a three or more days before any armor can get here—if it can be authorized.”

“Yes Sir—I’m sure Corporal Troff can do it,” said Lieutenant Geller feeling confident.

“Well, see to it Lieutenant, and make sure he’s got plenty of cover—we don’t want him to get shot—now do we?” Said Captain Demaray authorizing the job.

So with a firm nod, Lieutenant Geller crouching low hurries back to his Platoon; when he gets there he orders, “Sergeant Baumgart—have Corporal Troff and his Squad go to the downed EXR Helicopter and secure the area around it, then have Corporal Troff assess the damage and see if its repairable, and if it is, have Corporal Troff get right on it.”

Then Staff Sergeant Baumgart looking confused asks, “Corporal Troff, Sir? Does he know how?”

“Corporal Troff has a MOS in EXR Helicopter repair—so get on it Sergeant,” Lieutenant Geller tells him; Staff Sergeant Baumgart nods with, “Yes Sir—right away,” and hurries over to where Mike and his Squad are huddled.

Mike sitting with his Squad, comments to PFC Fessler, “Boy—they sure got this screwed up again—just like the last time I was here—where are they getting their intel from?”

When Staff Sergeant Baumgart gets to his Platoon he summons Mike and his Squad for a briefing.

When Mike and his men arrive, Sergeant Baumgart orders, “Corporal Troff, take your Squad and secure the area around the downed Helicopter, and once you’ve done that, try to assess if the Helicopter can be fixed, and if it can, then get right on it.”

Mike looks at Sergeant Baumgart dumbfounded, and then he asks, “I won’t be breaking a Army Regs by doing this—will I?”

Staff Sergeant Baumgart looks at Mike and replies, “You’re safe—I’m told you’ve got an EXR Helicopter repair MOS, so you’re legal—now lets get on it—orders from Lieutenant Geller.”

The men in Mike’s Squad look at him bug-eyed.

“Ok Sarge,” Mike responds, and then he looks at his men and commands, “You heard Sergeant Baumgart—lets get to it,” and so, Mike and his Squad head for the line of trees where the Helicopter came down behind; the same row of trees that Mike had hid behind, in the EXR Helicopter he flew the last time he was here.

When they arrived, Mike ordered his Squad to reconnoiter and secure the row of trees and the area extending out about a city block from around the Helicopter; the Helicopter appeared to be Ok and the Pilot was crouched next to it with his weapon ready.

When he saw Mike and his men approach, he lowers his weapon and gets up; as Mike's Squad heads out to secure the surrounding area, Mike salutes the Second Lieutenant saying, "Corporal Troff, --Sir."

The Second Lieutenant returns the salute replying, "I'm Lieutenant Griffey and I'm glad to see you guys—guess I'm Infantry now—Helicopter doesn't fly."

"Don't be so sure," Mike retorted with a smile, and then he started to walk around the Helicopter to assess for any additional damage, and as he does, the Pilot gets rather curious and asks, "Just what are you doing?"

About then, Mike feels he knows this guy from someplace, and as the Pilot is about to repeat his question, Mike suddenly recalls, turns, and says, "I know you from school—we were in the same preflight class at Rucker—you're Chris Griffey," pointing at him.

The Pilot stares back slack-jawed and drawled, "Yea-h—but, I don't recall you."

"I was one of the E2 Tech Students—Mike Troff, and you announced in class that you had dibs on Gas Attack, and I'll never forget what you did next," Mike started to giggle pinching his nose, then Lieutenant Griffey's face turned a rosy shade of red.

"So how come you're in the Infantry—you get washed out of Tech School?" Lieutenant Griffey asked; Mike shakes his head and replies, "Nope."

As Lieutenant Griffey opens his mouth to inquire how, Mike breaks in with, "Don't ask, Sir—it's a long story."

Then Lieutenant Griffey inquired, "So you can fix my bird?"

"Yeah—if you got the right stuff on board and didn't break anything else during the landing," replied Mike and turns to resume his inspection.

"Nothings busted," Retorted Lieutenant Griffey, "I landed this bird perfectly—the only thing that doesn't work is the damn engines when the PL9 missile went off in front of me.

"If you saw the PL9 detonate—why didn't you maneuver away from it?" Mike pointedly asked with a glaring expression; Lieutenant Griffey with a deadpan expression just shrugged his shoulders and after a few moments pause, he responded, "We weren't taught how unless it was some distance away."

"Well--," Mike criticizing, "if they ain't teaching ya' how to fly around this stuff, then they better well teach ya' how to fix your aircraft once you fly through the crap."

Mike finally finished the walk-around and found the Helicopter was air-worthy once the engines were fixed, so he opened the door and climbed inside to check the toolbox.

A huge smile broke out on Mike face when he saw the large can of unclogging agent and a complete toolkit.

Selecting the nozzle for the can, a large flat-blade screwdriver, a wrench, and after putting the large can of unclogging agent in his right cargo pocket, Mike proceeds to the engine access cover on the right side of the Helicopter; using the flat-blade screwdriver, he unfastened the large slotted recessed latches that secured the engine cowling.

Once the cowling had been removed the jet turbine engine was exposed, Mike locates the plug to the combustion chamber; using the wrench, Mike removes the plug.

Reaching into his cargo pocket, Mike removes the can of unclogging agent and screws the injection nozzle onto the can, and then he inserts the end of the nozzle into the jet turbine engine and squeezes the trigger on the can.

Filling the combustion chamber with the unclogging agent until Mike sees foam coming out of the rear of the engine, then he stops injecting, puts the can back into his cargo pocket, reinserts the plug, and tightens it with the wrench.

After closing the access panel and latching it with the screwdriver, Mike gets down and goes to the other side of the Helicopter and repeats the same procedure on the other engine; all the while the Pilot is watched with amazed curiosity.

After Mike had finished with the second engine and secured its access panel he re-entered the Helicopter and while waiting for the twenty minutes on the clock on the instrument panel to elapse, he returned the tools and the empty can to the toolbox.

When the time had elapsed, Mike flipped the master switch and all of the instruments lit up; Mike then proceeded to try and get the engines fired up, which required some patience and a few gentle coaxing remarks.

Finally, after belching flames out of each exhaust port, they started and after a few minutes were running smoothly.

Satisfied the engines are fine, Mike shuts the Helicopter down and exits the aircraft; he walks up to Lieutenant Griffey and tells him, “She’s all yours, Sir, just like new, but I wouldn’t advise flying into another PL9 cloud, as there isn’t anymore unclogging agent—one more thing, I think Captain

Demaray would like to speak to you about a little matter of air support in retaking Ladapur—have a nice day Gas Attack,” Mike adds with a smile.

As Mike was about to walk away to rejoin his Squad, Lieutenant Griffey snapped, “Hold it right there Corporal!”

Mike came to a sudden halt, turned, and faced the Officer at attention.

Lieutenant Griffey then hotly asked, “What did you just call me?”

“Your call sign—Gas Attack, --Sir,” Mike smartly replied.

“Only Fighter Pilots use call signs to address one another,” Lieutenant Griffey sharply explained, “it’s not meant to be used indiscriminately by others—do you understand Corporal?”

“Yes Sir,” Mike acknowledges nodding.

“Good, and how about a little military courtesy—if you remember what the Instructor had said about saluting in that class back at Rucker, ‘He’ll be an Officer with all the rights and privileges that come with the rank. And like he says, those of you whom are of lower rank must recognize his position with a salute’.”

“Yes Sir,” Mike sharply replied with a salute, and then Lieutenant Griffey returned the salute with a warning, “Just remember that Corporal, or the next time you might find yourself in deep trouble—capeesh?”

“Yes Sir,” replied Mike looking smitten.

“Good—now you can return to your unit Corporal—you’re dismissed,” ordered Lieutenant Griffey; now feeling perturbed from the reprimand, Mike walks back to where his men are stationed and Lieutenant Griffey walks over where Captain Demaray is talking on the radio.

The next day, a frustrated Captain Demaray exclaimed to his First Sergeant, “Are you sure there aren’t any men in the entire company who qualified as expert?”

“No Sir, I don’t know of anyone,” First Sergeant McFarly replied with a sigh.

Now Mike who had just returned his dirty breakfast tray happened to overhear them as he headed back to his Squad; he piped up, “I qualified as expert, Sir,” then wished he hadn’t opened his big mouth.

They both looked at him slack-jawed, then Captain Demaray exclaimed, “You!”

Mike nodded with, “Yes Sir.”

“When did you qualify and where?” Captain Demaray curiously asked.

“Last September at Cetin NATO base, Sir--,” Mike firmly replied.

“Cetin NATO base in Turkey?” Captain Demaray asked, looking bug-eyed.

“Yes Sir,” Mike replied sharply.

“That was considered a combat zone back then,” noted the Captain Demaray.

“Yes Sir,” Mike acknowledged rolling his eyes.

“What unit were you with?” Asked Captain Demaray.

“The 127th Headquarters Company, Sir,” replied Mike.

“Then why are you here?” Captain Demaray asked looking dumb-founded.

“Got volunteered,” Mike simply replied shrugging his shoulders.

“Volunteered?” Repeated Captain Demaray with a dour expression, along with First Sergeant McFarly; Mike just nods, and then Captain Demaray asks, “Have you ever been asked to be a Sniper?”

Again Mike nods remembering his time at Camp Roberts.

“I guess we just found our man, First Sergeant,” announced Captain Demaray looking somewhat roguish.

“Yes we have, Sir--,” said First Sergeant McFarly in agreement with a wily smile; Mike swallowed hard and blinked twice wondering what he’d got himself into.

Then Captain Demaray tells Lieutenant Geller, “Lieutenant, assemble a Squad of our best men and take Corporal Troff and show him what needs to be done—we’re counting on you, Lieutenant.”

“Yes Sir,” replied Lieutenant Geller, and then he turns to Mike and orders, “Follow me Corporal Troff.”

Mike follows the Lieutenant and they head back to where the Second Platoon is hunched down behind a line of thick trees.

Then Lieutenant Geller tells Mike, “Wait here until I return,” Mike nods and Lieutenant Geller leaves.

As Mike sat there hunched down, Staff Sergeant Baumgart asked, “What’s going on?”

“I guess I just became the Company Sniper,” Mike told him with a forced grin, Sergeant Baumgart looked at him with an etched expression.

A short while later, Lieutenant Geller returned with the other three Platoon Leaders and Sergeants.

When they were altogether, he informed them of Captain Demaray’s orders concluding with, “So, I’ll need eight of our best men to make up a Special Ops Squad to get Corporal Troff close enough to take out the missile launcher.”

Then the other three Lieutenants and Staff Sergeants returned to their Platoons.

Thirty minutes later the three Platoon Sergeants returned, one-by-one, with two men each.

When Lieutenant Geller only saw six, he remarked, “Only six—we’re short two men to make a complete Squad—these are all you’ve got?”

The three Platoon Sergeants nodded, with, “Yes Sir.”

Then Sergeant Baumgart said in defense, “These are the best shots in our Platoons—they’ll have to do, Sir.”

Lieutenant Geller with a straight face looked at them, and then he turned to Sergeant Baumgart and said, “Sergeant, see if you have two men that qualified in the upper Sharpshooter list.”

Sergeant Baumgart nods with, “Yes Sir, right away,” and begins to query the men in the Platoon; after a few minutes he’s found the two men and they join the other six.

Looking at the assembled men, Lieutenant Geller suddenly turns to the four Platoon Sergeants and announces, “We need an NCO to command these men—any ideas?”

“Have Corporal Troff command them—he’s already a Squad leader,” replied Staff Sergeant Baumgart.

Lieutenant Geller shakes his head rebutting, “No, Corporal Troff will have enough on his mind without having to command eight men—no, I want a Sergeant in command, so whom do we have?”

“I’ll volunteer,” announced Sergeant Baumgart, “after all—Corporal Troff is from my Platoon.”

Lieutenant Geller shakes his head again, and this time firmly, turning down Sergeant Baumgart’s offer with, “Sorry Sergeant, but I need you to command the Platoon—in fact all Platoon Sergeants are excluded—any other suggestions?”

Then Staff Sergeant McCaffrey piped up, “I have a Assistant Platoon Sergeant you can have,” Sergeant Gressett held his breath when he heard he was being volunteered.

“Yes, he’ll be fine,” replied Lieutenant Geller nodding.

Then Staff Sergeant McCaffrey motioned to Buck Sergeant Gressett to join the Special Ops Squad.

Gressett walks over and stands next to Mike and says greeting, “Great to see you,” and pointing at the Corporal insignia, he sorrowfully says, “sorry about the demotion—they lost a good leader.”

“Don’t be—at least now I don’t have to stay up all night on CQ,” Mike told him with a smile; Greg smiled back.

After dismissing the others, Lieutenant Geller comes over and begins to brief the Special Ops Squad by unfolding several pictures on the ground of the village, including a close-up picture of the target building.

Lieutenant Geller points at the building, which appears to be a garage and says, “Inside is where the truck mounted launcher is kept. This vehicle must be destroyed before we can retake this village. Mike piped up, “How about using mortar or artillery, Sir?”

“Nearest artillery unit is three to four days away in New Delhi, and as for mortar, can’t get close enough to target the building—it’s inside the village. Besides, you need a spotter to get the coordinates for the mortar to be effective. So, who’s volunteering to crawl into the nearest building and get on the roof to radio back the coordinates of the target for the mortar—same goes for the Artillery unless you just blow the entire village up—then what’s the point of retaking it—there’s nothing to retake. Anymore dumb ideas?”

Everyone shook their heads, including Mike.

Then Lieutenant Geller announced, “The missile launcher is the primary target, we also have a couple of secondary targets and they are: One, any shoulder mounted missile launchers, and two, communications such as satellite uplinks, et cetera. Questions anyone?”

Mike raised his hand, Lieutenant Geller points to him as a cue to speak.

Mike then inquired, “Ok, so how are we to accomplish this?”

“It’ll be Sergeant Gressett’s job to get you close enough to fire a RPG at the truck with the launcher. You’ll be issued four RPG rounds in addition to your regular ammo—I hope you are able to carry the additional weight,” explained Lieutenant Geller.

“All the additional weight is sure to slow me down, and if one of those RPG’s gets hit, I’ll go up like the fourth,” proclaimed Mike, then he suggested, “how about if every man in the Squad carried one RPG, including Sergeant Gressett, and I would carry two—two less RPG’s to lug would really help, plus, we’d have more RPG rounds to use if we need them.”

“That’s a excellent idea, Corporal,” declared Lieutenant Geller, and then he asked, “Are there anymore questions or suggestions?”

They all looked at each other, shook their heads, and then Lieutenant Geller announced, “Ok—now lets get you all outfitted and get the mission underway.”

After Lieutenant Geller radioed for a supply drop, an hour or so later a Helicopter arrived, landed, and unloaded several wooden creates, and then took off again.

The wooden creates contained the RPG rounds and everyone in the Squad was issued one, except Mike, he got two.

Now the plan was to sneak in, complete the mission, and leave as quickly as possible; stealth would be the order of the day.

Hiding in the wooded area just a short distance from the first row of buildings in the village, Sergeant Gressett, looking through field glasses, surveys the nearby row of buildings for any enemy activity.

Seeing two sentries, one on each end of the village hiding behind large stone planters filled with flowers, Sergeant Gressett motions for two men to take them out.

Then Sergeant Gressett requests, on the radio, for the company to engage and start shooting to cover the shots that will take out the two sentries.

When the two men are in place, Sergeant Gressett, using the radio, asks for the covering fire to begin; soon the sounds of gunfire can be heard coming from the woods and return fire from the outer buildings of the village.

Then pop, pop, two shots and both sentries fall dead.

The way is now clear to enter the village from the north.

Now the buildings are spaced very close together, some of them are adjoining; for the ones that aren't, there's very little room between them, barely enough for a single man to slide through sideways—no room to fire a weapon.

Two of the buildings have a small courtyard with stonewalls and an arched entryway leading to the wooded area a short distance away; a door from the each of the two buildings opens into its courtyard.

Four of Sergeant Gressett's men enter both courtyards, and with two men standing on either side of each door, prepare to enter the buildings.

Mike and Sergeant Gressett are with one group of four men, and are hunched down behind large stone planters along with two of the four men, waiting for the assault move.

Suddenly each man standing on either side of the door, burst through the door with weapons ready, but no one is inside.

So, with the wave of a hand from one of the assault crew, the other two men, Mike and Sergeant Gressett enter the building; the other four men enter their building with no opposition.

Sergeant Gressett radioed that they're in the village and about to make their way towards the primary target.

Using hand signals, Sergeant Gressett has the two groups of men move forward, occupying another two buildings.

Sergeant Gressett and Mike in the second building locate a stairway to the building's flat roof and climb up there; on the roof they find several very large terracotta pots used as planters, and in hunched position, they carefully make their way to the edge.

At the edge of the roof there is a row of rectangle terracotta planters with a space of six or seven inches between them.

Mike and Sergeant Gressett carefully peer out from behind two adjacent planters and observe the area in front of them.

They find their primary target, the garage supposedly containing the vehicle mounted missile launcher, is the second building over from them and slightly east of their position.

They also observe a lot of enemy soldiers in Pakistani uniforms milling about, going into and out of nearby buildings.

The building next to the garage had a satellite antenna and a white fiberglass short-wave antenna on the roof; several Pakistani soldiers are entering and leaving that building.

Quickly retracting their heads, Mike whispered to Sergeant Gressett, "I think this is as close as we can get without stirring up a hornets nest—they out number us by three or four to one and that's only the ones we can see."

"Do you think you can land a RPG into the building from here?" Greg whispered back; Mike takes another peek and locates a small window that's facing him on this side of the garage, he retracts his head and replies whispering, "It's going to be tough, but I think I can do it. The bigger question is—is the vehicle mounted missile launcher actually inside? I can't tell from here without using a spotting scope, and the next bigger concern is—once I fire the RPG they'll know where we are, that's if I don't get spotted first, and be on us like flies."

"Can you use the scope on your M20 to look into the window?" Asked Greg in a whisper.

"Not if it's dark inside," Mike whispered back, "I could put a round inside and it'll destroy anything in there, but if the target isn't there all we've accomplished is to destroy a garage and get ourselves killed or captured and for nothing—I'd rather know for sure our target is there."

"So, what are our options?" Greg whispered, looking worried.

"Well, we can destroy the secondary target, or wait until either they open the overhead door or wait until after dark and hope they turn on a light inside," Mike whispered in reply; Greg looking gloomy bites his lip.

Then Mike remarked, “I’d rather wait until tonight and hope they turn on a light—at least the darkness will conceal where we’re at and give us some time to evacuate.”

“Then you won’t be able to destroy the secondary target,” declared Greg, “I would like to destroy both.”

“That’s true,” Mike confirmed in a whisper, and then he added, “But under the circumstances, I don’t believe it’ll be possible to do both.”

Then Greg got an idea and said, “What if the EXR Helicopter that’s parked behind the trees would force them to open the overhead door, would that work?”

“Yeah maybe, but as soon as the Helicopter approaches, they’ll bring out their shoulder mounted rocket launchers first,” Mike reasoned, “the Pilot would have to react very quickly or he’ll be toast—from what I’ve seen of this Pilot—he’d be toast.”

“Well—I like to give it a try anyway,” Greg told him, “we can have one of the four men down below to come up here and between the three of us take out the men with the shoulder mounted rocket launchers,” Mike shakes his head.

“Now what’s wrong?” Grunts Greg looking bilious.

“First, I can’t, because my M20 will be setup to fire an RPG round: Second, those men with the rocket launchers are going to be at two to three hundred meters away or more, and they more an likely be moving as well, so unless you’re able to consistently nail moving targets at three hundred meters, forget it.”

Greg looks at Mike stone-face, and then he firmly declares, “Ok, then maybe one of the men downstairs can, because I still think this will work.”

Then Greg goes back down to where the other four men are standing watch, while Mike mounts an RPG round on his M20.

For the next few minutes as he waited for Sergeant Gressett to return, Mike studied the garage layout and the communications building with the antennas on the roof.

Finally Sergeant Gressett returns with one of the men and introduces him to Mike, “Corporal Troff, this is PFC David Holtan,” he smiles and raises his hand in acknowledgment.

Mike bluntly asks, “Private, what did you qualify as?”

“Sharpshooter,” Holtan firmly replied, but before Mike could comment he quickly added, “almost made Expert—missed it by one point.”

Mike nods, and then he reemphasizes, “I still don’t like your plan—it’s too risky and dangerous, we have a better chance after dark—I say let’s wait

until it gets dark.”

“I’m in charge of the this mission,” Greg firmly declared, “and we’re going to execute it like I suggested—I’m radioing Lieutenant Geller and fill him in on my plan—sorry to pull rank, Mike, but as a NCO I’m in charge and the mission comes first and that includes taking out the secondary target as well.”

“Ok, it’ll be our funeral—literally,” remarked Mike with a sigh, and then he added, “when they send the Helicopter, tell Lieutenant Geller to start the assault on the village to cover our RPG and sniper attacks. With all of the confusion we might get the secondary target and escape with our lives.”

As Sergeant Gressett talked on the radio, Mike had a foreboding feeling, like when he was at the fortuneteller at the Amusement Park so long ago, and she foretold Russ’s death.

Mike now felt this was his final day and he wouldn’t see the Sun set, and softly said to himself, “Well—I guess twenty is as old as I’m going to get—now it’s my turn to go home in a box.”

Then Mike looks up and pleads, “Please God, make it quick, so there isn’t much pain.”

Then he felt bad when the thought of the anguish he’ll put his Family through; “Poor Mom—I feel so bad that she has to go through this,” Mike thought to himself as a tear ran down his cheek, and then he smiled when he thought about what Major Clark would say when he found out, and boy would he be pissed—oh, the cussing and swearing—he’d carry on and on about Mike not listening to him, and of course, then there’s all the I told you so’s.

Mike giggled a bit thinking about it.

Then Mike came back to the present when Sergeant Gressett said, “It’s all set—get ready, because it’s going to start shortly,” Mike nods with, “Yes Sergeant—I’ll be ready.”

Mike turns and points his loaded M20 at the garage window.

After waiting for thirty minutes and still nothing, Mike grumbled, “Why haven’t they started the assault—what’s the damn problem?”

It was almost the top of the hour and still nothing and Mike’s nerve’s were driving him nuts; “A little patience there, like Clark had taught you,” Mike said to himself, and then he calmed down.

At one minute after the hour, gunfire and men yelling is suddenly heard, and then the Helicopter made its appearance above the treetops and headed for the village.

Mike loudly said to PFC Holtan and Sergeant Gressett, “Get ready all hell is about to break loose—those handheld rocket launchers will make an appearance at any moment,” and no more had Mike issued the statement, when two men with handheld rocket launchers walked out to the center of the street and aimed their launchers at the incoming Helicopter.

The majority of the Pakistani soldiers ran to the edge of town to engage the US assault force, to Mike’s delight, because there’s no one to engage the Special Ops Squad.

PFC Holtan shot the closest man with a handheld rocket launcher, then he sighted in on the second man, and just as he was about to fire a rocket, *POP*, the man fell.

Suddenly, the garage door slowly raised, Mike held his breath, his heart beating hard in his chest.

Mike zeroed in on the small window, and with daylight now illuminating the inside of the garage, Mike could clearly see the truck with the missile launcher in his scope; with a calm assuredness, Mike pulled the trigger and launched RPG.

As the RPG round headed for the garage, Mike quickly removed the spent launcher from his M20 and as he reached for the next RPG, there was a huge explosion; fire and smoke burst from the small window, the overhead door blew across the street followed by fire, black smoke, and metal parts.

