

PEGASUS CHRONICLES



THE PHOENIX FACTOR



PEGASUS CHRONICLES

Book Five — Phoenix Factor.

By DC Storm

THE PEGASUS CHRONICLES.

By DC Storm

Book Five -- The Phoenix Factor.

- Chapter 1. Requiem for a Tiger.
- Chapter 2. Colonel Waraich.
- Chapter 3. Laid to Rest.
- Chapter 4. Requisition.
- Chapter 5. Air Ninja.
- Chapter 6. Special Flight Training Redux.
- Chapter 7. A not so Merry Christmas.
- Chapter 8. Advanced Flight Training.
- Chapter 9. Air Battle over Kathlaur.
- Chapter 10. Phoenix Burn.
- Chapter 11. Mixed Up, Mix Up.
- Chapter 12. Returning from the War.
- Chapter 13. Fort Rucker Redux.
- Chapter 14. Mess Hall of Heroes.
- Chapter 15. Detail Duty.
- Chapter 16. Flight Exams & Checks.
- Chapter 17. Phoenix Rise.
- Chapter 18. Sightseeing and a Job.
- Chapter 19. Paintball Team.
- Chapter 20. Coach Troff.
- Chapter 21. Oshkosh Air Show.
- Chapter 22. Hero's In the Sky.
- Chapter 23. Auld Lang Syne.
- Chapter 24. New Beginnings.
- Chapter 25. EPILOGUE.

Copyright 2018

First Edition 2018

Second Edition 2019

CHAPTER 1 -- Requiem for a Tiger.

The next morning, Mike awoke to distant gunfire and loud explosions.

Sheila was already awake and stood looking towards the partially fog hidden village far below and growling from deep within.

Mike looks to where she's looking and clambers to his feet and remarks, "Yeah, I hear it too. Sounds like a big battle down there—the war has finally arrived in all of its gory," agreeing with her, and now feeling a sense of impending doom.

The morning was dank; the Sun was hidden by large dark gray clouds, and diffused curtains of fog hung over the forest making everything feel damp.

"A fine crappy day for a fight," Mike commenting to himself, as he goes about breaking down the camp.

Thirty minutes later, Mike hoists his backpack onto his back, picks up his M20 and says, looking at Sheila, "Time to join the fray—it might be too dangerous for you this time, so I suggest you return to the forest. I need to be with my kind and you with yours, and hopefully someday we'll meet again."

Sheila issued a deep disapproving growl and shook her head.

"No," said Mike surprised, and then pleading, "please Sheila, go away from here—I don't want to see you dead."

Again she shakes her head and this time raises her huge paw, those deadly curved claws prominently showing.

"Ok," Mike says with a sigh, "but in-order to survive we must use stealth, cunning, and patients," remembering what Larry Clark had taught him so long ago, and also what he learned from Sheila and her Streak.

Then a group of American F30's flew over; Mike looks up, and as one of the low flying aircraft's passes by a brake in the fog, he sees the US Fighter Group insignia on its tail section and remarks, "Looks like our guys are involved, guess it's time to move out."

So, Mike heads down towards the village with Sheila close behind.

As Mike and Sheila got closer to the village, the sounds of the conflict raging in and around the village grew louder.

With his M20 at the ready and with heightened senses; Mike and Sheila cautiously made their way closer to the conflict.

As the sound of loud gunfire and exploding shells sounded up and down the mountain valley, the sulfurous odor of burnt gunpowder finally reached Mike, and when Sheila got a whiff she shook her head and rubbed her nose with her paw.

“Yeah, it stinks,” Mike acknowledged, “I told you not to come—remember.”

Sheila looks at Mike and paws her nose again and then sneezes shaking her head.

Mike giggles and says, “Yeah, and it’ll only get worse—your eyes will start to smart and your ears will hurt too. I think you should leave this place and go back up into the mountain forest and rejoin your Streak.”

Sheila stands steadfast, sharply shakes her head, issues a deep-throated growl and pads past Mike towards the raging battle ahead; Mike shakes his head at her obstinateness and starts after her.

A short time later, Mike and Sheila emerge from the deep forest, when suddenly, a stray round barely missing them buries itself in the tree right next to them, sending pieces of bark and wood flying; they both take cover behind a nearby bolder.