Mike quickly mounted the second RPG round to his M20, and then aimed at the open doorway of the communications building.

Seeing movement inside in his scope, Mike fired again launching the second RPG.

As the RPG flew towards the building, Mike started to remove the spent launcher from his M20 when another huge explosion with fire and black smoke burst from the doorway, windows, and raised dust on the roof.

PFC Holtan and Sergeant Gressett both were grinning when Mike motioned to them with hand requesting, “Give me your RPG’s and then get the hell off of the roof and take the rest of the Squad and get out of the building.

Handing his RPG round to Mike, Greg asked, “What are you going to with these?”

“Finish taking out the secondary target,” Mike replied pointing to the roof with the still intact antennas; Greg glances to the roof and nods, pats him on the shoulder with, “Good luck—I’ll see you down stairs.”

“Yeah—now get the hell outa’ here,” Mike barks and PFC Holtan and Sergeant Gressett head down the stairs to the lower floor as Mike loads one of the extra RPG’s on his M20.

After PFC Holtan and Sergeant Gressett had gone, Mike aims at the roof with the antennas, and then he fires, a few second later another huge explosion on the roof of the communications building.

As Mike removes the spent launcher from his M20 a small fireball followed by billowing black smoke rises skyward.

Now ready to get out of there, Mike reaches for the last RPG when the Helicopter made another closer pass to give support for the assault team who are now entering the village.

As Mike starts to rise to leave, a bright glimmering flash of Sunlight hits his eye, when he turns to see what caused the reflected Sunlight he held his breath in horror, for entering the village square was a truck mounted rapid firing cannon that shot twenty millimeter armor piercing rounds.

It came to a sudden stop and the cannon turned to zero in on the approaching Helicopter.

Mike quickly loaded the last RPG round onto his M20 and took aim, and just as the cannon was about to fire, Mike squeezed the trigger, the RPG left his M20, and with a trailing smoke trail that led right to where he hid, hit the truck with a loud explosion; the cannon along with the truck is destroyed, but several Pakistani soldiers are looking in his direction with one of them pointing to Mike's location, then they began firing at him.

Knowing it's time to leave, Mike makes haste for the stairway with bullets flying all around, hitting the flowerpots and planters.

Just as Mike was about to descend the stairs there was a very hard blow to his left thigh followed by sharp numbing pain, this caused Mike to tumble down the stairway.

Sergeant Gressett rushed to a now dazed Mike.

With the other four men gathered around and coming out of his daze, Mike looked at them and urgently said, "What are you still doing here—they know where we are and are headed this way—get the hell outa' here!"

As Mike tries to rise, sharp pain shot through his left leg and hip causing him to collapse to the floor.

Then Sergeant Gressett told Mike, "You've been shot in your left thigh—we'll help you," Mike looks down and his entire left leg is soak in blood and dripping on the floor; seeing this almost caused him to pass out.

With one arm around PFC Holtan's neck and the other around Greg's neck they headed out of the back door, across the small street, and into the building with the courtyard, and between them hobbled Mike.

As soon as they were starting to exit out the back door the Pakistani soldiers burst through the front door.

Mike and the men take cover behind two large stone planters, the Pakistani soldiers started firing at them from the window and doorway; the four men returned fire, keeping the Pakistani soldiers from entering the courtyard.

With the wound bleeding copiously the pain was almost unbearable, Mike was now starting to feel very weak and getting a bit fuzzy.

Greg said in a urgent tone, “We gotta’ get the bleeding stopped or you’ll bleed to death.”

So, Greg got a compression bandage from the first aid kit he carried, because Mike’s kit in his left cargo pocket was soaked in blood; Greg, using his combat knife, the one taught in basic training, cut Mike pant-leg to expose the wound.

It wasn’t much, just a hole about the size of a dime and copiously oozing blood.

Greg felt the back of Mike’s leg for an exit wound, but found none which meant the bullet was still inside Mike’s leg.

From the way the wound bled, according to the first aid manual, no artery was severed, but from the way its bleeding it appears as if one or more veins were severed.

Greg took the compression pad and placed it directly on the wound and applied pressure, which caused Mike to cry out in pain, then Greg took a roll of gauze and tightly wrapped it around the leg and the pad several times keeping the pressure applied to the wound, and then tied it very tight to keep it from unraveling.

For the next twenty minutes, which seemed like hours to Mike, they held the Pakistani soldiers in the building to a stand-off, then one of the men, getting rather tired of this nonsense, loaded his RPG on his M20 and aimed at the window and fired, a large explosion followed with fire and smoke coming out of the door and window; all was now quiet.

Greg using his scope on his M20 scanned the building for any movement, seeing only smoking debris he announced, “Their all dead—now, I suggest we get the hell outa’ here,” everyone nodded.

By this time Mike was fading in and out, so Greg puts one of Mike’s arms around his neck, and Holtan puts Mike’s other arm around his neck, and they head out of the village with Mike now unconscious and being carried between them with his feet dragging on the ground; they head back to

their staging area.

When they get to where there was medevac Helicopter waiting, Mike was put on a stretcher and place in the Helicopter.

With the village retaken and only mop up details in progress, the EXR Helicopter had landed and Lieutenant Griffey comes walking over when he heard about Mike.

The first thing he asked was, “How’s Corporal Troff?”

“He’s got a serious leg wound and lost a lot of blood, but he should pull through,” Lieutenant Geller replied, “He’s being medevaced to a hospital in New Delhi.”

“He’s quiet a Hero you know,” remarked Lieutenant Griffey to everyone’s surprise.

“How so--?” Questioned First Lieutenant Geller.

“He single handedly took out a truck mounted rapid firing cannon that would’ve taken me out and caused you to abort the assault—you probably wouldn’t have retaken Ladapur and would’ve sustained very heavy casualties; they all looked astonished.

CHAPTER 20 -- New Assignments.

Henry walked into the house, removes his military cap, and puts it on the top shelf of the entryway closet; after removing his uniform coat, he puts it on a hanger, hangs it on the rod inside the closet, closes the door, and then he walks out to the kitchen.

Maria is busy cooking their dinner when Henry walks up to her and looking over her shoulder, gives her a peck on the cheek and asks, “What are we having for dinner Hon?”

“You’re just like our boys, sneaking a peek at what I’m cooking,” Maria replied with a smile, “well, I’m not going to tell you—you’ve just have to wait.”

Henry just smiles and tells her, as he goes over and sits at the table, “I’ve got some good news and some bad—which do you want to hear first?”

“Give me the bad first,” Maria replied stirring a bubbling pot.

“Ok, some bad news—I learned today that our Son has been wounded in combat.”

Maria gasped, drops the spoon into the pot, and puts her hand to her mouth looking aghast, and weakly sputtered, “Which boy?”

Henry softly replied, “It was Mike.”

Maria went weak kneed and slumped, Henry quickly got up and went and grabbed her; helping her to a chair at the table, and then he went over and turned the stove off and sat back down opposite her.

Henry reaches across the table and puts his hand on hers and tells her, “The good news is, Mike’s fine—it was only a leg wound.”

Maria looks at him feeling relieved, and then she angrily says, “The next time it may not be his leg—he might be dead—I wish he was home where he belongs, with his family and flying Helicopters with Mister Manning.”

Henry smiles and adds, “You know Hon, Mike’s a Hero—he saved his Company from being decimated and has earned a metal—possibly two,” nodding, as she looks at him; “Mike’s earned a Purple Heart and maybe a Bronze Star for gallantry.”

“A Hero!”

“Yes—our Son’s a Hero,” Henry giggles nodding,

“I’m now ready for the good news.”

“Ok Hon,” says Henry grinning; “The good news is, besides Mike being Ok and a Hero, I’ve been promoted—they’re giving me my first star—Isn’t that great Hon?”

“Yes dear, it is, and congratulations,” Maria said looking blissful.

“But, there’s more bad news.”

Maria looking faint softly remarked, “More bad news.”

“Yes Hon, the star is contingent upon moving to Washington—I’ll be assigned to the General Staff at the Pentagon.”

“Washington--the Pentagon—,” Maria stammered, “why can’t you stay here?”

Henry shook his head and explained, “No Hon, there’s no position for another one star General at George—if I’m to accept the promotion, then we’ll have to move.”

“What about our house?” Maria asked with a quizzical expression.

“I guess we’ll just have to sell it,” Henry replied looking wistful.

“Sell it--but it been our home for almost four years, the boys call this place home—Mike graduated from high school here, and is part owner of a Helicopter business.

“Yeah, I know Hon, but when Mike gets out of the Army he’ll buy his own house here, marry and settle down—Brian will probably return to Miramar, and if he remains in the Marines, he’ll move around like us, so who knows where he’ll be in two years.”

“What about Jeff?” Maria inquires with a stern expression.

“What about Jeff?”

“Where will he go to live when he gets out of the Air Force?”

“I don’t think Jeff’s getting out of the Air Force anytime soon,” replied Henry in a firm confident tone, “he loves it too much—that’s why he went to the Academy.”

Looking despondent, Maria remarks, “you know we really haven’t had a real place to call our home since we got married, so what are you suggesting—we sell this one and buy another house in Washington?”

“Yes Hon—there’s really nothing tying us to this house, except that Mike graduated from high school here, anyway, Brian and Jeff graduated in Roseville, and we moved out of that house too.

As for buying another one--probably not right away--thinking maybe renting an apartment for awhile, and if it looks as if I’ll be there awhile, then maybe we can look for a house or condo in a nearby small town,” Henry suggested with a smile while patting her hand to ease her concerns; Maria looks back with a doleful expression, and then she asks, “So--when do we have to leave?”

“I’m scheduled to meet with Major General Howard Snyder at the Pentagon in two weeks,” and then Henry suggests, “I was thinking, since you’ll be here all by yourself that maybe you should come along, and after the

meeting, we could go apartment hunting.”

Maria looking worried remarked, “you’re leaving for Washington in two weeks?”

“We’re leaving in two weeks,” Henry correcting her, “you’re coming with me—I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”

“So when are we selling the house?”

“When we get back, we’ll put it on the market and start packing up our things,” Henry replied, “we’ll put most of our furniture and some of our things we don’t need in storage until we decide if we want to buy another house or condo.”

Maria just sat there staring intently at him, as if she wasn’t so sure that this is what they should do.

Then Henry smiling at her and holding her hand firmly in his hands tells her, “Hon—why don’t you use the next week or so to make a list of what we’ll need until we return, then I’ll help you pack.”

“What do we do with all of Mike’s trophies and stuff, and all of Jeff’s and Brian’s things—what are we to do with them?” Maria asked, and then she quickly added, “We’re not throwing them out if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No, of course not,” Henry quickly replied shaking his head; “We’ll put their stuff in storage along with our stuff until they decide what they want to do with it.”

Maria nods, and with a slight smile she says, “Ok dear, I’ll get started on that list.”

Henry patting the top of her hand, smiles at her and reassuring her, he says, “You’ll love it in DC--you’ll see--we’ll have a great time together going out, attending balls, banquets, and who knows, we might even get to meet the President and his Wife.”

After hearing this her face lightens, and then removing her hand from his, she gets up telling him, “I must get back to the business of our dinner.”

Then Maria goes over to the stove, turns up the heat and begins stirring the now cooled pot; Henry just smiles as she starts cooking again, then she suddenly turns and asks with a very worried look on her face, “there isn’t anymore good or bad news—is there?”

Henry shakes his head replying, “no Hon,” Maria sighs and turns back to the now bubbling pot.

At Fort Irwin, Major Larry Clark, commander of Bravo Company of the 125th EXR Cavalry Battalion was reviewing the training schedule for

the next day when his phone rang; he picks up the phone and answers, “Major Clark speaking.”

“Major Clark, this is Sergeant Mason, Colonel Larson wants to see you in his office.”

“Thank you Sergeant,” he replied, hangs up, and gets up wondering what the Battalion Commander wanted, walks out of his office, gets in his car and heads over to Base Headquarters.

When Major Clark arrives, he walks up to the Head Clerk’s desk and announces to the Buck Sergeant, “I’m Major Clark and I was told the Battalion Commander wanted to see me.”

“Yes Sir, Lieutenant Colonel Larson informed me that you were coming and you’re to go right in when you arrived,” pointing to a door to his right.

“Thank you Sergeant,” the Major politely told him, and then he proceeds to the door the Head Clerk had pointed too.

After pausing at the door with a plaque which reads, ‘Battalion Commander, Lt. Colonel Howard Larson’, Major Clark opens the door.

Colonel Larson was watching a video on his office TV of aerial combat between several Fighter Helicopters, when his door opens.

Upon seeing Major Clark, Colonel Larson gets up and greets him, “Major Clark, please come in—we need to talk,” extending his hand to the Major; Major Clark takes his hand and they shake.

Colonel Larson leads the Major to a nearby chair and offers him a seat; Major Clark sits down and Colonel Larson goes over to his desk and his chair.

Major Clark notices the video playing as the Colonel sits down and inquires, “Where is this taken?” pointing to the video.

“That particular piece of video was taken in India.”

Then several of the enemy Helicopters suddenly split off, followed by two large explosions producing white clouds a short distance in front of the friendly Helicopters; they didn’t or couldn’t avoid the white clouds and flew into them.

Major Clark shook his head mumbling, “Stupid Pilots—they should’ve known better than fly through that stuff,” and watches them come out the other side followed by puffs of white smoke coming out of the engine exhausts, and then down they go in a controlled auto-rotation.

Colonel Larson looking grim announced, “It appears the other side now has their equivalent of our PL9 and are using it as a weapon to gain air-superiority.”

And then slowly in a grave tone, he said, “We’re not doing so well—unless we can come up with a method of neutralizing this situation we won’t be able to stop them.”

“I just know there’s Pilots smart and skilled enough to know how to handle this stuff,” Major Clark remarked.

“No, I’m afraid not,” Colonel Larson said shaking his head.

“I knew this was going to happen!” exclaimed Major Clark, then he added, “if they start using this weapon on Jets we’re going to be losing lives—a Jet Fighter or Bomber needs a runway to land safely.”

“You knew this was going to happen!” exclaimed Colonel Larson; Major Clark nods.

“Why didn’t you say something—how long have you’ve suspected?” inquired Colonel Larson looking surprised.

“For about two years or so, ever since I learned that my best trained Pilot was being trained as a EXR Tech Support Specialist. At first I was very angry at what I perceived as a blatant act of stupidly on the part of the Army, but later, after remembering what I told him about using the PL9 on Jet Fighters and the reason we train with them, I began to see how these harmless munitions could be used as a weapon and maybe having him know how to repair his EXR Helicopter in the field wasn’t such a bad idea after all,” explained Major Clark looking meaningful, and finally adding, “and that’s why all my Pilots are now being taught how to do field repairs on their EXR Helicopters. I sent a memo through about updating the toolbox in the EXR Helicopters with some additional tools plus a can of unclogging agent.”

“I’ve received your memo, and that’s one of the reasons you’re here,” remarked Colonel Larson, and then he adds, “I’m going to have all of the Pilots in the Battalion to begin immediate training in field maintenance. I have also forwarded your the memo along with other recommendations to CONUS Command in Washington.”

Colonel Larson remembering a memo he received several weeks ago from CONUS and remarks, “You mentioned a few moments ago about knowing there might be some Pilots smart and skilled enough to use a PL9—well it happens there is a Pilot who used a PL9 as a weapon and scored a kill.”

“Where—who?” Major Clark asked blinking.

“In India—a member of the 39th Battalion—no name was mentioned, but he scored three kills that day,” replied Colonel Larson with a smile, “we need more Pilots like him.”

“You mentioned there was another reason you wanted to see me.”

“Ah’ yes there is,” replied Colonel Larson, “after the memo I sent, I received orders for you to be transferred to Washington—the Pentagon.”

“The Pentagon in Washington!” Major Clark said shockingly, looking confused.

“Yeah, next Monday you’re to report to Major General Richard Griggs, he’s a member of the General Staff,” Colonel Larson tells him and picks up a copy of the orders, hands it to him, and adds with a smile, “there might be a silver oak leaf in it for you.”

Major Clark takes the document and remarks, “I wonder what they want with me?”

“I would think it has something to do with the memo I sent through, and the fact we’re not doing so good with the PL9 threat,” Colonel Larson replied with a stolid expression.

“Well then, I better start packing if I’m to be in Washington on Monday—it doesn’t leave me with much time,” Major Clark remarked with a sigh, and then he asked, “Is that all, Sir?”

“No—one more little detail, and that is, whom would you recommend from your Company as your replacement for CO?”

Major Clark thought for a while as Colonel Larson impatiently waits, and then he said, “Captain David Barq—he proved he is very capable of commanding and making decisions, he demonstrated this several years ago in the field exercises that was conducted not to far from here.”

“Ah’ yes, I remember those infamous exercises—a few lessons were learned, especially from the civilians who were involved,” Colonel Larson said grinning, and then nodding he said, “Yes, I think Captain Barq would make an excellent replacement.”

Then Major Clark asked, “Is there anything further, Sir?”

“No that should cover everything that I wanted to see you about—you may go Major.”

Smiling they shake hands, and then Major Clark salutes and after the salute is returned, he walks out of the office.

When Mike awoke, he was still groggy and in a hospital ward, a blue and white-checkered curtain was enclosing his bed on two sides, and while a Doctor in a white lab coat was looking at his history on a computer screen, a male nurse was adjusting an IV drip.

Looking around, Mike tries to make sense of his surroundings and notices that he’s got a transparent plastic tube from an IV bag inserted into his

right forearm, another transparent plastic tube with bright red contents from a smaller bag inserted into his left forearm, and lots of colored wire leads coming from him and connected to a monitor; a plastic clip that glowed red inside, where his finger was inserted, was on his left hand and a dark blue four inch wide cuff with a tube going to another monitor was on his upper left arm.

Mike slowly moaned in a confused tone, “Where am’ I?”

The Doctor turns to look at him and in broken English he says, “Corporal Troff, you’s is awake—ah’ is Doctor Captain Amit Kumar and tis’ be Lance Naik Vinay Goel—he’s be you’s Nurse. You’s have us all very worried, but now’s you’s be fine—yes?”

Mike looks at him trying to make sense out of all of this, and then he remembers getting shot and the fight at Ladapur.

Mike asked again, “Where am’ I?”

“You’s be in a Military Hospital in New Deli,” replied Doctor Kumar, then he asks, “How’s you’s feel?”

“A bit groggy, Sir, and my left leg feel’s funny.”

“Yes—you’s be getting over the grogginess in a few days,” Doctor Kumar explaining, “it be the pain medication—you’s had a bullet crack you’s left femur and severed some major veins—you’s lost a lot of blood, but we replace,” pointing to the red bag.

“My left leg feels heavy,” Mike complaining.

“You’s have a cast on left leg until crack heals—it’ll take about three weeks.”

It takes a few seconds for the information to sink into his groggy mine, and then Mike exclaims, “A cast on my left leg—three weeks to heal!”

Both the Doctor and the Nurse nod.

Then Doctor Kumar tells Mike, “After three weeks here—maybe less—you’s be going to rehabilitation unit for maybe one month to get the weak and sore leg to work again.”

“Another two months!” Mike exclaims in shock; Doctor Kumar nods with, “Yes, about two months.”

Still looking rather groggy and now stunned at hearing what Doctor Kumar had told him, Mike closes his eyes, when he opens them again it’s several hours later.

Mike looks up at the white textured ceiling tiles and wonders where he is, and then his memory slowly returns and he looks at all of the stuff around the head of his bed, all connected to him by wires and tubes.

Then he looks away towards the far wall, for that's all he can see, because of the drawn curtains on either side of his bed; there, against the far wall appears to be his civilian bag and fully packed duffle bag which surprises and confuses him, because how could they be here, his stuff is in his wall locker at the 39th in Nagpur.

Then Mike hears groans coming from the other side of the curtain to his left; he looks at the curtain wondering who's on the other side?

Doctor Kumar and Nurse Goel enter his little area followed by an American Army Second Lieutenant and a Staff Sergeant; they remain at the foot of the bed while the Nurse and the Doctor approach on either side.

As Nurse Goel attends to the two IV lines (Plastic tubes) Doctor Kumar lifts the sheet and examines the leg; upon finishing, he lowers the sheet, turns to the nearby computer monitor and keyboard, and enters new information.

Upon finishing, Doctor Kumar turns and with a big smile he says, "Corporal Troff, you's doings just fine, and the way you's are healing you's be off the pain medication, and as soon as you's gets you's strength back, you's be leaving this area in a week or two."

As Mike looks at them smiling back at him and nodding, he's thinking, "Great—two more weeks of this—just great!"

Then he looks at the two men standing at the foot of his bed and when Doctor Kumar sees Mike eyeing the two visitors, he smiles and tells him, "You's have two guests, and we'll leave now," he nods to the Nurse for them to leave and they walk out.

Then the Lieutenant and Staff Sergeant came and stood on either side of Mike's bed.

The Lieutenant introduces himself and the Staff Sergeant, "Corporal Troff, I'm Lieutenant Paul Baxter, First Platoon Leader and this is Staff Sergeant Marvin Atwell the First Platoon Sergeant," pointing at the Staff Sergeant standing on the other side of the bed; Mike looks at them wondering why they're here.

After introducing himself and the Sergeant, Lieutenant Baxter explains why they're here, "The reason we're here is to inform you that you've been transferred to the 40th American Expeditionary Battalion, Charlie Company, and have been assigned to the First Platoon. So, as soon as you're released from the Rehabilitation unit, you're to report to Charlie Company. You'll receive official orders just before you get released from rehab—we'll be expecting to see you—do you have any questions?"

“My stuff—when did they empty my wall lockers?” Mike asked looking glazed.

“Your wall locker in your previous unit was emptied shortly after they received word that you were going to be gone for over a month—your personal and military stuff is over there,” explained Lieutenant Baxter, and points to the duffle bag and civilian bag sitting next to the far wall, “any more questions?”

“Yeah, --why was I transferred—did I do something wrong?” Mike asked, remembering when he got transferred from the 127th at Cetin.

“You’re old unit couldn’t fulfill it’s mission with a missing Squad leader and several men—especially for the length of time you would be gone, so, Battalion did a swap, and we got you and your old unit got one of our seasoned veterans,” explained Lieutenant Baxter.

After hearing this, Mike felt dejected with a doleful expression.

Then Lieutenant Baxter asked, “Any other questions before we have to leave?”

Mike slowly shakes his head, and then Lieutenant Baxter tells him with a smile, “We must leave now, so get well and we’ll be looking forward to seeing you in a month or so,” Mike weakly nods, then they leave; feeling very despondent, Mike closes his eyes.

Monday morning after knocking and “Please enter” is heard, Major Clark enters Major General Richard Griggs office and introduces himself in a courteous manner, “Good morning Sir. I’m Major Larry Clark and I have transfer orders to join your staff,” and starts walking to the Generals desk; the General smiles, then he gets up.

“Yes Major, and welcome,” General Griggs says greeting, and starts walking to meet Major Clark, offering his hand after they meet halfway.

After shaking hands, General Griggs leads Major Clark to a large plush chair in front of his desk, which he offers him.

As Major Clark settles in, General Griggs goes to his large chair and sits down behind his desk.

Then Major Clark asks, “Sir, why was I transferred here?”

“Because, I think you’re uniquely qualified to head up a special EXR tactical response unit and a advanced tactical training unit. The quick response unit is to be based here in Washington at Fort Belvoir and the advanced tactical training unit at Fort Irwin,” explained General Griggs.

“Why me, Sir. I’m sure there are some men better qualified than I am.”

“Because Major, of a memo and other information I recently received, pertaining to the use of a PL9 as a weapon of which I think uniquely

qualifies you,” replied General Griggs with a fixed expression.

“Ok, but how does that memo uniquely qualify me?” asked Major Clark searching.

“For one—the contents of this memo,” said General Griggs removing a document from his desk drawer and holding it up, “and two—information about an EXR Fighter Pilot in India that used a PL9 as a weapon and downed an enemy aircraft—in fact, he scored three kills that day.”

“Ok—so how big a units are we talking?” inquired Major Clark looking quizzical.

“Company size for each,” replied General Griggs, “the existing training Platoon at Irwin, can be incorporated into a Company, along with another two Platoons for support—that’ll give you a EXR Tactical Training Company of three platoons or so. The Tactical Response Company will be located at Fort Belvoir and Davison Airfield. They’ll become the first Companies of the new 83rd EXR Battalion and you’ll be the Commanding Officer. You’ll select the commander of the 81st EXR Tactical Training Company and the Commander of the 660th EXR Tactical Response Company.”

“You want me to be the CO of the 83rd EXR Battalion,” Major Clark repeated choking, General Griggs smiles nodding.

“I’m a Major— isn’t a Major being assigned as a Battalion Commander lowering the bar a bit, Sir?”

Then General Griggs reached into his center desk drawer and removes a small black box and slides it across the top of his desk towards Major Clark telling him, “That’s for you Colonel.”

Major Clark’s eyes enlarged and for a few seconds he just stared, then he bent over and reached for the box; taking the box, Major Clark settled back into his plush chair and opened the box, and inside he found the silver oak leaf insignia of a Lieutenant Colonel.

General Griggs remarks with a smile, “Now the bar doesn’t have to be lowered.”

“I guess not, and thank you, Sir.”

“You deserve it Colonel, and congratulations,” General Griggs tells him getting up and extending his hand over the desk; Colonel Clark gets up and takes his hand and they shake, then they both sit down.

Then General Griggs says, “Before I let you go there’s one small favor I require of you,” Colonel Clark raises his eyebrow thinking, here it comes—the attached string; “And it’s this, that you personally select the best-of-the-best EXR Fighter Pilots for the tactical response unit—everyone you select should be an Ace.”

“Wow Sir!” Colonel Clark exclaims, “That’s going to a rather tough request to fulfill, considering there’s no one that I know of whom currently meets that criteria.”

“I believe I just mentioned a possible candidate a few minutes ago,” General Griggs tells him with a grin, and then adds, “So, why don’t you start with him.”

“Yes Sir, but that’s only one Pilot and three kills don’t make him an Ace, besides, I don’t even know his name.”

“That’s true Colonel, we don’t, but that was over two weeks ago and by now he’s probably is an Ace—as for a name—none was mentioned, but his call was Pegasus.”

Colonel Clark sat there bug-eyed with his mouth open thinking, “It’s Mike Troff—he’s in India and flying.”

“I’m very certain by the time you get the Battalion and each unit established there will be more qualified men to populate your units,” General Griggs tells him looking resolute.

“Ok Sir—I’ll try,” said Colonel Clark in an optimistic tone, feeling a bit uncertain, and then he asked, “Is there a location at Belvoir where I can begin to assemble my Battalion Headquarters?”

General Griggs nods, opens his left top desk drawer and removes a document and places it on the desktop and slides it towards Colonel Clark remarking, “Here, this may help—the locations for each of the units have already been selected—all you have to do is assemble them.”

Colonel Clark takes the document and reads it and politely replies, “Thank you Sir—this will do nicely,” and then he asked, “What about recruitment, equipment procurement, and then there’s budgeting? We’re talking major funds here.”

“You let me worry about the funding part. I’ll get you cleared through G1 here in Washington, so you can start selecting you department staff—et cetera—just submit a list of names and I’ll see that you get them transferred to you, and as for the funding—we’re at war Colonel, so whatever the cost, if you need it you’ll get it. Right now this special Battalion has top priority, but you still must submit a budget through me—do you have any other questions or concerns?”

“No Sir, that about does it,” replied Colonel Clark.

“Ok then,” says General Griggs, rising from his chair, starts walking around the side of his desk and approaches Colonel Clark with out held hand; Colonel Clark gets up and takes his hand and they shake with General Griggs telling him, “Good luck Colonel.”

“Thank you Sir.” And then Colonel Clark walks out of the office.

CHAPTER 21 – Hospital Tribulation.

On Monday, Mike's IV lines and wire leads were removed and he was transferred to another ward.

Now off the pain meds, Mike could once again feel his left leg and it felt warm, itchy and very sore inside that cast.

For the next two weeks, Mike was taken out of his bed and made to walk back and forth in the ward on crutches to get his strength back.

Slowly, Mike got stronger and the soreness went away, but that damn cast itched so bad that it was driving him insane with no way to scratch, then one morning he was put into a wheelchair and taken to a room where his leg was X-Rayed.

The next day Doctor Kumar arrived, with an Assistant holding a nasty looking tool with a circular saw blade attached to it, and greets Mike with, "Good Morning—how's you's feel today?"

"Ok, but that damn cast is causing my leg to really itch," replied Mike meekly, glancing at the nasty looking tool while sitting up in bed.

"Good," replied Doctor Kumar, "after reviewing the X-Rays of the crack in your left femur, it appears it has healed quite nicely and today we're going to remove that cast."

The Assistant took the end of the cord with the attached plug and went over and plugged it into an outlet, and then he placed a plastic sheet under the cast.

With a big smile on his face, Doctor Kumar said, "Lets see what that leg looks like, so lets begin," and flips the switch; the tool makes a loud sound like a power hand saw, Mike's anxiety level ratchets up three notches.

Doctor Kumar, with a big grin, and like an evil scientist, said with a giggle, "This isn't going to hurt a bit—you's won't feel's a thin' except maybe a slight tickle as the blade touches you's skin."

Mike looks at him and begins showing some signs of fear, and as Doctor Kumar moves towards the cast with what looks like a spinning saw blade, Mike holds his breath, backs up towards the head of his bed and wants to scream.

Seeing Mike slide away, Doctor Kumar nods to the Assistant and he grabs Mike and holds him in a judo lock.

Unable to move, Mike with perspiration forming on his forehead is about to cry out as the saw touches the cast and plaster dust starts to fly.

As the blade makes its way down the cast, Mike holds his breath waiting for that painful moment when that awful blade slices into his leg, but as the saw reaches the end of the cast, nothing, no pain, no blood; Mike relaxes, but the Doctor isn't finished, he announces, "Now for the other side and starts cutting the cast on the other side.

After shutting the cast-saw off and lying it to one side, Doctor Kumar separates the cast and exposes Mike's leg; it looks sickly whitish with a very red spot where the skin is bunched and tied with black three closely spaced sutures.

Doctor Kumar examines the wound and smiles commenting, "The wound looks like its healing nicely—in a few days we can remove the sutures," and then he points to Mike and says, "now you's can wear you's pants again and start therapy—yes."

Mike smiles overjoyed that he now can get out of this stupid hospital gown and put on a decent pair of pants.

The next day, now wearing his green fatigue cargo pants, Mike is taken by wheelchair to his new home; a semi-private room in the rehab-unit.

Later that day, Mike's civilian and duffle bags were brought and placed next to wall by his bed.

Before the nurse left, he informed Mike that tomorrow he would start the therapy sessions; the nurse also informed Mike to unpack a few things he would need to wear and use for personal hygiene, because he would be spending the next few weeks here.

Now besides his, there was another bed on the other side of the room, a window separated the two beds, similar to what he had when he shared a room with Staff Sergeant Lambert.

Each bed had its own closet and a single door near the back of the room led to a private bathroom.

Inside the closet there was several drawers for personal items, so Mike unpacked his military duffle and hung several green fatigue uniforms in the closet and from his civilian bag he put some personal stuff into one of the drawers; the bottom drawer already contained bath towels and washcloths.

When five-o'clock arrived, a male nurse arrived and Mike was taken by wheelchair to the dining room and wheeled up to a table where he received a food tray; three more men were wheeled to his table and had food trays delivered.

The man sitting across from Mike looked at him and said, "Hi—I'm Bill—Bill Groth, then the man to Mike's right quickly piped up, "Tom here—

Tom Knox."

He was followed by the man on Mike's left, "And, I'm Dave Edson," extending his hand; Mike takes his hand and simply says, "Hi."

Then they look at Mike expecting him to introduce himself and when he doesn't, Bill bluntly asked, "Now you know who we are, and so, who are you?"

"I'm Mike Troff," replied Mike, and resumed eating; the other three men returned to their meals as well, then Mike asked, "How long have you guys been here?"

"I'm been here for almost two weeks now," Tom replied, "expect to be heading back to my unit next week."

"I as well," added Dave with a British accent, to Mike's surprise; remembering that he's part of a UN Coalition and other countries are involved.

Then Bill said, "I just arrived, I'm told I'll be here for three weeks—broken right leg—what about you?"

"I've been in the medical unit for about three weeks now," replied Mike, "just got transferred to this unit—I'm told I'll be here for another two to three weeks."

"What happened?" asked Bill looking shocked?

"Took a round in my left leg—cracked the femur bone," replied Mike nodding.

"We were hit with an IDE (Improvised Explosive Device) which rolled the bloody truck with me and Tom inside—we were really, really lucky with only broken bones and cuts—it was still rather bloody, but we could've been heading home in a bloody box," Dave piping up.

"So how are we doing in the war?" Mike asked changing the subject.

"Not so good I'm afraid," Tom replied looking and sounding glum, "the middle east is in flames—Israel is barely holding on—Turkey is just getting by, and the Kurds in eastern Turkey have allied with their brethren in northern Iraq, and Iran to revolt and declare their own country of Kurdistan—they have also joined the Iranian alliance."

"What about India?" inquired Mike?

"Not so good," replied Tom, "Pakistan is now in control of Kashmir and is advancing into Punjab providence. The UN Coalition has control of the Arabian Sea for the moment and halted and repulsed the Pakistani intrusions in the south, but up in Punjab, the cities, towns and villages around Amritsar, Batala and Kangra have come under Pakistani control. We're holding them at Moga, Phagwara, Hashiarpur and Manlupur on eastern foot hills of the Shivalik Mountains."

“And Yesterday a two engine supply plane disappeared in the Shivalik Mountains on the way to Manlupur,” Bill added.

“What happen to it?” Mike asked; Tom, Bill and Dave shrugged their shoulders.

“Was a search conducted?”

“Yeah—but nothing was found—no wreckage—nothing, it completely disappeared,” replied Bill, “the steep mountain terrain and thick forest can easily hide a small plane, besides, the mountains were covered by low thick clouds—the Pilot probably got lost and flew off course.”

“Not likely,” countered Mike, “a twin engine plane is equipped to fly in that kind of weather, and the Pilot is trained in the use of IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) instruments, so I think the plane was either shot down or sabotaged—with no wreckage, I bet it was sabotage.” The three men look at Mike with somber expressions.

A couple of days later, after breakfast, Doctor Kumar and a nurse assistant, carrying a small stainless tray with a surgical tweezers and nasty looking snips, entered Mike’s room; Doctor Kumar announced with a smile, “It’s time we removed those sutures, so please removes your trousers.”

Mike slid his pants down to his ankles to expose the sutured wound.

Then Doctor Kumar told him, “You’s does can either sits on you’s bed or lays on you’s right side.”

Mike chose to lie on his right side, and with some concern he asked, “Will this hurt?”

“No—not’s at all,” replied Doctor Kumar grinning, “just like when I’s removed the cast you’s won’t feels a thing.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Mike’s Roommate from the other bed piped up.

“Huh!” Mike responds looking over to his Roommate; his Roommate nodding.

Doctor Kumar motioning to Mike’s Roommate, telling him, “Don’t you’s have someplace you’s need to be?”

Mike’s Roommate gets up and starts for the door dismissively saying, “Be glad to leave—couldn’t stand all the loud screaming and crying, besides, you’ll be in quite some pain for the rest of the day—don’t expect you’re going to get much sleep tonight—I didn’t when they took my stitches out.”

Doctor Kumar gave him a nasty look and waved his hand towards the door and sharply tells him, “Outs—now!”

Mike’s Roommate walks out of the door, leaving Mike feeling apprehensive and looking uneasy.

Doctor Kumar, trying to undo the damage caused by the Roommate, reassures Mike, “He’s trying to scares you’s—its not as he says. You’s only feels some tugging—that’s all—no pain—just tugging. Now let’s take a look at you’s sutures,” Doctor Kumar starts examining the sutured wound.

Then Doctor Kumar remarks, “This looks very, very good—so, lets begins,” and reaches for the tweezer with one hand and the snips with the other.

Mike held his breath when the Doctor grabbed the end of the suture; Mike felt the tug when Doctor Kumar pulled on the knotted suture, but when he pulled harder to expose the suture below the knot sharp pain shot through Mike’s leg and he loudly complained, “O O OUCH!”

His Roommate was right and that nasty Doctor had lied.

Then, just about the time Mike was going to pass out, the Doctor snipped the expose suture and removed it remarking, “Two more to go.”

When Doctor Kumar grabbed the next one and tugged, it instantly hurt, because the first one still was hurting and when he pulled very sharp pain from both sutures shot through Mike’s body; with several drops of perspiration running down his very red face, Mike was feeling light headed.

When the Doctor snipped the second suture, Mike gave out a loud yell of pain.

Doctor Kumar tells him, “Hang in there—you’s not teenager—you’s adult—only one more to go.”

With perspiration now streaming down his very red face, Mike nods thinking, “Hurry up--get it over with,” and clinches his teeth.

When the Doctor grabbed the last suture, Mike was glad he was lying down, because he had no place to fall, and then as the last suture was firmly pulled, everything went dark.

It was two hours later when Mike awoke to a very sore leg and some jeering coming from his Roommate, “Hey—couldn’t stand the pain huh—you wouldn’t still be a teenager—would you?”

Mike turns and looks at him with a quizzical expression.

“Well—are you still a kid?”

“No—I’m twenty,” Mike finally answered with a bilious expression.

“Close enough,” replied the Roommate, “basically, you’re still a kid.”

“I’m no kid,” Mike defiantly replied, and then he asked, “How old are you?”

“Twenty-two,” replied the Roommate with cheeky grinning expression.

“Twenty-two--huh,” Mike retorted, “that’s only two years older than me—you’re still a kid too.”

“Don’t you wish,” argued the Roommate, “I’m over twenty-one, and besides, I didn’t pass out when he removed my stitches, but it did hurt like hell, like I told you.”

Mike didn’t sleep well that night, because of the very sore leg; the next morning, using crutches, Mike slowly hobbled to the dining room for breakfast.

Because of the sore leg, therapy went very slow that day; it got better the next day, and by the end of the week the leg no longer hurt.

By the middle of March, Mike progressed to where he was walking normally again, and then early on the third Monday morning a Female Nurse entered Mike’s room, which he now occupies by himself, because his roommate had returned to his unit.

She was carrying several sheets of papers, hands them to Mike informing him, “These are you’s Hospital discharge papers and orders for assignment to you’s new unit, so you’s can begins packing, but before you’s leaves stop by the Nurses Station to check out and get you’s Data Link updated and obtain you’s 201 Data Disk—any last minute questions?”

“Yeah—what uniform is proper for checking out?”

“BDU’s and boonie hat—any other questions?” She asked.

“No, and thank you,” Mike politely replied shaking his head.

“You’s welcome,” and then she turns and walks out of the room.

Mike spent the next two hours repacking his duffle and civilian bags; now wearing a clean set of BDU’s, Mike heads for the central Nurses Station.

Mike walks up to the Nurses Station where several Nurses and two clerks are sitting entering information on terminals.

One of the Clerks looks up and sees Mike and asks, “May I’s help you’s Corporal.”

“Yeah, I was told to stop here to check out—I’ve been discharged,” Mike replies.

“May I see you’s discharge paper,” the Clerk requested with out held hand; Mike hands her the document.

After receiving it, the Clerk started typing on her terminal; then she requested with out held hand, “I need you Data Link.”

Mike removes the Data Link from around his neck and hands it to her.

After updating the Data Link, she removes it, and then she gets up and goes into another room.

Several minutes later, she returns with the small thin metal box containing the Data Disk and hands both to Mike; “Any questions,” She asks?

“Yeah,” Mike responded as he put the Data Link back inside his shirt, “how does one go about getting a ride to my unit.”

“Stop at Information Desk on main floor and they’ll help you’s—any other questions?”

Mike shakes his head and puts the thin metal box into the pocket on his duffle bag.

Then he grabs both bags and heads for the nearest elevator; getting out on the main floor, Mike heads for the Information Desk.

Stopping at the Information Desk, Mike inquires about getting a ride to his unit, which the friendly Clerk arranges, and tells Mike, “Someone’s from you’s unit will be here in a few minutes—you’s can wait over there,” pointing to a small waiting area with rows of comfortable padded chairs; Mike nods and goes over and sits down.

Twenty minutes later, a PFC walks up to the Information Desk and speaks to the Clerk, she points to Mike the PFC turns and walks over to Mike and asks, “You Corporal Troff?”

“Yeah,” Mike responds nodding.

“Come with me,” the PFC said, “I’m from Battalion and I’m supposed to take you to Battalion HQ.”

Mike gets up, grabs his bags and follows the PFC out to his waiting vehicle.

A few minutes later they arrive at Battalion Headquarters.

Mike gets out of the vehicle and goes into the building; following the information signs, he locates G1 and enters the room and walks up to the counter with a Buck Sergeant and two Sp4’s typing at computer terminals.

The Sergeant looks up and sees Mike and asks, “Can I help you with something Corporal?”

Mike hands him the sheet of paper with his orders and says, “I’m reporting for duty.”

The Sergeant looks at the paper and says, “Just a minute Corporal—let me see what Company you’ll be assigned too,” and starts typing on his terminal; after double checking, he hits a key and the printer starts printing, when its finished, the Sergeant removes the sheet and lays it on the counter-top and tells Mike, “There’s been a change of orders since the one you were

issued. You've been reassigned to the 39th Battalion at the Dholewal Military Camp at Ludhiana—that's northwest of here in Punjab Province—here's your new orders—any questions Corporal?"

He slides the paper with the new orders to Mike.

"Yeah—how do I get there?" Mike asked taking the sheet of paper.

"The Duty Driver will take you to the airfield where you can catch a transport."

"Thanks," Mike says and grabs his bags and heads back out of the building.

Finding that same PFC, who brought him standing next to his vehicle, Mike walks up and announces, "I've been reassigned and I need a ride to the airfield."

"Get in," said the PFC, and as Mike put his bags into the back of the vehicle, the PFC got in, then Mike slid in on the passenger side.

When they arrived at the airfield it was very busy, two F30's were taking off and four Helicopter Transports were sitting with running engines and rotating blades waiting for a platoon to load; Mike got out of the vehicle and headed over to a Staff Sergeant in charge of the platoon.

Mike said, after he walked up to the Staff Sergeant, "Sergeant, I'm Corporal Troff and I have orders assigning me to the 38th Battalion at Dholewal—if there's room, I sure could use a lift."

"Corporal, you're in luck—I just happen to have a vacancy in the Second Squad—so fall in."

"Thanks Sarge," Mike said with a smile and hurried over and took his place at the end of the Second Squad.

The members of the Squad looked at this new man with puzzled expressions wondering who is this guy?

A short while later, a 2nd Lieutenant walked up to the Staff Sergeant; the Staff Sergeant came to attention and saluted, and then they talked, the Lieutenant pointing to the waiting Helicopters and occasionally looking at Mike.

The Staff Sergeant nods several times and also looks at Mike and finally salutes, after the Lieutenant returns the salute, he turns and walks away, and then the Staff Sergeant turns to face the Platoon and calls them to attention.

With the Platoon standing at attention, the Staff Sergeant orders, "Time to load-up—one Squad per Helicopter, starting with the First Squad—**FALL OUT!**"

Each Squad heads for a Helicopter, Mike and the Second Squad hurries to the second Transport Helicopter and gets in.

When all four Helicopters were loaded, they started taking off, one after another, heading to the northeast.

As Mike flew towards his new home, he couldn't help thinking that he's once more heading back into harms way; maybe this time he won't luck out with a bullet to the leg, but maybe the fatal one that sends him home in a box.

CHAPTER 22 – EXR Recovery Mission.

After having settled in at Fort Belvoir, Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark begins setting up his new Battalion Headquarters and once he had accomplish that, he starts searching for men, women and Pilots to make up the new 660th Tactical Response Company.

The first Pilot, Colonel Clark wants is Mike Troff, so a week before Mike leaves the Military Medical Facility at New Delhi; Colonel Clark goes to G1 in the Pentagon and requests Mike's DD201 data file to learn of his current status.

Colonel Clark is shocked to discover that Mike is only an E4 with the rank of Corporal; he also learns that Mike has been transferred to 40th American Expeditionary Battalion, Delta Company, in New Delhi India after being hospitalized for a wound received in combat at Ladapur, of which he has been recommended to receive the Bronze Star for Meritorious Conduct and the Purple Heart for the wound suffered.

Colonel Clark smiled and silently said, "I knew this kid was special from the first time I met him in Roseville so long-ago," then he stuffs, Mike's file into his briefcase and with a sigh, Colonel Clark adds grabbing the handle, "now to get Mike commissioned and reassigned to the 660th."

In the Pentagon, Lt. Colonel Larry Clark enters the office of Major General Richard Griggs and requests to see the General; the head clerk, a Master Sergeant, informs Colonel Clark the General will see him and he can go right in.

As Colonel Clark is about to enter, General Griggs comes out, drops a file on the nearest clerks desk, and when General Griggs sees him he goes and meets him with extended hand, "Colonel Clark—how's the new 83rd coming—any problems?"

"Everything is progressing just fine Sir," replied Colonel Clark shaking the Generals hand.

"That's great—come and tell me about it," says an enthusiastic General Griggs opening the door to his office and motions for Colonel Clark to enter.

After being ushered to that plush chair, Colonel Clark sits down, and as General Griggs seats himself in his large office chair behind his desk, he asks, "So tell me all about how the new Battalion is coming."

"The Battalion Headquarters is complete and functioning—the 81st is almost there, I've requested that the advanced training company at Irwin be

transferred to 81st, and I've located a couple of old business clients, that happen to be EXR Pilots, and that I still need to speak with."

"Who may I ask are they?" inquired General Griggs?

"One of them is Major Donald Zempel—he's the leader of the Humming Birds, a Helicopter Aerobatic Team—I would like him to be the Commanding Officer, and the other Pilot, also a member of the Humming Birds, is Captain Harold Tate, and I want him to command the Training Unit. Considering their skill level I think they'd be excellent for heading the Tactical Training Company."

"I agree—excellent choices—and the rest of the company?" remarked General Griggs.

"The commander's for the 1st and 2nd Platoons which are the Headquarters staff and the Support Platoon—I'm thinking of using Master Sergeants for those Platoons, which I still haven't filled as yet, but the bigger problem is the 660th—so far I've only been able to come up with five men to fill some of the command positions and two Pilots for one of the Squadrons—again I'm thinking of using Master Sergeants for the Headquarters and Support Platoons."

"I see," said General Griggs looking somber, "what seems to be your problem?"

"Finding qualified Pilots," returned Colonel Clark, "you set the bar pretty high—if you remember. Major Dave Barq from Fort Irwin is my choice for the Commanding Officer, if he'll accept, and Captains Wayne Tripp and Scott Schultz, also from Fort Irwin, to command the two Flight Units. I've only found two qualified Pilots for two of the four Squadron leaders and one of them is First Lieutenant Ed Kiver."