“Wow! That was a close one,” Mike exclaims; Sheila emits a low growl.

“Now to see what’s happen’,” Mike commenting as he brought his M20’s scope up to his eye, turns it on with his left hand and peers into the viewfinder.

After carefully surveying the battle in and around the village, he learns that the Pakistani Army is between him and the UN Coalition force with several firefights going on at different locations throughout the village.

Then as Mike pans to the right, he came to a small landing strip for Fighter Helicopters; as Mike watched, two HX2’s took off and flew off to join the air battle, and then the stolen EXR3 landed, as several Pakistani MIGs flew overhead and circled the battlefield and made a strafing pass on two of the UN Coalition positions.

While the UN soldiers are hunkered down, the Pakistani Soldiers advance.

Soon four F30’s arrive from the southwest and engage the MIGs; Mike shook his head and made another scan of the battlefield and noticed a Platoon of UN Coalition soldier’s slowly making their way towards the landing field.

Mike now knew that if he has any chance of recovering the EXR3, it has to be before the UN Coalition Platoon gets there and destroys the EXR3, because he's sure that's their mission.

With his M20 in assault position, Mike looks at Sheila and tells her, "Time to try and recover the EXR3, and your last opportunity to leave," pointing back towards the deep forest; the Tiger just stands there looking back at him making no move to leave.

Seeing how obstinate and loyal she is, Mike bends down and gives her a hug around her neck which she surprisingly allows.

After straightening up, Mike starts for the edge of the village closest to the landing area with Sheila in tow.

Mike and Sheila exit the forest and scurry across a small yard near a beige house.

Staying very close to the house, Mike and Sheila carefully move towards the end of the house nearest the landing area and the Helicopters.

When Mike reaches the end of the house, he peers out from the corner of the house and sees a lot of sandbag bunkers that are holding two to three soldiers with machine-guns and RPG launchers, guarding the landing area.

Standing up against the side of the house, Mike is very worried about if he can recover the EXR3.

He looks down at Sheila and whispers, with a very bleak tone, "I don't see any way to pull this off—there's no way we can reach the Helicopter without getting killed, and then there's you. Even if I do manage to recover the EXR3, there's no place for a Tiger in the Helicopter. I think you had better head back into the forest where it's safe and you can be with your kind."

In the interim, the Platoon of UN Coalition soldiers had reached the landing area and hunkered down behind various buildings when they learned how well the landing area was guarded.

By this time the air battle had escalated with additional aircraft arriving from both Pakistan, which wasn't far, and the UN Coalition airbase in New Delhi, so now there wasn't any available air support for the Coalition soldiers.

As Mike got ready to try and find a way to return to the UN Coalition US Army, he was shocked to see the EXR3 rise to a hover and knew he couldn't let the Pakistani Pilot use the EXR3 against the UN Coalition Forces.

When the Platoon Leader of the hunkered down Platoon sees the EXR3 hovering, he gets very worried, because his mission to destroy the Helicopter is now in jeopardy and orders a RPG assault on the bunkers closest to his position.

When Mike hears the explosions, he peers out and sees smoke rising from the two bunkers closest to the hunkered down troops.

Then, he sees a squad of eight men making a charging assault to take those two bunkers, and thinks, “Are they crazy! The EXR3 will mow them down before they get there,” which it does with its 50 caliber canon as soon as the Squad was nearly half way there.

Mike stared in horror, as the entire Squad lies dead; now he knew he had to find a way to take out that Helicopter.

For the next tense minutes, Mike thought of scenarios to reach the EXR3 while both sides exchanged gunfire, and each time he came up being dead; there just wasn’t any way to reach the EXR3 without getting killed.

Then the Platoon leader ordered a RPG assault on the EXR3 Helicopter, but each round fell way short, because the EXR3 was out of range, but the Platoon wasn’t out of range of the EXR3’s rockets which it used with extreme prejudice.

When the dust and smoke cleared, several buildings were destroyed and the Platoon was now down to only a Squad and a half; the Platoon Leader was dead and so was the Platoon Sergeant.

As Mike looked on with stark horror at the decimated Platoon, he just had to find a way to destroy that horrible Helicopter.