"You mentioned two—who's the second Pilot?"

"The second Pilot is Pegasus, and he's the one I really want, and the problem," explained Colonel Clark reaching into his briefcase and removing Mike's DD201 file and lays it on General Griggs desk.

General Griggs opens the folder, he raises his eyebrows when he sees the name and current rank and declares, "He's not commissioned and there's no record of him attending any kind of flight school—are you sure this man is Pegasus?"

"Yes Sir, now you see my problem" Colonel Clark replied nodding, "I've trained him myself—Sir, he's the best natural Pilot I have ever seen, I can sit here and spend hours telling you about his flying abilities—in fact, he trained and flew with the Humming Birds and both Major Zempel and Captain Tate will attest to his flying skill along with Major Barq who flew with

him during the Powder Horn exercises.”

“Ok I hear you, but he’s not a commissioned officer, and only commissioned officers can pilot an EXR Helicopter,” explained General Griggs.

“That’s where I was hoping you could help Sir.”

“How so?” asked General Griggs?

“Sir—since we’re now at war maybe you could try and get Pegasus a battlefield commission. I would think considering his flight and field records, that shouldn’t be too big of a problem, and if you need any affidavits, I’m sure that shouldn’t be a problem either—and I need him transferred to the 660th.”

General Griggs looks at Colonel Clark straight-faced, and then he responds, “I don’t think they’ll go for it, but I’ll give it a try. What I can do is get Corporal Troff assigned to the 660th, and then you can coax him into going to OCS.”

Colonel Clark reluctantly nods, knowing that no amount of coaxing is going to get Mike to agree on going to OCS, because he’s already been down that road.

General Griggs leans back into his armchair and announces, “I have a problem too—yesterday we lost a EXR3.”

“How? Where?” asked Colonel Clark?

“It was downed by an enemy PL9 northeast of Ludhiana, in foothills of the Shivalik Mountains,” replied General Griggs looking somber, “at least it didn’t crash—it went down in a controlled descent and the Pilot was captured—he’s now a prisoner of the Pakistani’s.”

“I didn’t know we had an EXR3,” remarked Colonel Clark with a surprised expression.

“It’s our latest model—faster, higher ceiling, more maneuverable, improved instrumentation, and more firepower—I could go on and on, and considering we’ve been losing aircraft to enemy PL9s it was decided to deploy them to the combat theaters—big mistake—now we’ll pay I fear.”

“Sir, the EXR3 should’ve never been deployed until the Pilots that will be flying them learn how to handle a PL9—I know of only a few Pilots who in my opinion are qualified to fly that EXR, and one of em’ is an E4—now Sir—will you get Mike Troff a commission,” Colonel Clark hotly declared looking stern.

“I don’t have that authority,” General Griggs hotly argued, “All I can do is to pass on your concerns.”

“The EXR3--do you think they’ll try to reverse engineer it?” Asked Colonel Clark looking impassive and changing the subject.

“They will if they can get it back to Islamabad, and the only way that can happen is if they either they fly it back or transport it by rail or truck. I don’t see them trying to transport it, because its to large, and in order to do so would mean they have to disassemble it, which I don’t think they want to do—they need it in one piece if they intend to reverse engineer it, so my guess is, they have it hidden somewhere waiting for a Pilot to fly it out.”

“So, what are we doing—waiting for them to fly it back to Islamabad?” inquired Colonel Clark with an etched expression.

“No—orders are being cut to have a Squad from the 38th go into the foothills of the Shivalik Mountains and find and destroy the EXR3,” argued General Griggs.

“Destroy it!” exclaimed Colonel Clark, and then he asked, “Why not have someone fly it back—that’s what you said the Pakistani’s are intending to do?”

“Because, as you so astutely pointed out, Colonel, we have no one qualified in the theater to fly it—we can’t afford to loose it to a PL9 round again,” General Griggs hotly pointing out.

“Yes you do,” Colonel Clark retorted, “he’s an E4 and currently assigned to the 40th American Expeditionary Battalion in New Delhi. Get him transferred to the 38th at Dholewal and get him a Commission so he can fly—and he’ll bring that EXR3 back in one piece—I’ll guarantee it,” pointing to the file on the Generals desk.

“What? And get the only Pilot qualified to fly the EXR3 killed? He was wounded in the last major battle he was in—remember,” General Griggs huffishly pointed out.

“Yes he was, but look at the report on what he did, General,” said Colonel Clark with fervor pointing to the file, “he’s very resourceful and determined and if there’s anyone who can pull this off it’s him.”

“Ok—we’ll try it your way, but I very seriously doubt they’ll give him a commission,” said General Griggs with furrowed brow, “I’ll include a copy of Corporal Troff’s DD201 with my recommendation and see what happens—my guess is nothing.”

“Thank you Sir—that’s all I ask. Is there anything else Sir?”

“No, that’s all for now. If the recommendation doesn’t workout, I’ll have Corporal Troff Transferred to your Battalion, and then you can send him to OCS—you may go Colonel.”

The next day, Colonel Clark received Mike’s DD201 file and a short memo saying the recommendation was received favorably and a commission is being looked into; Colonel Clark smiles.

It was early afternoon when the Transport Helicopters set down on marked areas in an open field at the Dholewal Military Camp in the city of Ludhiana.

The camp looked like a huge park with lots of tall concrete buildings surrounded by a thick lush forest.

The Platoon unloaded and marched the distance of a couple of city blocks to where a row of large three story 'H' shaped buildings were located; they halted in front of the second building from the end of the row.

Mike was glad he didn't have to march any further, because his arms ached and he felt weak lugging both bags; he still wasn't up to this kind of activity since getting out of the Hospital.

After the Staff Sergeant dismissed the Platoon, he told Mike to report to Battalion Headquarters, pointing to the adjacent building on the end, so with his bags, Mike goes into the next building.

Locating the Battalion G1 office, Mike enters and walks up to the counter while several men and woman sitting behind desks are working on computer terminals; a Buck Sergeant nearby talking to one of the Sp4 clerks sees Mike, comes over and asks, "Can I help you soldier?"

"Yeah," Mike replied retrieving his orders and handing it to him, "I've been transferred from the 39th—actually the 40th—I'm being bumped around for some reason."

The Sergeant reads the document containing the transfer orders and says, "Just a minute Corporal," and goes over to a nearby terminal and enters the basic information, a second or two later the screen displays Mike's information.

Then the Sergeant requests, extending his hand, "I need your DD201 Data Disk," Mike gets the disk and hands it to him.

Inserting the disk into the computer, the Sergeant begins typing again and after a few seconds a nearby printer begins printing and when it finished it ejects a sheet of paper; the Sergeant goes over, retrieves the page, returns to where Mike is standing, places the sheet on the counter top and tells him, "Take this page and present it to the Company Clerk of Bravo Company, which is the next building over—they'll assign you to a Platoon—that's your new home now, and good luck."

"Thanks—next building over—Bravo Company," Mike repeating taking the page, folds it, puts it into his pocket, and then he asks, "What about my DD201 Disk?"

"We'll keep it safe here--you'll get it back when you leave—anything else?"

“Nope—that about does it,” Mike responds grabbing his bags and walks out of the office.

After entering the next building with a sign that read, ‘Bravo Company 38th American Expeditionary Battalion’, Mike walks into the Company Orderly Room and stops at the Company Clerk’s desk.

Mike gets the page, unfolds it, hands it to the Sp5 sitting there and announces, “Battalion sent me here—they assigned me to Bravo Company.”

The Sp5 takes the page and after looking at it begins typing on his terminal; after a few seconds a special printer next to the far wall starts printing a card, the Sp5 gets up, goes over, retrieves the card, returns and hands it to Mike telling him, “Here’s your meal card—it’s good for any mess hall in the Battalion, so don’t lose it—you need to return it when you leave. You’ve been assigned to the First Platoon. Second Lieutenant Allen Goldstein is your Platoon Leader, Your Platoon Sergeant is Staff Sergeant Tony Hackman, First Sergeant is Raymond Coker, and the CO is Captain Wesley Garner—that’s all you need to know for now. I’ll summon Sergeant Hackman to take you to your new Platoon and he’ll fill you in on anything else you need to know—any questions?”

“Nope—that just about covers everything,” Mike replied with a grin.

“You can wait over there for Sergeant Hackman—he’ll be here in a few minutes,” announced the Sp5 pointing to several chairs arranged in a row next to the wall by the door; Mike looks in the direction he’s pointing and with a nod goes over and makes himself comfortable.

Twenty minutes later, that same Staff Sergeant that Mike introduced himself to, back at New Delhi, walked in and inquired, “Where’s the new troop?”

The Sp5 with a sarcastic grin pointed to Mike sitting in the chair; Mike gets up when the Staff Sergeant turns, and seeing Mike, he rudely remarked, “You again! Kinda’ figured you’d be assigned to my Platoon, as I currently have a vacancy,” Mike just nods with a simple smile adding, “Yeah, —it’s me.”

“Ok, follow me—you’re in the Second Squad, —the one that you were in when you flew here. Your Squad Leader is Buck Sergeant Engelby and you’ll be on the first floor—oh, and by the way, in case you weren’t told at Battalion HQ, I’m Staff Sergeant Hackman.”

“Yeah, they already told me—I’m Corporal Mike Troff.”

“Yeah, I already know,” announced Sergeant Hackman, the tone of his voice suggesting he knows more.

Sergeant Hackman leads Mike up the stairway to the first floor where he points to a set of double steel doors on the right telling Mike, "This is your new home—the First Platoon—follow me Corporal and I'll show you where you're bunking," Mike nods and follows the Platoon Sergeant through the double doors.

The barracks is laid out like similar barracks that Mike has been in, with four large cubicles, two on each side of a center aisle; Mike's cubical is the first one on his right, just like other ones he's been in.

Sergeant Hackman points to an opening between four large double wall-lockers and says, "Here you are—Second Squad—after you."

Mike enters through the meager opening, which was just large enough to pass through without his bags rubbing the lockers on either side.

When Mike and Sergeant Hackman walked in, two PFC's were sitting at a table next to the only window; when they saw Sergeant Hackman they quickly got up.

"At ease," Sergeant Hackman barked and they relaxed and sat back down.

Sergeant Hackman points to the only empty bed, at the end of four beds in a row near two double wall-lockers, at the back of the cubical and tells Mike, "As you can see you have a limited choice—so that's your bunk. Leave your bags and follow me to the Quartermaster Supply room and we'll get your bedding, then you can spend the rest of the day unpacking your bags and setting up your lockers."

After leaving his bags near the empty wall-locker, Mike followed Sergeant Hackman down to the ground floor or basement level where the Quartermaster Supply room was located.

After getting his bedding, Mike was told, by the Staff Sergeant in charge, he was to return tomorrow for field gear and a new uniform issue.

When Mike asked, "Another uniform? Why am I getting another set of BDUs?"

"You ruined your last one—didn't you, Corporal," the Quartermaster Sergeant barked.

"Ruined—oh, you mean the one with the bullet hole and blood stains," Mike replied with a grin; the Quartermaster Sergeant nodded.

When Mike returned the two PFC's were gone, so Mike made his bed and started to unpack and setup his wall lockers.

Mike was still unpacking and setting up his wall-lockers when the Squad returned; they looked at Mike remembering him from the flight from New Delhi.

The Squad Leader, a Buck Sergeant, bluntly remarked, “I remember you—you’re the one who joined our squad back in New Delhi, so you’re our new member, huh.”

“Yeah, that’s me, the new member of the Squad” Mike replied extending his hand, “I’m Mike Troff.”

“I’m Bill Engelby and leader of this here Squad,” taking Mike’s hand, and then he introduces the rest of the Squad, “These two are Corporals Davis and Diekman,” pointing at them; “and these are our cubs—PFC’s Fanning, Gammell, Ersland, and Henely.”

Mike looking a bit puzzled asked, “Why do you call those guys “Cubs”?”

“Because, their still teenagers,” replied Sergeant Engelby with a grin.

“Next month I’ll turn twenty,” Ersland quickly piped up; Mike just grinned and simply nodded.

Then Sergeant Engelby added, “Anyway, by Fall, they’ll all be twenty, so we won’t have any Cubs left. Besides, they’re four of the best shots in the Company and our Squad has em’—they all qualified as expert,” Mike thinking that’s great, now the heats off of me.

Then Sergeant Engelby remarks, “Looks like we now have three E4’s in the Squad,” and then informs Mike, “Reveille is at 0600—morning formation is at 0800. Your area and morning detail, which for our Squad is the stairwell from our floor to the basement, must be completed by morning formation. There’s a formation at 1300 and a final one at 1600. The mess hall is open from 0600 to 0800, 1100 to 1300, and from 1500 to 1700. Lights outs out at 2300—that’s about it—I don’t think I forgot anything,” looking at the other Squad members; Mike nods thinking SOP, and then asks, “So, what’s the rule on civvies?”

“Only when you’re off duty and only in the mess hall on weekends and general holidays, which will be posted,” replied Sergeant Engelby.

“Do we work on Saturdays?”

“Not normally, but there are times when we do,” replied Sergeant Engelby, “it will be posted if we’re scheduled for duty and it could be for the entire day.”

Looking at his watch, Davis piped up, “Mess hall’s open—time for chow and I’m hungry,” then looking at Mike he asked, “you want to join us?”

Mike nods, and then Mike closes his wall-lockers and together they head for the mess hall on the main floor.

The next morning, the lights came on at 0600, and by 0800, Mike had eaten breakfast, got his area squared away, and completed the morning chore with his Squad.

At the 0800 formation, Mike was ordered to draw his field gear and weapon, along with any other issue that the Quartermaster deemed necessary.

At the 1300 formation, Mike was ordered to join a group of new men in the Battalion; they were marched over to a firing range to calibrate their weapons.

Later, after eating dinner, Mike returned to his cubical and finished setting up his military wall-locker.

While Mike was putting the finishing touches to his gear, Sergeant Engelby hinted, “Don’t get your gear too organized—you might need it very soon.”

Mike stops and looks at him, along with the others, and responds, “What—are you telling us, we’re going on a mission?”

Sergeant Engelby inferring, “Could be. Heard this special attack Helicopter went down northwest of here—they called it a EXR3—and will be putting together a special Squad to go and destroy it before the enemy can get their grubby hands on it.”

“An EXR is a Fighter Helicopter not a Attack Helicopter—there’s a difference,” Mike piped up explaining, and then he asked, “Are you sure you heard right—its a EXR3 and not a EXR2?”

“I heard it was an EXR3,” said Sergeant Engelby nodding.

“Wow—that’s a new model,” remarked Mike, “no wonder the brass is concerned—if the other-side gets it to Pakistan or Iran—we’re in deep shit.”

“You think they have it already?” asked Corporal Davis with a concern expression.

“Probably, if the Pilot was captured, I’d say they have it and my guess is we’re going on a mission to find and destroy it before it gets out of India,” Sergeant Engelby surmises looking worried.

“Do you think it was shot down by ground fire or by a Jet Fighter?” asked PFC Fanning.

“My guess a ground fired PL9 missile—those stupid Pilots coming out of flight school don’t know how to quickly maneuver out of the way—they should’ve never deployed them over here until the Pilots were properly trained to fly em’,” Mike declared in a harsh tone, as they all look at him with etched expressions.

“Just how do you know so much about these Helicopters?” Sergeant Engelby asked with an accusing tone while the others turn their gaze to Mike with curious expressions; Mike quickly acknowledged, “It’s common knowledge—you all know that,” covering his slip of the tongue.

They either nodded or shrugged their shoulders, and then Mike added, “If we’re going, and the Pakistanis have it, then it’s going to be a nasty, bloody fight, because they won’t be giving it back easily.”

The look on the Squads faces was one of anxiety and fear.

The cubical was very quiet that evening, no one spoke much; they used their notepad or laptop computers to send emails home.

Mike just quietly lay there solemnly thinking back to his last fight at Ladapur and the pain he suffered, and now thinks maybe he’s destined to meet his end in the next few days.

For the next several days nothing became of Sergeant Engelby’s roomer, even Mike was beginning to believe it was nothing but a roomer and began to relax.

On the first bright sunny Monday morning in April, while standing in the 0800 formation, the roomer had become a reality.

The Company Commanding Officer, Captain Garner, announced that the Company has been selected to undertake a special mission which is vital for India and the UN Coalition.

He went on to tell them a special team from their Company, which will consist of ten handpicked men, will carry out this vital and very dangerous mission, and then after a brief pause, he turned the company over to the First Sergeant.

Then the First Sergeant began reading names from sheet on a clipboard, “Sergeant James Bartel, Corporal Troy Grogan, Corporal Christopher Hobbs,” as the names were being called, Mike felt he was safe and relaxed, as well as the rest of his Platoon, because none of the names were from the Second Platoon.

Then suddenly, the First Sergeant called, “PFC Jessie Jordahl, PFC Daniel Fanning, PFC Joseph Gammell, PFC Bob Ersland, and finally Corporal Michael Troff. These men will be joined by Specialist Mickey Travis and Gary Clarey from 2022nd Ordnance Company. Report to the Company Briefing Room after you’re dismissed—Platoon Sergeants take charge of your Platoons,” and then after salutes are exchanged, he make an about-face and walks back into the Company building.

Mike and the Second Squad is stunned, because over half of their Squad is on the Special Squad.

After Staff Sergeant Hackman has assigned his remaining men to work details, he tells the selected men to report as ordered to the Briefing Room, Mike and his four companions head for the Company Building with a foreboding feeling and somewhat uneasy.

When Mike and his four companions entered the Briefing Room, the other men were already there and seated in the front row seats; Captain Garner, First Sergeant Coker, Lieutenant Colonel Colby the Battalion Commander, and a Major were seated at a long table in the front of the room; Mike and his four companions sat down in the second row seats.

Upon seeing Mike and his four companions take their seats, Colonel Colby gets up and goes to the nearby podium and remarks, “Since we’re all here we can begin—Major—you have the floor,” turning to look at the seated Major.

The Major gets up, walks over, and pulls down a large picture of the missing EXR3 Helicopter, which intrigues Mike, and then he walks over to the podium.

He begins by introducing himself, “I’m Major Cochran from G3 CONUS and I’ve got a critical mission for you—it involves locating a missing highly advanced EXR Fighter Helicopter that we do not want the enemy to take out of India—here is a picture of the Helicopter,” turning to point at it.

When Mike heard how important it was, he was pretty sure the other-side already had possession just by the tone of the Major’s voice, he also knew this was going to be a very bloody mission.

Then the Major continued, “We would like—prefer to have the Helicopter flown back, but if that isn’t possible, then we have a contingency plan—we’ll destroy it with Thermite TH3 and C4 explosives. That’ll be the job of Specialists Travis and Clarey—they’re from the 2022nd Ordnance Company in New Delhi—the rest of you are here to get them there in one piece.”

Now Mike was totally confused, if the primary objective was to fly the Helicopter back, where is the Pilot?

He wasn’t in the room, as everyone is accounted for, except for Mike, and he felt sure no one knew he could fly, and then Mike assumed the Pilot was still to join them.

“The Helicopter was shot down about a week ago,” the Major tells them as he goes over and pulls down a large satellite image of the Punjab Province of Northern India, and using a pointer he points to the image and says, “this is where we last had contact with the Pilot and where we believe he went down. We believe its being hidden somewhere here, near or in the small village of Ghandapur. The village is currently occupied by a small garrison of Pakistani Soldiers and the one reason we haven’t been able to go in and search.”

Then Mike raised his hand; the Major pointed to him and Mike bluntly asked, “Then how do you know for certain that it’s there—maybe it managed to land further north, because even without power if the Helicopter was at an altitude of several thousand feet and flying at a high rate of speed it would’ve been able to auto-rotate a good distance beyond that village—Sir.”

Everyone looked at Mike wondering how he knew so much about that Helicopter, except the Major, and looking peeved he responds, “Because Corporal, we have good intelligence that it’s there—any more questions before we move on?”

With everyone but Mike shaking their heads, the Major remarks, “No questions, so let’s continue.”

As the Major starts to lecture, Mike leans over to Chris Hobbs and whispers, “I heard that before and got our asses handed to us at Ladapur.”

The Major resumes, “As you can clearly see, the Pakistani border isn’t very far—only a few dozen miles, which only takes that Helicopter a few minutes to traverse, and that’s why it is so important to retrieve it as soon as possible. Now this whole area is crawling with Pakistani Infantry patrols and one reason we felt a small Squad of men would have a better chance at success than an entire Company.”

With the Major’s back to them, Mike leans over and whispers to Corporal Hobbs, “I’d go with an entire Battalion—sounds like we’re expendable—it’s a one-way mission—we’re not coming back,”

Corporal Hobbs looks at Mike with a pale expression.

The Major points to the Satellite image and says, “This is the last known location of the Helicopter, and this is as close to the village that we can get you,” pointing to area adjacent to a river some distance away, “because the Transport Helicopter will be subjected to the same kind of fire that the EXR Helicopter was—so, you’ll have about a mile or so hike to the village—any questions,” and returns to the podium; no one had anything to ask, but Mike sure did, but didn’t want to argue with that officer, he might get busted to a PFC.

With no further questions, the Major returned to his seat and the Battalion Commander walked back to the podium and said, “Ok men, that about covers everything, you now know the importance of this mission—you must not fail—Ok?”

“YES SIR,” the men stood and shouted, except Mike, he just stood, because he had misgivings.

“Alright then—get geared up and be ready to move out in thirty minutes—you’re dismissed.”

As Mike walks to the door, the Major with Buck Sergeant Bartel stopped Mike, and in a very low tone Major Cochran told Mike, “I know you have some misgivings about the mission, I understand, but don’t let them get in the way—this mission must succeed—lives hang in the balance.”

Mike looks at him expressionless and nods, “Yes Sir.”

Then Major Cochran makes an unbelievable statement, “Corporal, I was informed by Major General Griggs in Washington, that if you get the opportunity you’re to fly the Helicopter back to New Delhi,” Mike looking astounded stuttered, “Ye Yes S Sir.”

“According to Military Regs, only a Warrant or Commissioned Officer Pilot can fly a military aircraft—now I’m not so sure you are a Corporal, by chance, you wouldn’t be and undercover Officer—now would you?” the Major asks in a suspicious tone of voice with a quizzical expression.

“No Sir—I’m a Corporal,” Mike slowly replied shaking his head.

“Can you fly an EXR Helicopter?” the Major asked, Mike hesitated and finally replied nodding, “Yes Sir, --I can fly a EXR Helicopter.”

Then Sergeant Bartel with a worried look on his face bluntly asked, “If Troff is an undercover Officer—who’s in command of this mission?”

“You are,” Major Cochran sharply replied, “like Troff just said, he’s a Corporal—enough said—you two better get your gear—you move out in twenty-eight minutes.”

Twenty-eight minutes later, or so, the special Squad was formed up and with Buck Sergeant Bartel in command they marched out of the company area and over to that open field where two Transport Helicopters were waiting with engines running.

Ten minutes later, they were flying northeast towards the village of Ghandapur and the Beas River.

About an hour later, they approached the Beas River and touched down just to the northeast in the river flood plain.

Disembarking, the Squad with heightened senses and weapons ready, formed two columns and started marching out of the open river flood plain; the two Transport Helicopters took off and headed back to the airbase at Chandigarh.

Following a dry watershed flow channel they steadily made their way up the valley to Ghandapur without being detected.

When they reached the vicinity of the first building, Sergeant Bartel raised his hand for the Squad to stop and in a low tone told them, “We’ll wait here undercover and out of sight until nightfall—in the meantime lets do a recon and see what we’re up against—we’ll rendezvous back here at Sundown.”

So, the Squad broke up into individuals and quietly headed out around the perimeter of the village, seeking information about the number of soldiers and their locations, as well as clues to where the Helicopter might be hidden, all the while keeping out of sight.

They were back at the rendezvous location just as the Sun began to sink down behind the mountains.

What was determined is there was in fact a Platoon of Pakistani Infantry in the village, with soldiers guarding the two roads into and out of the village—they also headquartered in what appeared to be the village’s central gathering building, and there also were patrols of two men moving about inside the village, but no signs of a Helicopter could be found, also, most of the village seemed to be abandoned.

After eating a M.R.E. in the dark, the Squad was ready to enter the Village in search of the hiding place for the Helicopter; they discovered four large steel Quonset buildings during the recon, so they split up into five man teams and headed to the two closest buildings.

After inspecting the first two Quonset buildings, and not finding the Helicopter in either, they carefully made their way to the other two without alerting the Pakistani Patrols.

Not finding the Helicopter in those buildings either, both groups headed to the woods on the opposite side of the village from where they came.

When both groups regrouped in the woods, there was confusion as to why no Helicopter was found; it appears as if the Helicopter isn’t in the village.

Corporal Hobbs sounding flustered asked, “So, what now Sarge?”

“Keep lookin’,” responded Buck Sergeant Bartel.

“Where?”

“To the northeast—that’s the quickest way back to Pakistan,” replied Sergeant Bartel.

“Ok—but, I suggest we wait until morning,” Suggested PFC Fanning, “I’m tired and besides, we’ll get lost groping around in the dark woods.”

“Ok—we’ll make camp and start out in the morning, but no campfire—we can’t risk being seen,” said Sergeant Bartel.

“Not having a campfire isn’t a good idea,” rebuffed Corporal Grogan, “unless you want to become fodder for a Wild Boar, Hyena, or worst—a Tiger. I suggest we head deeper into the forest to hide the light from the campfire, and I also suggest we take turns keeping the fire burning.”

For the next twenty minutes the Recovery Squad made their way deeper into the forest, stumbling over fallen limbs, roots, and rocks until finally, they were far enough away from the village to have a campfire without being spotted.

That night was a restless one tucked away inside their fragile dome tents; for one swipe from the claws of a Tiger would have sliced a huge hole.

All night the men would hear growls, grunts, roars, and howling that would keep them awake.

Several times, Mike thought he heard some animal sniffing at the rear of his tent and lay there holding his M20.

The next morning, there wasn’t any need to wake anyone, because everyone is still up from that awful night.

After repacking their tents and eating another M.R.E., they headed back to where they were the night before, in the forest just outside of the village.

Then suddenly out of nowhere an Indian squadron of eight attack Helicopters attacked the Pakistani soldiers in the village; a PL9 missile was fired and two Helicopters succumbed to the PL9 cloud and went down, several Pakistani soldiers capture the Pilots.

Then suddenly, the missing EXR Helicopter appeared and to everyone’s surprise, attacked the other Indian Helicopters; after shooting down three, the remaining three turned and retreated to the south towards the Indian Airbase at Chandigarh.

Mike commenting, “Well—I guess we can assume that the Pakistani Pilot arrived and they’re not to interested in flying it back to Pakistan—so much for Pentagon reasoning.”

“Now what do we do?” Asked Corporal Hobbs with a somber expression.

“Our orders are still to recover the Helicopter, and I see no reason at this time to abort,” proclaimed Sergeant Bartel, “Troff—go and see if you can still see if the Helicopter is nearby, and if it is watch where it goes. Specialist Travis and Clarey—you go with Troff. In the mean time the rest of us can see if there’s anything we can do to help free the two Indian Pilots.”

“How do you plan to take on a Platoon of Pakistani Infantry with only seven men—I think you need us,” remarked Sp5 Travis.

“That’s still only nine of us against an entire Platoon—that’s suicide, and what about the Helicopter we’re supposed to recover—didn’t you just tell us our orders still stand,” Corporal Grogan reminding him in circum-spect.

“First, Specialist Travis and Clarey are Ordinance personal and haven’t had our specialized combat training—they wouldn’t last ten seconds in a hot firefight, besides, we still need them to deal with the Helicopter once we recover it. Second, like I just told you a few minutes ago—our orders still stand unless we receive instructions to the contrary, and which I still intend on carrying out, and finally third, I don’t plan to go barging in there with guns blasting—we’ll do it intelligently by first doing a recon to find out where the Pilots are being held and the number of men guarding them—any questions?” Sergeant Bartel explained in rebuttal.

“I still feel we need Clarey and Travis—nine sets of eyes and weapons is a whole lot better than seven,” argued Corporal Grogan with everyone nodding including Specialist Travis and Clarey.

“Ok—they can come, but I’m putting you in charge of watching their backs, because if we lose either one of them our mission will be in jeopardy, and if they’re both killed, then we failed our mission—you got that, Corporal?”

“Yeah—I got that Sarge,” Corporal Grogan gruffly responded, and then he grumbled, “If you ask me—this rescue mission is a mistake—we need to concentrate on our primary mission.”

“Your concern is noted and rejected,” Sergeant Bartel hotly replied, “I’m in charge of this mission and you’ll do as I command.”

Kicking the dirt, Corporal Grogan reluctantly nods and so does the rest of the Squad.

As Mike, all by himself, made his way up to a bluff, so he could get some clue as to where the EXR Helicopter had gone, he felt Corporal Grogan was right and Sergeant Bartel was putting the mission in jeopardy with this insane rescue mission, because by now the Indian Air Force knows about the two downed Pilots and is probably planning a rescue mission of their own.

Proceeding with the rescue mission, Sergeant Bartel sent small groups of men to recon the village as to where the Pakistani’s are holding the two Indian Pilots.

A little after noon, Mike was feeling hungry when he reached the top of the bluff, and from his vantage point he could see for several miles to the north and east, and to the south and east; the forest and high mountains prevented him from seeing any distance to the west.

With no EXR Helicopter in sight, Mike sits down on an old log and eats the last of his MREs, now he'll either have to return to the Squad and radio for a risky airdrop, or do some hunting and live off the land.

Mike waited for the Helicopter to make an appearance, which it never did, and about the time he was about to give up and head back, he heard sharp popping sounds coming from the direction of village.

Getting up from his comfortable vantage point, Mike thought to himself, "Sounds like Bartel's little rescue mission hit a snag—I hope everyone's Ok—I better go and see what I can do to help."

Mike hurried as best as he could, but it was late afternoon when he reached the place where he left them.

With weapon ready, Mike carefully made his way, then he came upon a scene from a war movie; dead bodies were lying about.

The Squad must have come upon a large Pakistani patrol on the way to the village and a firefight must have ensued, leaving many Pakistani Soldiers dead as well as PFC's Jordahl, Fanning, Gammell, Ersland, and Corporal Grogan; Specialist Clarey laid a short distance from Grogan as well as two Pakistani's.

Mike said to himself, "Looks like Grogan had Clarey's back before they both were killed."

Mike feeling nauseous by the gruesome spectacle, sat down and languished, then he was hit by a revelation, where are Specialist Travis, Corporal Hobbs, and Sergeant Bartel?

Looking around, they were nowhere to be seen!

Mike said, "They were captured and taken to the village," and asks himself, "now what should I do?"

Mike now needs to make a decision, should he abort the mission, as it seems it's already in jeopardy, and try to rescue the remaining Squad members and the two or three Indian Pilots, or continue with the mission.

Mike takes a deep breath and decides to resume the mission, because the way the mission was planed, the Squad was expendable and therefore the mission is more important, besides, the Indian Air Force is probably already on their way here to free their captured Pilots; after all, EXR Pilots are hard to come by, even poorly trained ones, but now they'll also find additional prisoners to free.

Mike grinned when he thought of what's going to happen to Sergeant Bartel when the remaining Squad members get back, and the foolish rescue mission is revealed, if they don't put him in the brig, he'll be busted down to a Corporal or lower.

After retrieving several unused MREs, from his dead companions, Mike turns, and with heavy heart and feeling guilty for abandoning his Squad, heads back to where he can view the surrounding country, and waits for the Helicopter to reappear.

As the Sunset's, and still no sign of the Helicopter, Mike ate an MRE, and then he looked for a very tall tree, finding a suitable candidate, he proceeded to carefully climb as high as he could get.

Finding a firm crotch, he settled in, hoping he wouldn't fall; it was a long way down.

Now the only bad animals to worry about were Clouded Leopards and a bunch of Monkeys.

After awaking from a somewhat better night than the previous one, Mike climbed down from the tree and sat down scanning the terrain for any signs of that Helicopter; with nothing in sight, Mike ate another confiscated MRE thinking maybe the Pakistani's flew it to Pakistan after all, and the recovery mission has failed.

Then as Mike disposed of the remnants of the MRE, he saw a large formation of Indian MIG'S and a Squadron of American and Indian EXR2 Helicopters approaching from the south.

Then he noticed a large column of armored personal carriers approaching the village on the road from the southwest; Mike smiled when he sees the Pakistani's evacuating the village using the road to the northeast.

Mike says to himself, "Looks like the cowards are leaving the barn—the prisoners will be coming home."

Then suddenly, the Pakistani Solders halt; Mike notices more armored personal carriers arriving from the northeast, and these are Pakistani armored personal carriers.

Mike says to himself, "Uh-oh! Look's like a big battle brewing."

Next, from the east came two Squadrons of Pakistani MIG's and HX2's and as the Pakistani Solders started back to the village, Pakistani MIG's engaged the Indian MIG's, then the Pakistani HX2's engaged the American and Indian EXR2's.

As Mike watched the aerial battle, he watched the Helicopters with interest; noticing the American EXR2's was out gunning and maneuvering the HX2's even with poor aerial combat skills.

As Mike continued to watch, he just shook his head and wondered, who was teaching these guys, they were terrible, making mistake after mistake.

Then the stolen EXR3 arrived, and after firing several PL9 missiles, several EXR2's went down as well as the HX2's, then he ran when an Indian MIG took after him; Mike watched, hoping the MIG would destroy the EXR3, then Mike wouldn't have to go and recover it, and he could go down and rejoin his comrades.

But, Mike shook his head again, when he watched the MIG turn and return to the air battle.

Now with heighten interest, Mike watched the EXR3 Helicopter as it got smaller and smaller, then using the scope on his M20, Mike reacquired it and watched to see where it would land, when suddenly it made a sharp turn to the east and descended into another forest near a small farming village very close to the Pakistani border.

With zestfulness, Mike loudly proclaimed, "Gotcha"—now I know where to go to retrieve the EXR3."

So, Mike headed out in the direction of where he watched the EXR3 Helicopter land feeling enthusiastic, because now he has the ability to complete the mission he was sent on.

CHAPTER 23 -- MIA.

Three days after the failed mission to recover the EXR3 Helicopter, Colonel Clark gets a phone call requesting him to come to Major General Richard Griggs office; after hanging up the phone, Colonel Clark softly says, “Now I wonder what he wants—maybe he couldn’t get Mike the commission.”

Colonel Clark gets up and leaves his office, and as he passes his head clerk, he informs her, “I’ll be at Major General Griggs for the next couple hours,” she nods and he continues to his waiting staff car.

Getting in, he’s driven to the Pentagon; after arriving, Colonel Clark goes into the Pentagon and heads to the Generals office.

Upon entering the General’s office, General Griggs points to that plush chair and in a firm tone he says, “Please have a seat Colonel—we need to talk.”

Sitting down, Colonel Clark thinks this can’t be good by the sound of his voice.

The General leans back in his chair and asks, “Well Colonel, do you want the good news or bad news first?”

Colonel Clark thinks, well, might as well prepare myself with a bit of good news first, and then replies, “Let’s have the good news—it might ease the pain of hearing the bad news.”

“Ok—first the good news,” General Griggs began, and then after a short a teasing pause, he said, “Corporal Troff was granted a Battle Field Commission with full flight privileges prior to him being assigned to that EXR3 recovery mission as you suggested—so, he’s now a Second Lieutenant, but little good that does, because the bad news is—he’s MIA and presumed a prisoner or worse--dead.”

Right after hearing the commission being granted a smile came to Colonel Clark’s face along with a feeling of exhilaration, and then just as quickly, it departed when he heard the bad news; in shock, Colonel Clark asks, “What happen?”

“We don’t know, only that the mission to recover the EXR3 went sour and six men out of the ten are dead, and your Pilot is missing and presumed a prisoner of the Pakistani’s. As of this morning we don’t have any new intel as to what happened, but the Indian’s retook the village and recovered the remaining three members of the recovery detail, except their missing Pilots and Lieutenant Troff, and they’re currently undergoing a debriefing.

Colonel, we could really use your Tactical Response Unit, so if you could speed things up I would really appreciate it.”

As Colonel Clark sits there in a shocked daze, the General opens his top center desk drawer, reaches in, and removes a thin square metal case and tosses it on the top of the desk and slides it towards Colonel Clark with, “Here—this is Lieutenant Troff’s original DD201 data disk. I just received it through channels from his last unit in India—the Battalion in India retains a copy in case he shows up. Since he’ll be part of your Battalion this belongs to you—oh, and by the way, since he’s MIA, his official DD201 has been removed from the active duty database and placed in a MIA database, so, if and when he shows up, be sure to transfer him out of the MIA database and into the active duty database and apply any updates. Personally, I think he’s dead, but since his remains haven’t been found his status is in question. One more thing—since he’ll be under your command, it now becomes your responsibility to notify his next of kin.”

Upon hearing those words, Colonel Clark looked horrified and a tear formed in his eye as sadness began to fill his heart, because Mike was like a Son to him, and now he has the unfortunate duty to inform Mike’s Family of the bad news.

After a few languishing minutes, Colonel Clark pulled himself together, cleared his throat, and replies to the General’s plea, “I’m trying my best Sir—locating qualified Pilots that meet your requirements isn’t easy—Lieutenant Troff was going to be my anchor—my cornerstone—and now—I don’t know—sorry Sir.”

“Don’t start telling me about how sorry you are,” General Griggs barked, “we don’t have the time or the energy to be sorry or give excuses—do you understand Colonel?”

“Yes Sir!”

“If you can’t find the kind of Pilots that meet the original qualifications, --then lower the bar a bit,” suggests General Griggs with a sarcastic grin.

“Won’t that compromise the purpose of this special unit?” Colonel Clark asked with a quizzical expression.

“Maybe, but we don’t have many options open right now,” argued General Griggs, “what we don’t have is being real choosy—we’re in a shooting war and we need this unit to be up and running as soon as possible.”

“Without Pilots like Troff, this unit will be no better than those that’ve already failed, so why bother spending anymore taxpayers money and abort this plan,” argued Colonel Clark looking bleak.

“Forget Lieutenant Troff—he’s gone and he’s not coming back—at least not anytime soon, so get over it,” grumbled General Griggs, “but, --if that’s what you really want—it can be arranged—so, --is that what you want?”

“No—it was a good idea—I just need time to do it right,” said Colonel Clark looking pained.

“Well, --we don’t have lots of spare time,” General Griggs gruffly told him, “in time of war we make do with what we have—so, --either we continue or we don’t, it’s up to you.”

“I want to continue Sir, it was a good plan, and I’ll do my best to see it through.”

“Good,” General Griggs acknowledged with a clap of his hands and a big grin on his face, and then he asks, “Any other questions or concerns?”

Colonel Clark shakes his head, and then General Griggs says with another clap of his hands, “Well then, that about covers everything and the end of our friendly little chat.”

They both get up and shake hands, and then with a salute, Colonel Clark turns and walks out of General Griggs office.

While Mike is slowly making his way northeast to where he had seen the EXR3 Helicopter land, Colonel Clark is trying to locate Mike’s Parents to give them the bad news.

Discovering that the Troff’s house in Victorville is empty, Colonel Clark went to the Pentagon to find out where Henry Troff is currently stationed, since he’s no longer at George Air Force Base, and now learns that Henry is now a Brigadier General and is at the Pentagon; he also discovered that Henry and Maria now live in the Washington area in an apartment.

The next evening, Colonel Clark goes to Henry’s apartment and rings the doorbell; Maria opens the door and is surprised to see him.

Colonel Clark smiling very politely and in a cordial tone, he asks, “Miss Troff is the General in—I would like to speak with you both—it’s about your Son, Mike.”

With a very worried look, She asked, “Has something bad happen?”

“I rather tell you and the General together—may I come in?”

“Yes, please do, Colonel--Henry’s in the family room,” Maria replied stepping aside, with a tear forming in her eye as Colonel Clark enters the apartment.

When Colonel Clark entered the family room, Henry sees him and gets up greeting, “Welcome Colonel Clark it’s nice seeing you—have you heard from Mike lately?”

“That’s why I’m here Sir,” Colonel Clark cordially replied, and then changes tone and subject asking, “When did you move—and congratulations on the promotion.”

Henry offers Colonel Clark the easy chair, “Please have a seat Colonel,” and sits back down on the sofa.

“Thank you General,” replied Colonel Clark as he eases himself into the soft seat, Maria sits down next to Henry.

“Just moved in a week ago,” explains Henry, “got the promotion and new assignment around the time Mike was wounded—how’s he doing?”

“So—what about the house in Victorville—you still have it?” asked Colonel Clark trying to put off having to tell the General and his Wife the bad news?

“No—we put it up for sale and all of our stuff is in storage until we find another home here—this apartment is only temporary,” explained General Troff, and then he firmly asked, “Tell me about my Son, Colonel.”

Knowing he can’t put it off any longer, Colonel Clark takes a deep breath and removes an envelope from his inside pocket and hands it to Henry officially informing him, “This is an official letter to inform you that your Son, Second Lieutenant Michael Troff is missing in action and presumed a Prisoner of the Pakistani Government—it is possible he could be dead, but until his remains are found he’s listed as a Prisoner of War—I’m really sorry.”

As Maria begins weeping, Henry choking sputtered, “Where—when—what happened?”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, but we lost an advanced EXR Helicopter—it was downed by an enemy PL9 several days ago northeast of Ludhiana, in the foothills of the Shivalik Mountains, so a recovery mission was initiated with a Squad of hand picked men and Mike was included,” explained Colonel Clark, “the mission went sour and we lost all but three men—Mike was one of the ones lost, and because his remains were never recovered, he’s listed as missing—I added an extra page to the letter explaining everything—I’m so very sorry.”

Maria embraces Henry sobbing and blubbering, “Mike’s not dead—I know he’s not dead—he’s out there trying to find his way back—I just know it.”

After reading the letter, Henry’s eyebrows raise and he looks at Colonel Clark and bluntly asks, “The letter states, Mike is a Second Lieutenant—since when? The last time I heard, he was enlisted as a Corporal.”

“It’s kinda’ of a long story and the result of my promotion and reassignment, and yes—I’m working in Washington too,” Colonel Clark explains, “I’m stationed at Fort Belvoir, charged with building a new Battalion of which I’m in command of—anyway, one of the new units within this Battalion is the 660th EXR Tactical Response Company, which is supposed to be made up of the best EXR Fighter Pilots in the army, and Mike was going to be my primary Pilot. So I requested that he be commissioned and get reassigned to the 660th.”

Henry just stares and there’s silence in the room, the Colonel giggles a bit remarking, “Ironically, Mike doesn’t even know he’s got a commission—he still thinks he’s a Corporal,” and then Colonel Clark gets serious, “The commission paperwork came through just prior to him being assigned to the mission. I found out about the commission the same day I was notified the mission went sour and he went missing.”

“So, my Son doesn’t know he’s now a Second Lieutenant.”

Colonel Clark nods with a small grin, and then remarked, “Yeah—it’s been a bad week for me—besides getting the bad news about Mike—the new Battalion might be in jeopardy and me out of a job—hate to think where I might get sent.”

“What seems to be the problem?” Henry asked?

“I can’t locate enough qualified Pilots—so far I only have five, and two of them are questionable.”

“What kinda’ qualifications are you looking for?” Henry inquired looking curious?

“I need Pilots similar to Mike—you know he’s almost an Ace,” replied Colonel Clark smiling and adds, “he already has three kills and all in one aerial encounter.”

“Are you sure it was Mike—have they been confirmed?”

“Yeah, they’ve been confirmed—it was Mike alright—unless there’s another Pilot with the call sign of Pegasus,” replied Colonel Clark nodding, and then adds, “He did it while he was still an enlisted man.”

“You know of course, enlisted men aren’t allowed to fly military aircraft,” Henry reminding him in a stern tone.

“Yeah, I know. I didn’t find out until later, and he was demoted and reprimanded for it,” Colonel Clark explained, “that’s one reason why I went and got him a commission—now he’s legal, but a bit late I’m afraid.”

“It’s not too late,” Maria piping up with a stern tone, her face tear stained, “he’s not dead or captured, and he’ll show up—just wait—you’ll see.”

“Yes Missis Troff, Mike is very resourceful, but that doesn’t solve my immediate problem.”

“It takes time to get seasoned Pilots—I know—I was a Squadron Commander before I got this assignment,” Henry declares with firmness.

“That’s the problem General, I don’t have the time to season a bunch of green Pilots—unlike Mike, most can’t even execute a simple avoidance maneuver—that’s how we lost the EXR3—the fool flew through a PL9 cloud, now Mike would’ve flown around it.”

“Well then, lower the bar, so more Pilots are available—I’m sure there’s enough Pilots in the Army to fill the positions in your new unit,” suggests Henry with a serious expression.

“That’s what Major General Griggs told me, but that’ll defeat the purpose of this special unit—it will be no better than a regular unit—then what’s the point of spending all the taxpayers money and the time putting it together,” Colonel Clark explains with a sigh, “the whole purpose of this special unit is to use our most skilled and seasoned Pilots to intervene in tactically hot situations to insure a positive outcome. It’s a great idea, but I’m not so sure if I can pull it off. If I had more time to train these Pilots it would work, but I don’t,” he sighs looking defeated.

“Don’t look so bleak,” Henry said in a sympathetic tone, “I like the idea and think it’s a good one—each branch should have such a unit, better yet, why not make it joint-branch. Just think of the possibilities—a unit comprised of Air Force, Navy, and Marine F30’s and F32’s along with Army EXR3’s all working together—the best-of-the-best—an elite unit.”

“Sounds great General, but until the Army can provide skilled EXR Fighter Pilots, it would be an Air Force and Marine unit,” bemoans Colonel Clark.

“Didn’t you just tell me a few minutes ago, that you know of two or three Pilots, and then there’s Mike—they can be your firsts, your seed stock,” suggests Henry trying to raise the Colonel’s spirits.

“Yeah, --I know of three possibilities, but they’re not as good as Mike, and he’s MIA or worse, --dead.”

“He’s not dead—don’t say that,” Maria bellowed and started sobbing again. There was silence for a while, and then Colonel Clark looked at the old Grandfather clock and announced, “I think I should be going, and again I’m really sorry to be the one to bring you the bad news,” then he gets up followed by Henry and Maria.

On the way to the front door, Henry says to Colonel Clark, “I really like your idea, and I’m going to bring it up at the next General Staff meeting.”

“It wasn’t my idea—it was Major General Griggs idea—I’m just trying to implement it,” Colonel Clark correcting him at the door.

Henry nods and they shake hands with Henry, saying, “It doesn’t matter whose idea it was, it’s still a good one and I’m pursuing it—we’ll keep in touch Colonel, and good-bye.”