As the day slowly waned, the Assistant Platoon Sergeant took command of the remaining men and they remained hunkered down, not making any moves to attack the EXR3 Helicopter on the landing area.

Mike also hunkered down feeling grim and hopeless, and then as the large orange Sun began to set behind the mountains, Mike remembered his rooftop ordeal in Ladapur.

Squatting on one knee with his M20 resting on his other leg, he recalled how he took out the mobile rocket launcher with a well-placed RPG round, but, he doesn’t have any RPG rounds, so he thinks maybe he can take out the men manning the remaining bunkers if he can get some clear shots.

Mike gets up, goes to the corner of the building and peers out; what he sees isn’t encouraging.

The bunkers are too far for a clean shot from where Mike is currently at, but if he were to go back into the thick forest and from a closer position, he might get high enough in a tree to shoot down into the bunkers.

Then Mike remembers what happened on the roof in Ladapur and the horrible pain that followed when he was spotted.

With a large exhale, Mike said to himself, “Well—I just can’t let them spot me. If I get shot this time—its curtains.”

So Mike and Sheila scurries back across the small yard and into the forest.

When they’re in the concealment of the dense foliage, they slowly make their way to a place just opposite the landing field and two of the bunkers; from here, Mike is behind the EXR3 Helicopter.

Mike also sees two large trucks and an APC (Armored Personal Carrier) parked to the left of the Helicopter; the APC with its machine-gun worries him.

Mike locates a nice tall tree with a large trunk, hoping he can use the trunk as cover against any strays, because once he starts shooting, the Pakistanis will return fire randomly.

With his M20 slung across his back and leaving his backpack at the base of the tree, Mike begins climbing the tree; peering out several times, he finally gets to an advantage point where he can now clearly see the men in both bunkers nearest him, and the men in a bunker to the right of where the ill-fated Platoon tried to attack.

Mike now carefully slides out on a limb next to the big thick trunk.

Lying on his stomach, Mike swings his M20 from his back and brings it up to his eye.

Looking into the viewfinder he checks all the status indicators; next he switches on the computer-aided sight and zeros in on the farthest target and sets this into the computer, and then the closest target, just as he’d done when he qualified in Turkey.

Finally, Mike is ready, takes a deep breath and whispers, “Well—here goes—all hell is about to break lose—I hope this works.”

Mike zeros in on the farthest man first, and because he’s way out there, Mike holds his breath and squeezes the trigger; the first round goes off and a fraction of a second later, the man falls dead.

The Pakistani’s start firing at the buildings in-front of them, thinking that’s where the shot came from and drawing return fire from the hunkered down Platoon.

Mike smiles, thinking, “This is great—they have no idea the shot came from their rear—I’m taking out the remaining two men.”

So, Mike zeros in on another man in the same bunker and fires, he too falls, then Mike fires once more and his partner joins him; now the bunker is empty and one less obstacle to negotiate.

Mike now knows when he fires on the next bunkers, they will be firing in his direction, and he hopes that they will be firing low.

Then he remembers Sheila is still down there!

Mike motions to her to climb the tree next to him, she understands and with a dash and a jump she’s up the tree in a flash and eases out onto a huge limb and crouches low.

Mike is again ready, and this time he knows the men with the RPGs are the most damaging, so he zeros in on the closest man with an RPG launcher and fires; the man falls and his companions are confused as to where the shot came from.

Seeing the confusion, Mike quickly sets up the man manning the machine-gun and takes him out, and then he goes to the next bunker.

Mike quickly targets the man with the RPG in this bunker and kills him and now there’s confused panic in both bunkers.

Mike uses the confusion to his advantage and kills the man manning the second machine-gun; now there’s total fear driven panic in both bunkers and they start shooting blindly and wildly in Mike’s direction.

Bullets fly into the forest, but are too low to affect both Mike and Sheila whom are high up in the trees; Mike hears the rounds go zipping harmlessly through the foliage far beneath him.

Seeing that the remaining men in the bunkers have no clue as to where he is, Mike takes his time and zeros in on the remaining two men. Then as the last man falls to Mike sharp eye, he’s horrified as the EXR3 rises to a hover and swings to his direction; now it’s Mike who’s panicking in fear, because he knows he’s no match for EXR3’s missiles or guns.