Colonel Clark walks to his car a bit worried about what had happened, and as he drives to his quarters on Fort Belvoir he’s deeply concerned as to what General Griggs will say when he has to tell him tomorrow.”

As Mike started out on the second day he was still a bit tired, because once again last night he was awoken by screeching Monkeys; upon opening his eye he saw something quite large climbing the tree he was in, so reaching into his cargo pocket he got his tactical flashlight and switched it on, and to his horror a large pair of orange glowing eyes was now slowly inching its way up his branch.

Mike quickly got his M20, but remembered the can of mace he was issued, the one he could never figure out the reason why it was issued; there was no training class on its use either.

So, reaching into his other cargo pocket, Mike found the small can and removed it and the cap, now pointing the nozzle at the pair of glowing eye’s, he let them have a good shot of the stuff.

With a loud high-pitch snarl it leapt from the branch, grabbed the trunk of the tree a fair distance down and quickly climbed down to the forest floor.

Now Mike didn’t have any idea what kind of animal it was and from the way it can climb and how it was sneaking up on him, Mike figured it must have been some large cat, maybe a Clouded Leopard.

Whatever it was, it was intent on making a meal out of him, and thank God for the warnings from the Monkeys; otherwise, he would have never seen the next morning.

As Mike slowly made his way up a small ravine, he was trying to come up with a way to get a good night sleep; sleeping in trees just doesn’t work in the forest of India.

Around about noon, a flash of sunlight off of a shiny object caught Mike’s eye; he stopped and hunch down behind a large boulder thinking it might be a Pakistani patrol.

After several minutes have passed and no soldiers have appeared, Mike carefully gets up and looks out from behind his hiding place, and when he sees no one, he gets up and looks up to where he saw the bright flash of light and its still there; now this intrigues him and with overpowering curiosity, Mike starts hiking to it.

When Mike arrives, he finds that its a crashed twin-engine airplane, so he starts to investigate.

Mike discovers that it isn't in to bad a shape; the only damage is to the wings and engines, the fuselage is intact.

Preparing himself for what he may find in the cockpit, Mike opens the door and enters the cockpit and finds it empty, except for the cobwebs and everything is covered in a light coating of dust.

Mike finds the instrument panel intact and the main circuit breakers are switched off, as if someone intentionally turned everything off.

Mike flipped the Master Battery breaker and nothing happens, everything was dead, so without power, none of the electrics will work including the radios.

Mike goes into the cargo section and discovers it's filled with animal traps; both live traps and killing traps, he also finds several containers of tranquilizer darts.

Then Mike discovers several large crates covered with canvas tarps tightly bound with straps and bound to large parachutes.

Out of curiosity, Mike uncovers one of the bundled crates, and to his surprise it's marked as military supplies, so Mike opens it and finds it contains MREs; the dates on the individual packages are still good, so Mike helps himself.

Then he uncovers another and finds it also is military; after opening this one he discovers it's filled with 9mm NATO ammo.

After uncovering the last crate and that one is military too; it was loaded with Quartermaster supplies, such as BDUs, NATO Army MK12 Combat Knives, blankets, and bedrolls; Mike helps himself to another MK12 Combat Knife figuring another knife would come in handy.

Then looking around, Mike wonders if this could be that missing cargo plane he heard about, but it sure is off course.

Then it dawns on him, considering all the animal traps, this plane was hijacked by poachers and crashed in the dense fog, trying to deliver the poachers cargo.

So—where's the Pilot?

He must have tried to hike out, but did he make it?

After spending three nights in the Indian forest, Mike now thinks he became fodder for some large carnivore.

Then after remembering his harrowing encounter last night, and the lack of a decent nights sleep, Mike decides to spend tonight in the aircraft where it's reasonably safe.

When the Sun set that evening, Mike closed the open cockpit door and locating a battery operated lantern in the aircraft's survival kit, he turns it on laminating the inside of the cargo section.

After eating a MRE from the crate and taking a bedroll and blanket from the Quartermaster crate, Mike lays down feeling safe, closes his eyes, and falls into a deep peaceful needed sleep.

CHAPTER 24 -- Sheila.

It was late morning when Mike awoke after finally enjoying a peaceful night of sleep without having to worry about a bunch of Monkey's stealing him blind or becoming fodder for the local carnivores.

After eating an MRE labeled, 'Breakfast', Mike re-enters the cockpit to locate an aviation map.

Upon finding the map, Mike marks the location of the crashed aircraft on the map; deciding that this would be a good base camp in which to return for supplies and such, until he is able to recover the EXR3 Helicopter.

After looking out of several windows to insure no dangerous animal is lurking outside, because Mike doesn't peculiarly like nasty surprises, he exits the aircraft and makes a walk-around inspection to be sure his stash is secure from burglarizing Monkeys.

And to protect the crash from being spotted, Mike searches for some camouflage netting; since this was originally a military aircraft, there should be some means of concealing the aircraft.

Mike found the camouflage netting packed away in a compartment in the aircraft, and then proceeds to cover the outside exposed areas, that weren't already covered by vegetation, with the net.

When everything was finally secured it was noon, so Mike had another MRE and restocked his backpack with MREs and other supplies.

With a full backpack and weapon, Mike heads out to resume his mission.

Around two in the afternoon, Mike nears a large flowing creek and hears men talking, so he cautiously approaches thinking these were a Pakistani Patrol, but when he peers out from behind the thick foliage, he sees a small compound with a fire burning in the center, several wooden crates, three animal cages, and two men looking at a large snarling Tiger that has been caught in the steel jaws of a trap.

Then to Mike's horror, one of the men aims a pistol and fires, the Tiger flinches and staggers a bit, then after snarling at the two men it drops to the ground and is still.

"Poachers," Mike angrily whispered and steps out of the foliage with weapon trained on them.

The two men quickly turn and confront Mike; one of the men was still holding the pistol, the other is unarmed.

Mike in a harsh firm voice, loudly commands, “Drop the pistol,” gesturing with the barrel of his weapon towards the ground.

The man just stood there and glared back, making no indication of dropping the pistol.

Mike uncomfortably thinks they don’t understand English.

When they see he’s a Soldier and thinking he’s the Authorities they panic and flee, dropping the pistol on the way.

After they’re gone, Mike lowers his weapon and slowly approaches the large Tiger.

Initially thinking the Tiger had been killed, Mike now notices its sides are moving; it’s still alive and breathing.

Then Mike sees the dart embedded in its flank and slowly approaches it.

Carefully reaching, Mike grabs the dart and removes it; discovering it’s a tranquilizer dart similar to the ones he found on the airplane.

Mike marvels at the animal lying there asleep at how big it is and the sheen of its orange coat with black stripes; Mike whispers, “It’s a Bengal Tiger.”

As Mike slowly and carefully walks around the marvelous creature, he notices that it’s a Tigress and its massive right front paw is caught in that cruel steel trap and is bleeding.

Mike, feeling empathy for her, knows what he must do, and that is to free her from that awful trap, but doing so may endanger his own life, because once she awakens from the drug induced sleep, she’ll more than likely attack out of fear, pain and hunger.

Now Mike knows he must take that chance, because he can’t bear the thought of leaving her to die bound to that horrible steel trap; he would rather euthanize her than let her perish of hunger, thirst and pain.

It has been about an hour since she was shot with the dart, and Mike doesn’t know how long the drug will keep her asleep, and he surly doesn’t want her to wake up while he’s trying to release her paw from the jaws of that trap, or while he’s tending to her injured paw.

So with dart in hand, Mike walks back to where the Poachers have stacked the cages and crates; just like the stuff on the crashed airplane.

Searching through the crates, Mike finds a box containing more tranquilizer darts along with instructions, so he begins to read; Mike learns that the blue-banded darts, like the one he removed from the Tiger, (there are also red, yellow, green, and white darts,) contain enough of the drug to knockout a large animal, such as the Tiger, for about ninety minutes.

Now Mike knows that he doesn't have enough time to release and tend her paw before she awakens, so with some hesitation, he takes another blue dart and hopes that by injecting her with another dose it doesn't kill her, but if she does die, she'll die without suffering.

Mike having no options goes over and gives her another shot in the flank, and then he goes and sees if he can remove her paw from the steel jaws of the trap without injuring her further.

Mike carefully moves the trap towards her as not to injure her further; with the trap in an upright position with her paw coming out of the jaws, Mike puts his feet on both sides of the trap, and using his weight forces the jaws apart, and grabbing her paw, he lifts it out.

Once free of the trap, Mike gets off and the jaws snap shut.

With her paw now out of the trap, Mike takes her paw and carefully examines it; feeling for any broken bones and finding nothing broken, Mike thinks she's lucky, but because of the strength of the trap, there still might be fractures and if they don't heal properly she'll never will be able to use it to hunt and defend herself, and therefore be unable to survive.

After examining her wound, that was bleeding and now has stopped, Mike finds it isn't bad, so he goes back to see if there are any medical supplies, and as luck would have it, he finds a crate with a big red cross and opens it; inside he finds plastic splints, gauze wrapping, bandages, antiseptic, salve, scissors, tweezers, several razors, and several fiberglass cast kits.

With bandages, splints, gauze, antiseptic, salve, a razor and a cast kit, Mike returns to her; there he carefully removes the fur from around the wound with the razor.

Once the wound was exposed, it was a very small one, so Mike poured some antiseptic on it and applied some salve; after wrapping it with a bandage; he applied a plastic splint on each side of her foreleg including the paw and tightly bound it with gauze wrapping.

Fearing she would try to remove the splints, Mike used the fiberglass cast kit and encased everything in a solid fiberglass shell; now she'll never get it off until it's removed using a cast-saw.

Mike feeling satisfied, moves away and looks at his wristwatch and sees that in about fifteen minutes she'll be waking up and he doesn't want to be anywhere near her when she does, but with that cast on her foot, Mike hopes she stays nearby.

Mike decides to go hunting, because he thinks when she comes too, she'll be hurting, frightened, and very hungry and if there isn't some fresh meat, she'll be eyeing him as an easy piece of steak.

When Mike returned, two hours later with a small Spotted Axis Deer, the Tiger was gone; Mike felt disappointed, because with the bad paw, he had hoped she would stay.

Leaving the kill on the other side of the fire-pit next to the forest, Mike starts scanning the nearby foliage hoping to catch some signs that maybe, She was still lurking nearby.

After spending sometime carefully scanning the area for her, Mike finally gives up with a sigh, figuring he underestimated her ability to move about, but he's worried she won't be able to feed herself or fend off other predators, and sits down feeling very depressed.

With his head hanging low, Mike is poking at a rock with a stick, trying to decide what to do next, when suddenly, he hears a rustle of leaves as with a slight breeze, but there's no wind or breeze.

Quickly turning his head, Mike looks in the direction of the noise and sees a grayish white object moving in the bushes; "It's her," Mike whispers.

Mike slowly rises to his feet and turns in the direction of the noise, and then reaches for his M20, because he doesn't know what she'll do.

Slinging the M20 around his neck, so it's hanging in front for quick access, Mike is ready.

Mike is sure that it's the Tiger, because he's sure the grayish object is the cat he put on her front foreleg and paw.

With no further movement, Mike figures she is quietly laying low, waiting for the opportunity to pounce, so Mike starts motioning with both hands, first to where she's lying, and then to the dead deer.

After several minutes, and no response from her, Mike is about to give up when suddenly there is a loud snarl from the location, and then the bushes violently moved and she very cautiously came out of the foliage.

There she stood, looking at Mike, snarling; Mike points to the deer and she looks at it, then Mike points to her and motions towards to the deer.

Seeming to finally understand, she slowly hobbled towards the meat while keeping a cautious eye on Mike.

Feeling elated, Mike relaxes and watches as she smells the fresh kill and haunches down, after putting her good paw on the deer, she takes a bite and begins eating.

Looking around the stuff piled nearby, Mike locates a circular pan with straight sides and heads to the small river.

After filling the pan with cool water, he heads back to the campsite, and slowly approaches the feasting Tiger.

When she sees him, she gives a warning growl and Mike comes to a halt, then he raises his hand, stoops down, puts the pan on the ground and slowly slides it towards her.

The Tiger haunches down showing her massive blood stained teeth as a warning; Mike slowly backs up, and when he's far enough away, she goes back to eating.

Mike goes over and pitches his dome tent, figuring he's going to be here for a while; when he finishes, he sits down and with his M20 on his lap.

Mike sat there watching her feast trying to figure out a way to put her asleep when the time comes to remove the fiberglass cast; he doesn't want to shoot her with a dart if he can help it, because that will surly alienate her and make her angry and very dangerous.

Then she goes over to investigate the pan that Mike had placed nearby, discovering it's filled with water, She begins to drink; it's then, that Mike sees how he can stealthily give her the tranquilizer.

Mike settles back smiling knowing he's solved his future problem, but in the mean time, he must see that she's properly fed and watered, for now, the mission will have to wait.

That night, Mike slept rather well, knowing no other animals would dare invade his turf with the Tiger nearby, especially those thieving Monkeys; Mike didn't fear her neither, because she was full and as long as he didn't threaten her she wouldn't bother him.

The next day, she finished off the deer and when Mike approached to retrieve the pan, she snarled; Mike raised his hand and slowly drew the pan away as she watched.

Returning to the river, Mike refilled the pan and brought it back to where it was previously; raising his hand, he pushed it back to its place, and then he backed away and returned to his tent, while she watched.

The Tiger slept the rest of the day as Mike investigated what was in the remaining crates, he was particularly trying to find a cast-saw to remove the cast when the time arises; finding none, Mike gave a sigh and softly said, "When the time comes I'll go back to the crash site and hope to God there's one there, otherwise it's going to be a challenge to remove that cast.

Eventually I'll need to return to replenish my food stock. Actually, I'm getting rather sick and tired of eating MRE's—a little steak wouldn't taste too bad right now. I hope a campfire won't frighten or upset her."

The next morning when Mike went to check on the pan, the Tiger went over and sniffed where the deer had been and looked at Mike, and then back to where the deer had been; getting the message, Mike said, "Ok—you want another deer—I'll go and get you one," and giggling, Mike added, "better the deer than me."

With his M20 slung over his back, Mike looks over to the Tiger and tells her, "I'll be back in a bit with your meal," and walks out of the campsite.

Three hours later, Mike returned with another Spotted Axis Deer, it seems their quite plentiful, and drags it to where the last one had been; all the while keeping an eye on the Tiger, because he wasn't sure what she'll do as he moves closer with the deer.

The Tiger just lay there watching, and when Mike backs away, she gets up and advances to the deer, settles down and begins feeding again; she never missed the chunk of meat that Mike had taken.

At the fire-pit, Mike removes the hunk of deer meat he had tied to his armament belt and lays it on a large nearby rock.

After gathering some wood, Mike prepares to start a fire, hoping this doesn't scare or upset the feeding Tiger.

When the fire started burning, the Tiger stopped eating, turned and snarled complaining heartily; it was evident she didn't like or trust the fire, and when the flames grew larger, she backed away towards the bushes snarling heatedly.

Mike looked at her and shook his head and remarked, "Guess you don't like the fire—well—once you get hungry enough and see that it's no threat, you'll be back munching on that juicy deer, hee, hee, hee," giggling and skewers his piece of meat with a Stick and puts it over the fire.

After awhile the sent of the deer, her hunger, and the fact that Mike hadn't fled, she slowly comes back to the deer and starts eating again, but always keeping an eye on the flames.

For the rest of the week, Mike went hunting, keeping her well fed with the small local Spotted Axis Deer, and by Sunday, Mike was getting rather tired of deer meat and was ready to have a MRE again.

Sunday morning, Mike looked at the Tiger, and she looked over to where the last deer was, and then to Mike; Mike remarked to her, "Yeah, it's gone and you want another—Ok, I'll get you another deer," grabs his

M20 and heads out into the forest.

Several days ago, Mike discovered an animal trail leading to a local watering hole; he knew deer and other animals frequent the watering hold including carnivores, so he stayed away, but he has been using the trail as a means to bag the local Spotted Axis Deer that use it.

So, waiting in a tree overlooking the trail, Mike waits again to bag another deer.

After about an hour and still no deer, Mike begins to think maybe there's a large carnivore lurking nearby, so he keeps a sharp eye out.

Twenty minutes later, Mike hears what sounds like grunting, and is confused until he hears a loud squeal; several minutes later, a wild Boar comes down the trail with its nose in the air sniffing for danger.

It comes within range and halts looking at Mike sitting in the tree and trying to decide what to do, as this strange smelling animal doesn't look like a Tiger or Leopard; this gives Mike enough time to aim and shoot.

With his dead prize, Mike heads back to camp looking forward to a nice Pork dinner.

When Mike enters the camp, the Tiger remained laying in her usual spot and watched as Mike pulled the dead hog to her feeding spot, and as Mike backed away, he said to her, "Well—I hope you like Pork—thought you'd like a change—I know I sure do, so have at it."

The Tiger got up and hobbled over to the dead hog and after one sniff she took a large bite; Mike went over, placed his large hunk of Pork on the flat stone, and then he started the fire, and a few minutes later, he was roasting the meat over the fire.

By the end of the second week, Mike figured any fractures should be healed and on Friday he made a stop at the crash site.

After stocking up on ammo and MREs, he looked for a manual cast saw, and after rummaging through several medical crates, he found a battery operated portable cast saw with three batteries; he tests each battery with the cast saw and they were all fully charged.

Stumbling upon a small mirror, Mike looks and sees he's gotten rather scruffy and searches for something in which to shave.

After a few minutes he finds a battery powered shaver a hair clipper along with a solar powered charger which the poachers had stashed in one of their creates.

After spending an hour shaving and trimming his hair, Mike adds three more of the blue tranquilizer darts to his backpack.

Finally, Mike heads out to his favorite hunting spot near the animal trail to bag another deer or Wild Boar.

Returning with a Spotted Axis Deer, Mike decides to medicate the Tiger tomorrow morning.

Saturday morning when Mike fills the pan with water, he adds the contents of three blue darts to the water, figuring the water will dilute the drug; he also adds a bit of deer blood to the water to mask any drug smell and taste.

With the cast cutter nearby, Mike watches and waits until she drinks, hoping she doesn't taste any drug in the water; he's in luck and she drinks heartily.

Mike waits until she passes out and when she finally does, Mike goes over and gives her another shot just to be sure she doesn't come to while he's working on her paw.

Grabbing the cast saw, Mike begins to cut the fiberglass cast; first, on one side, and then on the opposite side, just as he had seen the Doctor do to his cast in the Hospital, until the cast was in two parts, then Mike carefully removed both halves exposing the wrappings.

Next, Mike began unwrapping the forearm and paw until only the bandage covering the wound was left.

Finally, Mike removed the bandage exposing the wound which was fully healed, a patch of white fur now surrounded the wound site; something she'll have for the rest of her life and an easy way to identify her.

After dumping the drugged water, Mike puts the cast saw and cast remnants into the pan, and then with pan in hand, he returns to his place and removes the cast saw and empties the cast remnants into an empty box for disposal.

After refilling the pan with water and returning it to her, Mike sits down by the now dead fire-pit and waits for her to wake up.

Around three in the afternoon she finally comes around and finding her paw is now free of the object, she begins to preen it; Mike watches smiling.

A while later she gets up and tries to move on it; finding it rather stiff, she limps a bit.

Mike thinks she'll be using and moving about normally in a few days.

The Tiger goes over to what's left of the deer and begins feeding; Mike decides it's time to start his campfire and have a MRE, because he doesn't have any meat left.

After the Sun had set, Mike was sitting next to the fire watching the flames dance and thinking about resuming the mission he's supposed to be on, when he looks up, he sees the Tiger slowly approaching in a non threatening way.

When she got to a point about five feet away, she halted unsure, and cautious.

Mike softly coaxed her, "Come on girl—it's safe—it won't hurt you—come on."

Finally after a bit more coaxing, she came and laid next to Mike, and then he slowly reached out, and feeling a bit nervous, he carefully and softly touched her back; the Tiger looked up at him and Mike remarked, "Well—if we're going to be companions, then I need to give you a name. I just can't keep calling you girl or Tiger... How about Gertrude?"

The Tiger looked up at him and show him her teeth indicating disapproval; "So ya' don't like Gertrude huh..."

Well then, how about Sheila?"

The Tiger gives him an approving look, and then Mike nods with, "You like that name—don't you?"

So, Sheila it is," patting her on the back, and then she rolls over; Mike gets down and begins rubbing her stomach, then unexpectedly she starts to purr.

This surprised Mike, because he didn't think Tiger's could purr, but he noticed she only purred when she exhaled; now Mike knew he had a friend for life.

The next day, Mike grabbed his M20 and when he started to leave he looked over to where she lay, she gets up and makes a low growl like sound, Mike tells her, "I'm supposed to be on a mission to recover a stolen Helicopter, --but I've neglected that due to having to nurse you for the last two weeks or so—don't fret none, I'll be back by Sun down," and starts walking out of the camp.

He no more than got a hundred feet out of the campsite, when she walks up to his side and joins him.

Mike looks down at her and says, "Well, you can come if you want—guess there isn't much I can do to stop you, hee, hee," Mike giggling, and then getting serious, "you know, I'm not going hunting for meat. Where I'm going is going to be very dangerous—these guys that I might run into won't think twice about shooting you or me—so Sheila, are you really sure you still wanta' come?"

The Tiger just looks up at Mike and twitches her whiskers, so Mike starts out again with her at his side.

About noon, Mike's tummy began to growl, signaling him it's time for food; Mike looks down at Sheila and she looks back licking her chops.

Mike with a worried look says to her, "Yeah, I'm hungry too—so, don't be looking at me that way—I don't intend on being your lunch—I think we should look for a nice tasty deer—I could go for a nice piece of deer steak about now."

So they began looking for signs and shortly after entering a tall grassy meadow, they came upon a large Sambar with a nice rack grazing.

Looking at the huge grazing deer from a hunched position, Mike wonders if Sheila can eat such a large animal, then she nudges Mike to the right; Mike getting the hint, quietly heads out to get on the other side of the deer and force it to flee in Sheila's direction.

When Mike is directly opposite Sheila and the deer is between them, the large Sambar deer raises its head, and catches Mike's scent whom is now up wind of the animal.

Then Mike rises, and when the deer sees him it bolts in the direction of Sheila.

As Sheila springs from her position in the tall grass, two more Tigers spring from either side and all three Tigers take the deer down; in the matter of a minute or two the deer is dead.

When Mike arrives, the two smaller male Tigers snarl a warning; Mike halts and brings his M20 up in defense.

When one of the smaller Tigers make a threatening move, Sheila, with a swift strike of her good paw cuffs the younger male and he rolls over.

Sheila then snarls at the other Tiger and it moves back and hunches on the ground in front of her in submission.

The cuffed Tiger now on its feet and in a crouched position moves over to the other with Sheila watching intently.

Now both young male Tigers are hunched on the ground in front of her, Sheila gives them both a loud hard growl and they both cower before her.

Mike now has nothing to fear any longer, because Sheila has shown her dominance as an Alpha Female of this small streak; considering the small size of the two Tigers, they can't be more than two years old.

Shelia looked at Mike and uttered a low growl, and then looked at both young Tigers; Mike took this to mean that she wanted him to introduce himself to them, but looking at them with snarling gestures, Mike was a bit

apprehensive.

Sheila gave an angry loud snarl at the two juveniles and they stopped snarling and became submissive.

Sheila once again looked at Mike and he slowly approached, extended the back of his hand to one of the young Tigers, it sniffed Mike's hand, and then he moved it to the second juvenile and it also smelled Mike's hand.

Now Sheila looked at Mike, and then she put her massive left paw on the carcass as an invitation to Mike for him to get his piece of meat first.

Mike goes to the carcass and using his MK12 Combat Knife cuts a hunk of meat from the Deer's rump.

With meat in hand, Mike goes looking for a place to have a fire to cook it; as he passes Sheila, he motions with his head for her and the other two to start feasting.

To Mike's dismay, he can't find a bare spot to safely build a fire, everywhere there's tall grass and thinks this would make a great ambush sight.

With a deep sigh, Mike sits down and is about to get his first taste of raw meat when he spots a bunch of wild onions growing nearby, so using his knife he digs up several, then he starts walking in a large circle figuring since he discovered some wild onions, there just might be other eatable vegetables.

Mike hadn't gone to far when he noticed a several wild carrots, also known as 'Queen Ann's Lace', growing nearby, so he dug them up, and with a smile on his face, Mike returned to where Sheila and the two juvenile Tigers were feasting.

Sitting down, Mike combined the wild carrots and wild onions with the raw meat.

Closing his eyes and with a bit of hesitation, Mike takes a bite and finds it rather tough and stringy, but finds it's not too bad; the vegetables give the disgusting raw meat a rather good taste.

By the time the Tigers have finished off the deer, to Mike surprise, because he didn't think they would be able to consume all of the meat, Mike had finished his hunk of meat and is ready to continue, but the Tigers just lay down and closed their eyes.

Mike shook his head and threw his hands up saying, "Ok—I'll give you an hour—no more, and if you're not ready then, I'll continue on by myself."

Sheila opened her eyes and just looked at him, closed them again and started dozing; Mike knowing he can't persuade three large Tigers, also lay down and joined them.

An hour or so later, Mike awoke, got up, got his gear, looked over to where Sheila lay, and noticed she was awake, so he motioned for her to come; she got up and together they resumed Mike's mission to recover the stolen Helicopter.

CHAPTER 25 – The Soldier and Tiger.

For the next several hours, Mike and Sheila made their way northwest to where he had seen the Helicopter land.

Being careful to avoid Pakistani patrols, which were numerous, Mike, Sheila and the two juvenile Tigers, yes, they have rejoined them, pushed onward.

Towards Sundown, they killed another Axis Deer, and this time, Mike was able to build a small campfire to the displeasure of the two juveniles.

Mike looks at the two young Tigers crouched nearby snarling with distrust and fear of the dancing flames, while Sheila lies next to him unconcerned or afraid.

Mike giggling at the young Tigers says to them, “What are you two afraid of? Look at Sheila—she isn’t afraid.”

Then Mike tells them, “You two are cowards. If you’re going to be members of Sheila’s Streak, then you two need names. Hmmm—now let me see—how about Jeff and Jerry,” and starts laughing, then Sheila looks up at him and rises her whiskers in what Mike sees as an approval.

Very early in the morning, after another peaceful night with his three Tigers nearby keeping other dangerous animals at bay, they started out to where that Helicopter was located.

Around ten that morning, they came upon a shocking sight; there were four Prisoners with their hands tied behind their backs and black bags tied over their heads.

Four Pakistani Soldiers were standing behind them in a row with weapons pointed at the bound Prisoners while another stood off to the side with arm raised, ready to give the command to fire.

Mike motioned for the Tiger’s to attack the closest three Pakistani Soldiers, and as the Tigers leapt from the bushes, Mike shot the fifth Pakistani Soldier, of whom he figured was in command with his arm raised.

With the deaths of three Pakistani Soldiers by the Tigers, the fourth Pakistani Soldier turned to face the now three snarling Tigers; with raised weapon he prepares to kill all three starting with Sheila, because she’s the closest.

Mike mutters, “No you don’t,” as he takes aim and fires; the Pakistani Soldier falls.

When Jerry starts sniffing the dead soldier as a meal, Sheila growls and when Jerry doesn't obey, she goes over and swiftly cuffs him and he goes rolling; Jeff humbly leaves the other dead soldier and hunches down, then Jerry joins him.

Mike comes out from his place in the bushes, and as he walks past Jeff and Jerry, he waves his finger at them while telling them loudly, "NO—BAD—DON'T EAT!"

Hoping they get the point like Sheila.

Then taking his knife from its scabbard, Mike goes to the first Prisoner who's trembling with fear and cuts his bindings, and then Mike cuts the next and the next until he gets to the small Prisoner on the far end.

There he notices he is trembling and sobbing while standing in a small puddle.

Then as Mike cuts his bindings, he notices the Prisoner had wet his jeans; as the other Prisoners untie and remove their head bags, Mike removes the bag from the one with the wet jeans and finds to his surprise, that the Prisoner is a young boy of fourteen or fifteen and is crying.

Mike takes pity on him and puts his arm around him and softly tells him, "You're safe now—it's all over and you're Ok," consoling the boy.

After the four Prisoners had removed their head bags they're astonished by the sight before them; for here are three large Tigers, a strange soldier, and five dead Pakistani soldiers lying on the ground.

Mike looks at the boy and he's staring at the Tigers looking horrified, Mike whispers to the boy, "It's Ok—they're with me," and then in a normal firm voice, Mike tells rest, "Don't be afraid—they're my friends."

Mike removes his arm from the boy and walks over to Sheila and stands by her side, she looks up to him and Mike smiles back, and then he pats her on the back; the other two Tigers, Jeff and Jerry, come over and stand on Mike's other side.

Then with a large smile, Mike introduces the Tigers, "I like you to meet my friends, this is Sheila here," patting her on the back, and then pointing to the other two, "and these are Jeff and Jerry."

Then hoping they understand English, Mike tells them, "You're free to return to you village—if you're threatened again, you tell them about what happened here. You tell them the same will happen to them if they don't leave. Tell them it will come swift and quiet—you tell them that."

For the next several weeks, as Mike worked his way to the place where the Helicopter landed, he freed village after village of Pakistani occupation; some larger villages took longer to liberate, because more troops were

present, but in the end, they fled, fearing the dreaded silent killers who appear out of nowhere and disappear again.

As April drew to a close, Mike was so busy keeping himself and his Streak of Tigers out of sight that he was once again neglecting his initial mission.

When May first arrived, Jeff and Jerry finally departed leaving only Mike and Sheila to continue.

As Mike lay there with Sheila that evening in May, he knew he couldn't continue liberating villages, because his army had abandoned him and it was too dangerous to continue, so he told himself it's time to find and recover that Helicopter.

Then lying there looking up at the stars and trying to identify the constellations, Mike locates the constellation 'Leo the Lion' and renames it 'Sheila the Tiger' and smiles.

Then his thoughts turn to his family and wonders what his parents are doing back in Victorville, and his Brother Brian, is he's now in the war too; Mike smiles and whispers to himself, "Well—if I survive the next two months or so, I'll have made it to twenty-one and can legally drink," and he smiles.

The next morning, Mike and Sheila are making their way down a country gravel road when Sheila halts and starts growling; Mike knew instantly that she has heard something coming, so they scurry into the nearby tall grass and brush.

Sure enough, soon a small group of six Pakistani Soldiers came down the road escorting a group of ten Villagers all bound; some of them were teenagers.

Mike shook his head in disgust, and remembering back when he freed the frightened teenager from being executed, he couldn't let that happen to these kids and older men.

Now he faced a big problem, how to defeat six Pakistani Soldiers with just him and Sheila, he now wished Jeff and Jerry were here.

Mike looked at Sheila and pointed to the other side of the road, and then he pointed at each Pakistani Soldier, Sheila looked back with a low growl emanating from her throat; she then silently crept back and bounded silently across the road several hundred feet behind the group.

The stupid Pakistani Soldiers never seen her across the road behind them; Mike smiled.

Mike, well hidden, took aim on the Soldier at the rear and fired, he fell, one down and five more to go.

As soon he fell, the other Soldiers looked confused, but when the nearest soldier went to see what happened and discovered he has been shot dead, he alerted the others, and then Mike shot the leader; the remaining four Soldiers took cover in the ditch and madly started firing wildly in fear; the Prisoners fell to the road trembling in fear, covering their heads with their hands as bullets flew over their heads.

Now the four Soldiers were just where Sheila could attack, and she struck with a swift blow of her paw and that Soldier went tumbling unto the road without his weapon; he lay there bleeding through the torn uniform where her claws had racked.

When one of the Soldiers tuned to kill whatever attacked them, Mike quickly aimed and shot him dead; seeing this, the last two Soldiers, in mortal fear, threw down their weapons and took off running down the road.

When the shooting stopped, one of the Prisoners looks up and sees two Soldiers running away down the road, and then he gets up and tells the rest of the Prisoners that the Soldiers have gone or are dead.

With all of the Prisoners now standing and looking confused, Mike comes out of his concealed position and steps onto the road in front of them.

Mike raises his hand and tells them, “It’s Ok now—you’re safe, and as soon as I cut your bonds you can return to your village,” so Mike takes his knife and starts to cut their bonds, and each one shakes his hand when he frees him.

Meanwhile, Sheila hunches down out of sight in the brush and tall grass.

Mike goes over to the bleeding Soldier and checks him out and finds he’s still alive, then Mike motions to one of the villagers to tend to him; another villager picks up one of the discarded weapon and points it at the injured Soldier.

Mike quickly pushes the barrel away and shakes his head no, and then he asked, “Does anyone speak English?”

All of the Teenagers and most of the adults replied yes with a nod.

“Good,” says Mike, and then he commands, “Tend to his wounds, and then take him to the Indian Military Authorities—they’ll know what to do with him—also tell them what’s been happening in the villages.”

One of the villagers asked, “Ares’ yours’ all alone?”

“No—I had help,” replied Mike shaking his head, and then he looked to where Sheila is hiding and motions with his head.

She gets up and comes out from where she's been hiding and padded over to Mike's side.

When the villagers saw the Tiger come out of the bush and tall grass, they held their breaths in fear, but when she stopped next to Mike they were very surprised.

The man holding the weapon pointed it at the Tiger, Mike raised his hand telling them, "No—she's with me and is my friend. She is the one who helped me defeat the Soldiers and free you."

The bug-eyed man lowered the weapon, then Mike said, "This is Sheila and I'm Corporal Troff."

"You's bes' the one we's hears about," said another Man standing in front, "We's hears story of Soldier and Tigers saving villages—but I's figures its just made up—now I's know it's true."

"I guess that's me and Sheila alright," remarked Mike with a smile, "you can now go back to your village and I must go—bye."

Mike waves and together he and the Tiger stepped into the tall grass and are gone; later as they make their way towards Mike's destination he comments to Sheila, "I guess we're famous," she just looks back and twitches her whiskers.

Then shaking his head, Mike says to himself, "Another stupid story—another stupid legend."

Now as the story got back to the Indian Military Headquarters in New Delhi, they were totally astonished and flabbergasted, as were everyone at the UN Coalition Military Headquarters.

When the news got back to the Pentagon, they inquired of G2 and G3 if any secret operatives were working in the Punjab region of India; both departments came back with negative replies, so they decided it was either one of the coalition partners or it's all mass hysteria of what has been reported happening there.

On a Tuesday afternoon in the middle of May, a Lieutenant Colonel from G2 (Intelligence) entered a General Staff briefing room in the Pentagon; he walked to the front and up to a desk podium sitting on the end of a large highly polish oak rectangle table.

Seated around the table were Army General Charles Cook Chief-of-Staff, Air Force Major General Howard Snyder, Army Major General Richard Griggs, Marine Major General Paul Unger, and Navy Rear Admiral John Butler.

Lieutenant Colonel Cross took a deep breath and began, “Good afternoon Sirs. Let’s begin with the Mediterranean.”

He pushes a button the room lights are dimmed and a map is projected on a screen; with a laser-pointer, Colonel Cross points to the map informing them, “In this area—the Iranian Alliance Countries have made no progress in advancing across the Mediterranean, because NATO has held them in check, as neither side has gained or lost territory.”

Colonel Cross then pushes another button and the Mediterranean Map is replaced by one of the Middle East after which he uses his pointer and says, “Next, is the Middle East, and the situation there doesn’t look good. Israel is in dire straights and its situation is in doubt. They’re being attacked from three sides—they already lost most of the southern part bordering the Sinai to the Egyptians,” he highlights the area on the map with his pointer, “if it wasn’t for our Fleet in the Mediterranean and the two Carriers off the coast of Israel offering Fighter support, I’m afraid they’d be overrun by now. Ever since the Iranian Alliance started using PL9 ordnance as offensive weapons, we’re having a very difficult time getting air-superiority. Also, we’re having a difficult time with enemy HX2 Fighter Helicopters—they’re out maneuvering both our EXR’s and F30’s. There are a few exceptions three Marine F30 Pilots and a couple of Air Force F30 Pilots have so far been able to defeat them. One Marine Pilot, in particular, stands out showing phenomenal skill of any Fighter Pilot in the US Military. The biggest disappointment is the EXR Pilots—they’re having major problems avoiding close range PL9s, although, some of the Army EXR Pilots who’ve had training in field maintenance are now able to successfully recover, thanks to Major General Griggs’s directives—I strongly suggest the Air Force and the Marines also follow the same directive. This directive once fully implemented will make the PL9 a non-issue for the EXR Aircrafts. Another EXR disappointment is the fact they’re having problems engaging with enemy HX2 and MIG aircraft—quite frankly Gentlemen, with the current skill levels being observed in the battlefield, they’re no better than an Attack Helicopter and we already have those. Again, the only exception was an Army EXR2 Pilot in India who scored three MIG kills. Gentlemen, we need a lot more Pilots of this caliber if we’re to win this. This is quite disappointing considering the cost to the taxpayers for building this aircraft.”

Army Major General Griggs pipes up, “I’m already on top of this with the commissioning of a new Brigade, and in this Brigade there will be a Tactical Response Company of the highly skilled EXR Pilots, and another Company is tasked with training already skilled Pilots to an even higher skill level, but I might add, because of the lack of these individuals to fill these

two Companies I'm having some serious concerns. As of today I only have names of five Pilots who might be qualified—the one Pilot who would definitely qualify is currently MIA or dead.”

“Yes, I've heard of this unit you speak of from one of your staff and I personally think it's a great idea,” announced Air Force Major General Snyder, “and may I suggest to the General that we transform this Brigade into a Joint Air Unit and combine our best-of-the-best Pilots from all branches into this Brigade of yours. And later, possibly adding other elements like, Ground and Navel units all working together—a Joint Elite Special Tactical Ops unit.”

“That sounds great Howard, but until I can find those highly skilled men and woman, it'll be mostly a Air Force, Marine, and Navy Unit,” grumbled General Griggs.

“No it won't,” countered General Snyder, “I'm sure the Army has some very highly skilled Soldiers to fill the ranks of the Special Operations Unit,” the other two Generals including General Cook, the head of the General Staff, all nodding.

“I'm sure we do,” General Griggs replied, “but, so does the Marines—so, this Company, if and when approved, will be made up of Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines.”

“No different than the Air Unit with Airmen, Sailors, and Marines,” argued Rear Admiral Butler.”

“I don't know,” said General Griggs in a skeptical tone, “it looks lopsided.”

“Only until your EXR Pilots becomes highly skilled,” reassured General Unger.

“And who's going to decide when an EXR Pilot is highly skilled?” Argued General Griggs, who perceives being the underdog and losing control of his Brigade; after all, it was his idea originally.

“I would think a Double Ace or better would constitute a highly skilled Pilot,” replied General Snyder grinning.

“We don't have anyone that's an Ace, let alone a Double Ace,” grumbled General Griggs, “so, that means the Army won't have any Pilots in the Air Unit.”

“Yes, apparently so, --and my guess is, you probably never will,” General Snyder blatantly told him, with General Unger nodding.

Then General Cook intercedes, “Enough! There hasn't been any approval for a Joint Unit, so the whole argument is moot, and until there is, I don't want any more discussion. Colonel Cross, will you kindly continue with the Intelligence Briefing.”

Colonel Cross next projects a map of India, and with laser pointer he highlights a village on the map very close to the Pakistani border in the Punjab province and says, “Our latest intel indicates that the missing EXR3 Helicopter is using this village as an operating base and is being supplied from Pakistan by this road—I would strongly suggest that this road be targeted and another mission be undertaken to recover or destroy the EXR3—after the last mission was a failure.”

General Griggs pipes up, “Can you give an accurate count of the size and number of any Pakistani Units in and around that village, because I’m sure they’re using what ever forces they need to make sure we don’t try again to recover or destroy it—your Intel on the failed mission was inaccurate by a great amount—we lost many good men—including that Pilot I just recently spoke of.”

“What about any Intel on air defense placements or installations?” General Snyder asked, “Like General Griggs had just mentioned about the Pakistani’s providing security for the aircraft, I’m sure they must have considered that we would initiate an air attack.”

“Yes, --we have Intel that several portable missile launchers as well as artillery have been position around this village. From what we learned, the Pakistani’s have an entire Company stationed in and around this village,” replied Colonel Cross, and then he asked, “If there aren’t any other questions we can move on.”

With no questions from any of the Generals, Colonel Cross continues, “Now of the three main combat theaters only India has seen some positive results, but by whom is the question. It surly wasn’t by our hand, although we wished it was, and according to the Indian Military it wasn’t none of their doing either. We inquired if it was an underground group, but they assured us that they knew of no Partisan group working in the southern Punjab Province. Now, the reports filtering through indicate that a single individual and three Tigers were liberating villages and saving lives, but the last report stated only a single Tiger was involved. There is another piece of disturbing news, and that is, the Pakistani’s are pursuing a campaign of genocide against the Hindu People of the southern Punjab Province, and this lone individual and Tiger is preventing this in the southern Punjab Province—in fact, the Pakistani Government has issued a warrant for his capture or death and anyone caught harboring him will be executed along with their entire family. This single man has freed areas of southern Punjab Province—something the UN Coalition and Indian Military’s have failed to do—the Pakistani Military in the area is very nervous, because he and the Tiger or

Tigers seems to suddenly appear, inflict major damage, and vanish.”

“Sounds to me like he knows how to use stealth and cunning,” remarked General Griggs.

“And you have no clue as to whom he might be?” inquired General Cook.

“None Sir,” replied Colonel Cross, and then he added, but some later intel might suggest he’s one of ours

“An MIA, --maybe,” offered General Unger; General Griggs sits up with an incredulous stare.

“If this man has done everything you mentioned, give him a medal—he’s a hero,” declares General Unger; all of the Generals nod.

The Colonel concludes, “That’s all I have, and this ends the Intelligence briefing. If there isn’t any questions may I be excused, Sirs?”

“Colonel that was an excellent report, and if we’re all in agreement,” General looks to his left receiving nods, and then to his right receiving nods, and finding no objection he excuses Colonel Cross, “You may go and thank-you.”

After turning off the projection and bringing the room lights back up, Colonel Cross gathers his notes and walks out of the room.

By the end of May, Mike’s and the Tiger’s exploits are discovered by the International News Media and soon Mike and the Tiger are Indian National Heroes; the Indian Prime Minister has recommended to the President that the Bharat Ratna be presented to this Soldier and some other award be presented to the Tiger.

In Europe they’re celebrities and in the North America they’ve become heroes.

On the way back from one of his other staff meetings, Major General Griggs stops by Lieutenant Colonel Clark's office at the 83rd Battalion Headquarters.

Colonel Clark starts to get up when the General enters the office with the General responding, “Please don’t get up,” Colonel Clark sits back down and General Griggs sits down in a chair in front of the Colonel’s desk.

“This is a surprise, what do I owe this pleasure too?” Colonel Clark asks and wonders why the sudden visit.

“A few weeks ago I was at a staff meeting and heard something very interesting.”

Now this has Colonel Clark intrigued, especially since he is being informed by what could be Top Secret information, so out of curiosity he

asked, “Might I ask, what would that be?”

“Remember your MIA Pilot that you’ve been telling me you want so badly,” says General Griggs with a grin; Colonel Clark nods, now hoping there’s good news; “Well, I heard in that staff meeting about a mysterious Soldier with one or more Tigers that has gotten the Pakistani’s really stirred up—seems he’s been liberating villages in the southern part of their controlled Punjab Province—and guess what?”

“What?” Colonel Clark replied giving up sounding confused.

“According to intelligence, this Soldier could be American,” General Griggs announces, and then offers his suspicions, “Since we don’t have any Special Ops groups or unaccounted for units deployed in that area—at least not yet—the only logical conclusion is your missing Pilot.”

“Lieutenant Troff is still trying to complete the mission his unit was originally sent on!” Declared Colonel Clark!

“It seems so, Colonel,” remarks General Griggs as he gets up and starts walking to the door, then he halts, turns, and adds, “Oh by the way—we know where the EXR3 is and making plans to recover or destroy it. This time we’ll be sending a company in, so that kind of makes Troff’s mission moot. So far in this damn war, he seems to be the only one to make any gains—looking like there might be some medals coming his way. If the intel checks out, I think you might want to consider taking Lieutenant Troff off the MIA list and put him back on active status. It seems your Pilot isn’t dead or missing after all.”

General Griggs gives Colonel Clark a sarcastic grin and continues to the door and then exits.

CHAPTER 26 – An Ace.

During the last weeks of May the second Joint Fleet of British, French, and American warships and a third Carrier from Great Britain arrived in the Mediterranean, effectively blocking the Iranian Alliance from crossing the Mediterranean to target Southern France, Spain, and Italy.

With the continued Shelling and bombing of the North African coast states, including Egypt, the Alliance Forces retreated into the interior deserts.

Because of the sensitive ancient sites in and around the Nile River Valley, selective targeting was used, causing the Egyptian Forces to move into the Sinai.

An English Fleet with two aircraft carriers joined the American Fleet in the Arabian Sea that was already deployed there, and a French Fleet steamed into the Persian Gulf with one carrier, two battle ships, and several destroyers.

With continued bombing raids of military targets, by high altitude old B52's and B2's, along with the newer B80 bombers; in Pakistan, Syria, Iran and Jordan, the Iranian Alliance kept moving their Air Forces from airfield to airfield using civilian airports when necessary to conceal their Fighters.

The Alliance ground forces use of portable shoulder and truck mounted missile launchers, and using their version of the PL9, prevented the NATO Fighters from having air superiority over much of the theater; only a handful of American EXR Helicopters were able to penetrate the PL9 canopy.

With NATO air and ground forces from Italy, Greece and Turkey attacking Lebanon and Syria, Israel was now able to concentrate their efforts to regain their lost southern provinces.

At Tel Nof, a new Battalion was established with three companies including a Headquarters and Support Company; the Marines and the Air Force established two Companies and with the Israeli Air Force became a Joint Unit, and they became the 518th Joint Marine Air Unit and the 519th Joint Air Force Unit.

Chief Commander Norb Elkhalfa remained in command of the 106 IAF, and Marine Lieutenant Colonel David McCready became the commander of the new 905th Joint Air Battalion with the three companies.

Major Bob Ganley became the Commander of the 518 Joint Marine Air Unit.

On the third Monday in June, Brian, Bill Warfield, Bob Smith and Jim Gisler were sitting in a briefing on the upcoming campaign to retake the lost Southern part of Israel.