Knowing his hiding place is no longer safe; Mike quickly descends from his perch and looks for a sturdy shelter for him and Sheila.

Sheila, now at his side, Mike locates a huge bolder in front of his position near the edge of the forest; it’s not an ideal place to hunker down behind, but considering what he’s up against, he has no alternative.

Racing for his life with hard and rapid beating heart, Mike heads for the bolder.

Pressed hard against the bolder with his arms around Sheila, to protect her, Mike waits with eyes closed for the deafening concussive explosions and the hail of 50 caliber cannon rounds from the EXR3.

After a few minutes and no explosions, no 50 caliber rounds hitting the area, Mike opens his eyes in confusion; sitting there fearing to move, a few more minutes elapse and still nothing.

Then he hears gunfire coming from the landing area, so Mike cautiously peers out from behind the boulder and sees the Platoon had been joined by two more Squads with a Staff Sergeant in charge and are engaging the now unprotected EXR3.

As Mike watches, he sees the EXR3 Pilot has his hands full; Mike now sees his opportunity to move in closer, so he and Sheila make a dash for the nearest empty bunker.

Inside the bunker are the three dead Pakistani Soldiers, a RPG launcher with loaded round lying nearby and a machine-gun.

As the firefight continues, Mike knows that the Coalition Soldiers can't hold out for very long against the massive firepower of the EXR3, as they are already losing men.

Looking at the RPG launcher, Mike must make a decision, either try to capture the EXR3 or destroy it with RPG rounds, and times running out.

Mike peers over the top of the bunker at the hovering Helicopter at five feet in the air, and then he notices an APC in the distance heading towards the landing area; times run out as there's Pakistani reinforcements heading to the landing area, it's now decision time.

Looking grim, Mike looks at Sheila and remarks, "I've gotta' be insane—now you stay here—you hear," she looks at him making no gesture or movement.

Then taking a deep breath, Mike makes a mad dash towards the hovering Helicopter, his M20 slung across his back.

Since the EXR3's Pilot is concentrating on the soldiers firing at him from several buildings, he doesn't see Mike running up behind him, but the Staff Sergeant does and is surprised and confused, he halts the attack.

When Mike reaches the EXR3 Helicopter, he takes a running jump and just barely is able to grab the rear of the left stubby wing with the rocket pods.

Mike now barely holding on, as the Helicopter dips to the left with his additional weight, the Staff Sergeant and his men watch in awe as Mike struggles to hold on.

The Pilot corrects the Helicopter thinking he took a hit and immediately lands to prevent crashing.

As soon as the Pilot has set the EXR3 on the ground he starts to power down the engines, unbuckles his seat belt and removes his helmet; so he can make a hasty retreat when the time comes.

In the meantime, two Pakistani Soldiers from a platoon who were fighting a Platoon of Coalition Soldiers saw what was happening at the landing area and broke off and headed to the landing area to help.

As soon as the EXR3 had landed Mike slipped off the wing and fell to the ground; he quickly got up and started for the door of the EXR3 with the intention of dismounting the Pilot from the cockpit by grabbing him and throwing him out.

Just as he was reaching for the door latch, a round was fired and it ricochets off the side of the EXR3 leaving a shiny mark in the metal fuselage.

Mike takes cover by falling to the ground behind a wheel of the EXR3 and sees his two assailants; they're both to his right, one is behind a large bolder and the other is next to a small steel shed.

Now while all of this was going on, Sheila was still in the bunker watching Mike trying to single-handedly fight this big loud steel bird.

Mike knew he had to find better cover or its game over and lights out for him; he spots a pile of sandbags, like the ones used to construct the bunkers.

Mike then sees Sheila looking out from the entry to the bunker; Mike smiles and points to the Soldier nearest to her behind the bolder.

Sheila looks to where Mike is pointing and immediately understands, and then silently leaves the bunker and bounds towards the bolder where the Soldier is hunkered down behind.

Now as Sheila is silently sneaking up on the hunkered down Soldier from his rear, Mike quickly gets up and makes a mad dash for the sandbags with bullets whizzing past him, some so close he could feel their wake.

Reaching the pile of sandbags, Mike dives behind them just as two rounds plow into the top bag and shower Mike with sand; Mike's dash for cover didn't go unnoticed by the Pilot inside the EXR3.