Major Ganley, seated at the head of the table with all four of his Squadron/Platoon leaders seated on either side announced, “Two weeks ago, the Israeli ground forces retook the airfields of Mitspe Ramon at Mitspe Ramon and Ovda near Shizzaform and Newe Harif. Since Israel has regained control of these two airbases, they’ve had several construction companies go there and repair any damage runways and reestablish the infrastructure, so the airbases can become functional once again. I’ve just gotten information that the Egyptians have moved two Squadrons of MIG Fighters to Taba Airport across the border in the Sinai, and the Jordanians have done the same using King Hussein Airport at Aqaba in Jordan. Both the Egyptian and the Jordanian forces have taken the port city of Eilat and are using the Eilat Airport to control the airspace in and around Eilat, thus preventing the Israeli ground forces from retaking Eilat. So, --with that being said—the 518th is being sent to Ovda to assist the IAF in retaking Eilat. On that note, you’ll have your Squadrons packed and ready to move out in three days—that’s all I’ve got for now—are there any questions or concerns?”

With no one at the table having any questions, Major Ganley closed the meeting with, “Ok Gentleman—I’ll see you all at our new headquarters at Ovda—you’re excused.”

On the fourth day after arriving at Ovda Airbase, Major Ganley had a briefing with all of his Squadron Leaders.

Major Ganley began with, “I hope you’re all settle in for the time being, because for some of you I’m afraid it’s going to be temporary,” Brian and Bill looked at each other with confused concern, then Bob Smith spoke up, “Sir—are we going somewhere else?”

“Well—in a way—kind of,” hinted Major Ganley looking coy, “before anymore questions, let me briefly explain. With the NATO Air and Ground Forces attacking Syria from the north, and our Carrier Squadrons attacking Syria and Lebanon, Gaza, and Egypt. Israeli Ground and Air Forces are now concentrated on Jordan and the Egyptian Sinai. So, the plan is to take Taba Airfield in the Sinai and King Hussein Airfield at Aqaba in Jordan and use those two airfields as stepping-stones into Jordan and the Sinai, similar as to what was done in the Pacific in World War Two. So, here are the assignments: Captain Troff, you’ll take Eagle Squadron and provide air support for the Israeli Ground Forces at Taba. Captain Warfield, you’ll take Falcon Squadron to King Hussein Airfield at Aqaba. Captain’s Smith

and Gisler, you'll use your Squadrons as support and backup. Make sure you naturalize any Enemy Fighters, missile emplacements, and any command control centers. After Taba and King Hussein airfields have been secured, Captain Smith's Hawk Squadron will join Captain Warfield at King Hussein Airfield and Captain Gisler's Owl Squadron will join Captain Troff at Taba Airfield. Then you'll use those airfields, as your temporary bases to help retake Eilat and its airfield. Until I get notified to move, we'll use Ovda as support and resupply, since at the moment it's centrally located. The IAF and our Air Force will provide air cover here. Once Eilat has been retaken I'll move our Company and join an IAF Company at Eilat Airfield, because it has access to the Red Sea and means of direct sea supply, then we'll start sorties from Taba and King Hussein airfields into the Sinai and Jordan interiors. If there aren't any questions takeoff time is o-nine-hundred tomorrow. That's all Gentlemen and good hunting," with that, they all got up and walked out of the room.

The next morning at o-nine-hundred all four Squadrons taxied to the holding lines on the two parallel runways.

A few minutes later, the first F30's, led by Captain Troff of the Eagle Squadron and Captain Warfield of the Falcon Squadron, took off together from each runway, followed by rest of their Squadron; turning in opposite directions they flew out to form up on their Squadron Leaders.

In formation both Squadrons headed to their designated targets as the last two Squadrons took off; once they had formed up on their leaders, in formation they headed off in two directions after the first two, who were now some distance ahead.

When Brian was about halfway to his target he radioed to the Squadron following him, "Owl Leader, this is Eagle Leader. You guys concentrate on any MIG's that get up and watch out for HX2 Helicopters—remember don't engage any unless there's at least three of you—and don't forget to split up—over."

"Roger that, Eagle Leader—Owl Leader out," replied Captain Jim Gistler.

"This is Eagle One—I just got a Radar detect!"

"Copy that Eagle One—we're being tracked," announced Brian and warned, "watch for incoming missiles, and don't fly through any grayish white clouds—there's no place to land except for the place we're trying to take. I and Eagle Four will take out missile and artillery emplacements to the northwest—Eagle Two and Three will take out any emplacements on southeast—the rest of you destroy the communications and control centers

as well as any aircraft on the airfield, and try not destroying the runway, fuel tanks, and buildings because we'll be needing those after we land."

Brian and Eagle Four broke from the main formation and headed to the northwest end of the airfield to seek out any defensive emplacements; the second pair of F30's, Eagle's Two and Three, broke off and headed south-east.

As the remaining F30's of Eagle Squadron started making their attack runs, Jim Gisler's Owl Squadron arrives in support.

Captain Gisler of Owl Squadron radioed to one of his Squadron, "Owl Four and Owl Seven—concentrate on aircraft on the field, and remember—don't damage the runway, fuel tanks and buildings—we'll be needing those. I'll destroy their command and control center—the rest of you engage any Fighters that get up—good luck—Owl Leader out."

"Owl Four—copy that--over."

"Owl Seven—copy--over."

"Owl One—I copy--over."

"Owl Two—Rodger that--over"

As Brian and First Lieutenant Corrigan began to destroy the missile emplacements, on the northwest side of the airfield, Second Lieutenant Brueske and Eagle Three began destroying missile emplacements on the southeast side of the airfield.

While Captain Gisler destroys the command center, his Squadron begins destroying enemy aircraft on the airfield, but not before a sizeable force takes off to engage.

After destroying the anti-aircraft emplacements on the northeast side of the airfield, Brian's radar shows a large group of Egyptian MIG's coming from the north.

Brian issues a warning alert, "Eagle Leader to all Squadrons—there's a large formation of Egyptian Fighters headed our way, so, --heads up—things are about to get rather hot and dicey, over."

"Yeah, well don't look now, but there's a large formation of HX2 Helicopters headed our way and they look to be coming from Eilat," announced Captain Gisler of Owl Squadron.

"What the hell is Falcon and Hawk Squadrons doing? They're supposed to be taking care of that," barked Lieutenant Corrigan.

"Roger that," replied Brian, "now watch yourselves and keep your wing-man insight at all times."

Now finished with the missile emplacements, Brian and his Squadron fly out to intercept the incoming MIG's leaving Owl Squadron to handle the remaining MIG's and the incoming HX2 Helicopters.

Brian splits his Squadron into three groups in a dual flanking maneuver with him leading Eagles Six and Seven in a frontal attack.

When the MIG's arrive, they are confused and figure they're being attacked by a much larger force; this strategy gave Brian the much-needed element of surprise.

This first encounter cost the Egyptians eight of their number with no losses on the American side.

Brian scored his first kill of the battle for a total of three since he became a Marine Pilot.

Once the aerial battle evolved, the Egyptians seeing that the American planes are few they started getting aggressive and started ganging up with two against one.

John Brueske (Eagle Two) having a difficult time out maneuvering the two MIG's frantically called, "This is Eagle Two—I need help—I can't shake these guys—please someone—hurry!"

"I'm on my way," responded Brian, after out maneuvering and eliminating his two pursuers.

Brian spots Eagle Two and the two MIG's which are trying desperately to kill Brueske, as he desperately tries to evade.

Brian radios, "Just keep evading like you've been doing—I'm pulling in right behind your number two bogie—I'll have him off your tail in a bit."

Then suddenly, Lieutenant Brueske makes a hard right bank and breaks away from a very surprised MIG Pilot, followed immediately by his partner falling away trailing a stream of black smoke; the result of Brian's cannon, as he now has scored his fourth kill of the day and is now an Ace with a total of six.

Then Brueske pulls in behind his pursuer and nails him good with canon fire, his first kill.

As Brian climbs to get a view from above, he spots two MIG's ganging up on Lieutenant Corrigan (Eagle One) and drops down and pulls in behind one of them.

Brian announces on the radio, "Eagle One, bank hard to the left—I'll nail one and you can nail the other as you come around."

"Roger that Eagle Leader." He executes the hard left bank, Brian fires his canons and another MIG bursts into flames, as Brian scores another kill for number five today for a total of seven; the Pilot ejects and descends to the ground under a large white canopy.

Corrigan also has his first kill too.

As the battle progressed, the Egyptian MIG's fell with no American losses; Brian thinking, the Egyptians sure aren't as skilled as the Syrians were the last time I was in the Middle East.

Finally after the last Egyptian MIG falls, Brian now sees how the Israelis were able to defeat them back in the twentieth century.

Heading back to Taba, Brian was shocked to see that Owl Squadron had lost half of its members and the Israeli Ground Forces were having a difficult time taking the Taba Airfield.

Brian counted five MIG's and six HX2 Helicopters against the depleted Owl Squadron; so, he launched a PL9 missile in desperation hoping that none of the American F30's would succumb to the white cloud.

The F30's managed to avoid it as well as several of the MIG's and HX2 Helicopters, but one of the MIG's and two of the HX2 Helicopters flew through it and went down; the MIG crashed in a fiery explosion and the two Helicopters managed to land unharmed.

The Israeli Ground Forces soon had the two Pilots captured and promptly destroyed the Helicopters.

As the white cloud dissipated, Brian wondered if the three downed aircraft could be counted as kills, although he felt sure the MIG would be, in which case it would count as number eight; now only four MIG's and four Helicopters remain.

As Brian takes out after one of the four remaining MIG's, he's wishing his Brother Mike were here to handle the four HX2's.

Brian's plan is to take care of the remaining MIG's so whatever is remaining of his group can handle the Helicopters.

As Brian is about to engage a MIG, Captain Gisler (Owl Leader), joins him and announces over the radio, "I'll give you a hand—we need to get rid of these guys fast, so we can concentrate on those damn Helicopters—they're deadly."

"Thanks—I can use all the help I can get," replied Brian, "and you're right about the Helicopters."

With those words brought back memories of the Excalibur Demo at Edwards and what he said when it flew by, "Why--it's only a stupid Helicopter!"

And later that night what his Dad said to Major Larson, "You don't find Ace's flying Helicopter's."

And the Major's reply, "That's all going to change, and there's going to be Helicopter Ace's."

Brian clearly recalling his Dad's reply, "Helicopter Ace's—who ever heard of such a thing."

Boy how wrong he was, Brian thinking, "If Mike is flying, and I hope to God he is, he'll be an Ace."

"Hey Python—get your head out of the clouds, else you're going to be playin' a harp in them," came Gisler's warning over Brian's headset, and none to soon, as one of the MIG's pulls in behind him.

For the next few minutes, Brian flew all over the sky trying to shake his adversary.

Finally having enough of this, Brian says, "I've had enough of this playing footsie—time to get serious."

So, Brian suddenly pulls up and applies his air-brakes and the surprised MIG fly's past beneath him.

Brian then locks his canons on him and fires, the MIG bursts into flames and heads towards the ground trailing black smoke; Brian scored his ninth kill, seventh of the day.

Returning his gaze from the explosion of the MIG hitting the ground to the sky around him, Brian searches for the remaining three MIGs.

Then Brian sees a bright explosion to his left, and watches burning parts of an aircraft fall to earth; he holds his breath hoping it wasn't Gisler.

Frantically, he calls on the radio, "Hydra, —are you ok?"

"Yeah, —I'm fine and that's number three for me," Gisler returns, his F30 busting through the thick black smoke.

"Awesome job—we still have two left."

"Ok, —let's finish off these bozos," announced Gisler.

When one of the remaining MIG's crossed right in front of Brian, barely missing him, Brian declared on the radio, "Bozo number one just introduced himself, and he's dead meat."

"Yeah, —and I just spotted Bozo number two."

A minute or two later, Brian pulled in behind his quarry and a few seconds later the MIG followed his friend to the ground trailing black smoke; Brian scored his eight kill of the day.

A short time later, Gisler sent the last MIG after the others; his fourth kill of the day announcing, "God—this is to easy—where do these guys learn how to fight? I'm beginning to feel guilty claiming so many kills in one day."

“Yeah, I know what you mean—it doesn’t seem right,” Brian answered, and then he said, “We’ve still got those Fighter Helicopters to deal with—and they won’t be so easy.”

When Brian and Gisler returned, they were shocked to learn that two more of their number was gone and five of the Helicopters still remain; Eagles Four and Seven were lost.

With the their diminished numbers, Brian decided to risk another PL9 launch in desperation to reduced the number of Fighter Helicopters they had to face.

In desperation, Brian announced, “I’m gonna’ use a PL9 and try to take out a couple of em’, so watch where you fly—we don’t need anymore of us going down.”

Brian spotted two HX2s flying in formation off to his right trying to get an angle on several F30s, so he launched his last PL9 Missile.

Placing the missile just ahead of the HX2 formation it went off generating a large white cloud which they flew right into; followed a short time later with two auto-rotations to the ground, where the Israeli Ground Forces quickly took care of them.

Now, all they have to defeat is the three remaining HX2 Helicopters.

The air battle is now eleven F30s verses three HX2 Fighter Helicopters and easy victory for the American F30s.

Seeing that they’re out numbered, the Fighter Helicopters “circled the wagons” and started to slowly fly in a counter-clockwise direction forcing the high-speed jets to fly a circle pattern; which they flew in a clockwise direction, which Brian thought gave them an advantage.

Then suddenly, the HX2 Helicopter’s each fired one of their PL9 missiles right into the circle pattern the American F30’s were flying; the PL9’s detonating at 270 degrees apart causing six of the F30s to head for the airstrip unpowered.

Brian choked seeing this unfold, and barely missing the white cloud himself, he was now forced to break the circle pattern along with the other five remaining F30’s.

As Brian, Gisler and the remaining F30’s formed up out of the HX2’s firing range, he felt discouraged and said on the radio, “Whata’ we do Guys—it doesn’t look good. I don’t think we can take em’ with only the five of us—anyone got any ideas?”

“How about using another PL9 on em’,” suggested Lieutenant Kempke (Owl One).

“Only way that’ll work is if you surround them in a white cloud, otherwise they’ll just wait it out,” replied Brian.

“Ok then, let’s all fire PL9s and surround the bastards with the stuff,” announced Lieutenant Corrigan (Eagle One).

“That’ll take at least eight missiles,” announced Brian, “I don’t have any—I used my last one on those first two--remember.”

“I don’t have any left either,” announced Gisler.

“Ok—that pretty much settles it,” Brian quipped matter-of-factly, “we don’t have enough PL9s to take em’ out—any other bright ideas?”

“How about a full on frontal attack using missiles and cannons,” Gisler firmly retorted.

“Ok, but that’ll mean some of us aren’t going home,” Brian pointedly announced, “this will be suicide—is that what you really want?”

“What choice do we have,” Gisler weakly replied, “at least we’ll have defeated the bastards and secured the airfield per our mission.”

“Ok then, a frontal attack it is,” sighed Brian, “make your shots count—and good luck to you all.”

“Ok,” Gisler firmly declared, “let’s hit em’ with everything we got at once—let’s do this!”

When they were in front of the three Helicopters, Brian yelled into his mike, “ATTACK!”

Then all five F30s flew straight at the three HX2 Helicopters launching missiles and firing their cannons; the three Helicopters fired back hitting two of the F30s.

Brian’s missile missed the Helicopter that he had a lock on when it suddenly dropped out of the tri formation, but one of the other Helicopters wasn’t so lucky and it went down in a spiral spin emitting black smoke; Gisler got his fifth kill and he too, became an Ace.

Then the HX2 Helicopter which had suddenly gone off radar reappeared, and fires at Brian’s F30 from below; Brian’s F30 violently shook, the flight controls felt heavy and weren’t responding correctly, several of the instruments went dead, and then grayish black smoke began filling the cockpit.

As panic and fear raced through Brian’s mind, he knew he had been hit and his F30 was done-for.

Trailing a plume of black smoke, Brian’s F30 headed uncontrollably towards the earth.

Keeping his cool, Brian knew his only recourse was to bale, and so he reached over and pulled the ejection lever launching him clear of the

doomed aircraft.

After Brian's chute open, he started to slowly descend to the ground, knowing the Israeli's would pick him up.

Then suddenly, the Helicopter that shot him down came at him aggressively and started firing its cannon at him with the Pilot harshly declaring, "Khudh `annak khinzir kafir—Allah `Akbar!"

Brian's body shook until his arms fell to his sides; with head on his chest his limp body continued to drift towards the earth where it landed in a heap with the white parachute collapsing on top and covering him like a funeral shroud.

When Gisler saw what had happened a tear ran down his cheek, and then in anger he cried, "MURDERING BARBARIAN," and attacked the Helicopter from behind with all cannons blazing with no concern for his own well being; taken by surprise, the Helicopter burst into flames and fell to the earth in a fiery explosion.

As the other two remaining F30s took on the last HX2 Helicopter, Gisler made a pass over where Brian had landed; a couple of Israeli Soldiers were putting Brian's body into a truck.

With sadness, Gisler headed back to rejoin what's left of the Squadrons and to finish off the last HX2 Helicopter, which now, with three F30s, didn't take long.

Henry was sitting in his easy chair watching world news on TV while Maria was out in the kitchen preparing dinner.

The news wasn't good as he well knows from his position in the Pentagon; as the NATO Alliance wasn't doing very well, and now he's listening to news reports on how badly it going for Israel.

Then after showing scenes of destruction and conflict it switches to a brighter bit of news about the mysterious Soldier and Tiger freeing and saving people in India.

The newscaster's closing statement, "Because of this one brave pair, many people have been spared and villages saved from the brutal Islamic Union, and only in India have any headway in this world war been achieved. The Indian Prime Minister has recommended to the President that this Soldier, whom ever nation he may be from, be given the Bharat Ratna for his heroism."

"Hon—India wants to give that Soldier with the Tiger the Bharat Ratna medal—isn't that wonderful, Hon," Henry announced from the living room.

Maria smiled after hearing her husband while spurning a pot on the stove, and as she was about to answer she froze with a look of terror; she

gasped with her hand to her face and collapsed.

Henry hearing a loud thud coming from the kitchen quickly got up and hurried to the kitchen where he found her lying.

Hurrying to her, Henry found her weeping and helped her to a sitting position, then he asked, “Hon—what’s wrong?”

With tear stained eyes and cheeks, she sobbed bemoaning, “Our oldest—he’s dead, *Sob*, *Sob*, Brian’s been killed—boo-hoo-hoo,” she cried.

“Now, now, Hon, I’m sure he’s alright,” said a skeptical Henry trying to ease her.

“No he’s not—he’s dead and I fear Mike will be next--*Sob*, *Sob*.”

“How can you possibly know that, Hon,” inquired Henry?

“Because I felt it—a dreadful premonition, *Sob*,” she replied.

A still unconvinced and skeptical Henry said, “I’ll call the Pentagon and see if they have any intelligence—I’m sure they’ll tell me he’s just fine,” and helps her up, after seating her in a chair he goes over to the phone and dials the number at the Pentagon.

After a few rings someone answers and Henry requests to get connected to G2; after going through the proper security protocol, Henry is connected to Major Greer, “Major, can you update me on the status of Marine Captain Brian Henry Troff—can you tell me if he’s recently deceased.”

A few minutes of silence follows, as Henry looks to Maria with a smile on his face to reassure her that everything’s fine with Brian.

Then the Major tells him, “Sir, the latest status of Marine Captain Troff does indicate he was killed in action in the Sinai. His F30 Fighter Aircraft was shot down over the Taba Airfield that his and another Squadron was trying to take—there were heavy losses. His remains have been recovered and will be flown back to the US in a few days—I’m very sorry—if it’s any consolation, his death wasn’t in vain, the airfield was taken. In few day’s someone will be coming by with the official notice and to answer any questions you may have—again, I’m very sorry for you loss.”

The smile faded from Henry’s face and a tear formed in his eyes as he chokingly said, “Thank you Major for the information, my wife and I will be awaiting the official notification—good-bye.”

When Maria saw the sad and tearful expression on Henry’s face she knew Brian was dead and began crying into her hands, then she lean on the table with her head in her arms crying, moaning, “Brian’s gone—Brian’s gone—I won’t see or hear him ever again—poor Brenda and little Mary, what will they do now?”

Henry also sobbing went over and took Maria in his arms and the both of them began sobbing, and then he blubbered, “Now both Mike and Brian are gone, I hope Jeff will survive this war.”

Maria stopped crying and sternly looked Henry in the eye and firmly told him, “Mike’s not dead—he’s not—I know that just as I knew Brian had died—he’ll be back—just wait—you’ll see.”

“Ok Hon, I believe you—he’s still alive and out there somewhere,” spluttered Henry.

Standing at edge of the dense forest overlooking the village where he had seen the EXR3 land, he saw to his horror several missile and artillery emplacements; looking through his M20 viewfinder he sees several machine-gun bunkers and what looks like an entire company of Soldiers.

Nearly all of the villagers have departed, just like several other villages he’s liberated.

Mike lowers his M20 and looks down at Sheila and grudgingly remarks with a sigh, “Madam—I don’t think we can save this village by ourselves—this is way beyond us—we need an entire company with air support—I think our mission is finished.

Guess I’ll return and report what I found to the nearest NATO military unit—what ya’ think,” she looks up and issues a deep-throated growl.

They turn and walk back into the forest and look for a place to make camp; after finding a suitable spot they go hunting for dinner, returning several hours later with another wild boar.

That night as Sheila munches on the boar and Mike roasts his chunk of pork over the fire, lots of aircraft are heard flying overhead heading for the village; Mike says to himself, “Sounds like a lot UN aircraft heading to that village maybe their going to make a decent try and recover the EXR3—if so, maybe I should head there as well—I might be able to help.”

Mike pokes the sizzling hunk of pork and sees that it’s done, so he slices off a large piece and eases back and begins eating.

While eating, Mike realizes its mid June and he is still alive and grins.

After swallowing the chewed piece he remarks with a bit of sarcasm and a giggle, “End of next month I’ll be twenty-one and can legally drink and there’s no bar in which to celebrate—what a bummer—maybe I wasn’t suppose to turn twenty-one—maybe I was suppose to be dead—well, there’s still six weeks before my birthday—I guess it can still happen. Maybe I’m to die in that big battle brewing in that village—maybe that’s where it’ll happen—huh,” looking over at Sheila, she eyes him and licks the blood off her

whiskers; Mike laughs.

After finishing her meal, Sheila comes over and eases down next to Mike.

Mike finishes his portion of pork and looks at his greasy hands, and then looks at her orange and black coat glistening in the firelight; he then shrugs his shoulders and wipes his hands on her coat.

Sheila jumps up, turns to face him and issues a warning snarl in displeasure; Mike raises his hands and apologizes, “Sorry Madam.”

Then saying to himself, “Women—always so concerned about how they look—all neat and clean,” now thinking of Pam.

With a smile on his face, Mike looks at his hands which he just wiped on Sheila’s coat and the smile vanishes when he notices there’s now only one line instead of two; he looks again moving closer to the fire for proper illumination and sure enough there’s now only one line.

The one that was touching his lifeline has disappeared leaving the one coming up to, but not touching.

Remembering back to his high school days and the mysterious old Fortune-teller who told him his fortune, Mike remembers her words so clearly, “You see these three short lines here. They indicate the death of three love ones. This one here, see how it connects to your lifeline, it indicates a death in your family. It could be one of your parents or your brother or sister.”

Then he remembered how one of the lines disappeared when Russ died in a motorcycle accident later that year; now he was deeply concerned, because this time it meant a death in his family had occurred, but who?

The fire loudly popped startling both Sheila and Mike; Sheila looks at Mike and moves her whiskers, puts her head on her paws, closes her eyes, and goes to sleep.

Mike lays back and wonders, of all the people in his family, which one had died and closed his eyes as a tear rolled down his cheek.