Now the Platoon of Coalition Soldiers who were fighting the EXR3 Pilot couldn't help Mike, because the Pilot of the EXR3 had them pinned down.

The Pilot of the EXR3 was afraid to get airborne, because he didn't know how bad the damage to his Helicopter was.

The Pilot figured if he could keep the Coalition Soldiers pinned down until the APC arrives with the reinforcements, then he can inspect the EXR3 and see what can be done to make it airworthy, but first he needs to take care of another little matter.

Mike now hiding behind the sandbags peers out and locates the soldier firing at him from the steel shed, and then he sees Sheila crouching getting ready to pounce; the stupid Pakistani behind the bolder still hasn't spotted her, Mike smiles, because he knows that guy is history.

Now, to take care of the man behind the steel shed; the EXR3 recovery will have to wait.

Mike with his M20 ready waits for his chance to end this guy; then, Sheila springs to the amazement of the Staff Sergeant and the Platoon of Coalition Soldiers, as well as the EXR3 Pilot.

When the bloodied body of the Pakistani Soldier sails out from behind the bolder and lands in a heap, the Soldier behind the steel shed moved away from his cover to get a better shot of the Tiger and gave Mike his big opportunity that he was waiting for; Mike aimed and fired before the Soldier could shoot Sheila, and then the Soldier fell dead.

In the meantime, the APC arrived and with its machine-gun began firing at the Coalition Soldiers keeping them from firing back, as it began to unload the reinforcements.

This allowed the Pilot to dismount and sneak up on the unsuspecting Mike.

Now Sheila seeing what the Pilot was doing, bounded out from where she had killed the Pakistani Soldier by the large bolder and races for the Pilot.

The Coalition Staff Sergeant watching this unfold was unable to help and was in shocked astonishment when this huge Tiger bounded towards the Pilot.

Mike seeing Sheila racing towards the EXR3 confuses him; "What the heck is she doing?" Mike thought.

Just as the Pilot, armed only with a 9mm military pistol aimed at Mike, was about to fire, he caught a flash of orange out of the corner of his eye, turns his head, sees a huge Tiger coming at him and turns his attention to the Tiger.

Mike, very confused, turns to watch what Sheila is up to and sees to his horror, that the Pilot a short distance from him is now aiming his pistol at Sheila.

Sheila makes the final leap.

Mike yells, “NO...”

The Pilot fires three times and Sheila falls.

Mike starts firing his M20 and yelling, “NO, NO, NO, Sheila, NO, NO!”

The Pilot’s body shakes and jerks as Mike’s rounds tear through his dead corpse, but Mike keeps firing until his weapon runs out of ammo.

With tears streaming down his face, Mike hurries to Sheila, lays his M20 down, kneels down and puts his hands on her lifeless body; seeing she’s gone, he buries his head in her fur and begins crying knowing she gave her life to save his.

The Staff Sergeant and the Coalition Soldiers that were able to watch, were in awe at what they were witnessing.

Then it dawned on them that the stories that they had heard were all true, and now the famous Tiger was dead and only the Soldier remained, but who is he?

Then a round fired from a Pakistani Soldier, with the newly arrived reinforcements, strikes the ground next to where Mike is kneeling.

Mike looks up, his face tear stained in grief, sees two Pakistani Soldiers headed his way, so he quickly gets to his feet, grabs his M20 and dashes to the nearest source of cover which was the EXR3.

As rounds fly pass, most barely missing, Mike makes it to the nose wheel of the EXR3 and points his M20 at the nearest Pakistani Soldier, but nothing happens when he pulls the trigger; the weapon is out of ammo, because he used it up in his fit of anger.

As panic ensues, Mike looks for an escape route and finds none; he’s trapped.

Then in desperation, Mike quickly gets out from behind the EXR3’s nose wheel and reaches for the door latch. Opening the door, Mike puts his M20 inside and climbs in and closes the door as rounds miss him by fractions of an inch.

With rifle rounds now hitting the EXR3, and harmlessly bouncing off of its armor, Mike quickly secures his M20, seats himself, buckles the seatbelt, dons the helmet and plugs it in.

Now hoping the 50 caliber machine-guns from the two APCs don’t fire at him or the Pakistani Soldier’s don’t have RPGs, else he’ll be in big trouble, because the EXR2’s armor won’t protect him from those.

After bringing the EXR3 to takeoff status, Mike lifts the EXR3 to a five-foot hover, and swings the EXR3 towards the Pakistani Soldiers and lets them have it with his canons; he mows them all down. Next, Mike locks onto the nearest APC and fires a missile; almost instantaneously the APC busted in to a huge fireball, then he fires a second missile at the other APC with the same result.

Now wondering about fuel, Mike checks his gauge and sees the EXR3 isn't fully fueled, but has enough to take care of some local business; he also checks his ammo stores and sees he low in canon rounds and three missiles remain.

Now the EXR3 and Mike is taking fire from all directions, so he takes to the sky.

Now flying over the battle area, he sees the larger group of enemy soldiers is on the other side of the landing area and in positions not too far from where a Helicopter refueling truck is parked.

Now, Mike gets a brilliant idea and comes in towards the truck and fires a burst from his canon; the shells punch holes in the trucks fuel tank and the fuel gushes out in all directions.

Then, Mike launches a counter measures flare into the gushing fuel and it erupts in a massive blaze.

Mike brings the EXR3 in close and comes to a hover a short distance from the infernal, and then using just enough cyclic and collective to remain in a stationary hover, he tilts the main rotor back a bit so the down-wash is directed towards the huge blaze.

Burning fuel is now directed towards the Pakistani Troop emplacements, and like a huge flamethrower they are engulfed in a blazing infernal.

Screams and cries of pain are heard coming from where there're many moving flaming bodies; Mike has just decimated an entire Platoon by using the fuel for a huge blazing Pyre.

With job done, Mike turns the EXR3 around so he can take care of the Pakistani Soldiers on the other side of the landing area, when he sees several Pakistani Soldiers with large knives heading to Sheila's corpse.

With anger in his voice, he barks, "No--you're not going to turn Sheila into a rug," and makes a strafing run, cutting them all down.

Now with burning revenge in his heart, Mike flies over to the other group of Pakistani Soldiers, and with no mercy uses his canon and cuts them all down leaving no one alive.

Now there's only one group of Pakistani Soldiers left, the garrison in the center of the village, so Mike gets some elevation and flies over the

rooftops, heading for the center of the village leaving the Coalition Soldiers to mop up the mess.

When Mike arrives at the Pakistani garrison, he flies over to get an idea of the layout of the place and notices both missile launchers are still active, so he heads for those first.

Now with only three missiles left in his wing pods every round must count, Mike can't afford to miss.

As Mike comes around to get a lock on one of the launchers, he gets a missile radar lock from one of the launchers, so he quickly locks on to that launcher and fires; moments later the launcher is destroyed.

As Mike is about to lock on the second launcher, it launches a missile.

Then Mike gets another bright idea, he lets the missile lock on to him, and then he rapidly flies in a large circle around the launcher with the missile rapidly closing in on him.

Then Mike heads for the missile launcher, with the missile hot on his tail and rapidly closing, Mike abruptly banks left at the last minute; the missile loses Mike and heads straight to the launcher.

Moments later there's a large explosion the missile launcher is history and Mike still has two remaining missiles.

Next Mike takes out the machine-gun placements with canon fire and with the remaining rounds makes a strafing run and cuts down as many of the enemy as he can; using the last two missiles he destroys the communications and Headquarters buildings.

With no more ammo, Mike heads back to where Sheila lays and hovers over her body feeling sick with grief.

As Mike sits there hovering over Sheila, the Coalition Soldiers come out of their positions, because the battle is over, Mike has single handily defeated the Pakistani garrison in this village; another village liberated by the 'Soldier and the Tiger', the final chapter of the legend.

As Mike hovers over Sheila's body some of the Coalition Soldiers gather in a circle around the hovering EXR3, then a First Lieutenant, whom is acting as the Company Commander, motions with his hands for Mike to land the Helicopter; the Captain who was in charge, had been killed.

Now when Mike sees the Lieutenant motion for him to land, Mike's first impulse is to follow the Lieutenant's order and land.

But, Mike remembers what happened the last time he commanded a Helicopter and hesitates.

The Lieutenant keeps motioning for him to land.

As Mike sits there deciding on what to do, he remembers what the Major had told him back at the recovery briefing in the 38th at Dholewal, “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.”

With those words, Mike begins to think it’s Ok to fly this Helicopter, but then again, that was a while ago and the recovery mission went belly up and this is a whole different scenario.

As Mike thought about it the more he convinced himself that he’s in big trouble if he lands.

The last time, he got an article fifteen and busted to a Corporal, this time it might be worst.

With this being his second offense, he envisioned being court-martialed, busted to a Private and sent to jail for a long time.

So in fear, Mike thinks his only recourse is to leave while he can and deal with it later.

So, instead of landing, Mike takes off and heads for the mountains where he met Sheila.

With a very heavy heart, Mike leaves Sheila and heads for the low cloud shrouded mountains with thinly veiled gray sheets of rain descending from the cloud bases onto the dark forest below.

As Mike flew, he was now having misgivings about what he did in disobeying orders, and then he firmly declares, “What orders? All I saw was some guy waving at me with his hands—I have no idea what he wanted—besides, no one saw me, so they have no idea who I am. I’ll just find a nice secluded place in the jungle to hide the EXR3, like the poachers did with that airplane. The way things can get lost in this area—it’ll be years before anyone finds it, if then. Anyway, I’ll sabotage it, so if the Pakistani’s happen to find it, it’ll be unusable except for scrap. Then I’ll hike back to my base camp, get supplies and ammo, and head for the nearest Coalition Base and report I was lost—yeah—that’s what I’ll do—problem solved.”

After Mike had flown away, the Lieutenant watches him leave with, “Damn—he should’ve landed,” then he looks at the Staff Sergeant and commands, “Gather the men Sergeant—we’ve got a job to finish—lots of mopping up to do,” and then looking to where Sheila lay, he solemnly adds, “and a Hero to take proper care of.”

“Yes sir,” the Staff Sergeant replied.

Just then two HX2s flew over.

The lieutenant barks, “Everyone, take cover, —this isn’t over yet,” everyone dashes for cover.

But, the HX2s weren’t interested in the Coalition Soldiers, they had been informed as to what Mike had done in the Village and were on their way to assist, but when they saw Mike flying away they took out after him.

As Mike flew towards the mountains thinking about how he’ll get out of this mess, he comes back to the real world when he sees his radar is indicating two bogies rapidly closing from his six-o-clock.

Then the Lieutenant was shocked to see two more HX2s heading for the EXR3 from the northwest and remarks to the Staff Sergeant, “He should’ve landed—looks like he’s dead meat—ready the men, Sergeant, -- once they’re finished with the EXR they’ll be coming back.”

“Yes Sir,” responded the Staff Sergeant.

Then Mike notices his radar indicating another two bogies coming from his ten-o-clock.

Now deeply worried and without a flight suit, Mike can’t fly any higher than four or five thousand feet without freezing, because the cockpit isn’t heated or pressurized.

With sweat growing on his face, he knows he has no maneuvering room or ammo, so Mike starts looking for a way out, and then he remembers the low cloud bases.

As the four bogies close on him, Mike frantically banks sharply right, increases throttle, collective, along with some left pedal he heads for the nearest cloud bank, hoping it’s not hiding a nasty mountain.

Just as Mike reaches the dense clouds, one of the HX2’s on Mike’s six-o-clock, launches a missile.

The Lieutenant watches with his mouth open as Mike and the two eastbound HX2’s reach the clouds at the same time; he looks at the Staff Sergeant and sadly shakes his head telling him, “I think the Legend is over—now the Soldier is dead.”

The Staff Sergeant looking at where Mike has entered the clouds remarks, “I’m afraid you’re right Sir.”

Just then, three EXR2’s and a F30 flies over the Lieutenant, the Staff Sergeant and the men at a high rate of speed; fresh from the battle to the southeast of the village, they head for the two HX2 Helicopters a fair distance ahead.

Just as Mike enters the dense clouds he gets a lock detect from one of the HX2’s. With nothing to fight with and unable to gain altitude, Mike decides on a maneuver that’s very risky and dangerous.

Then the HX2's, that were on Mike's six o'clock, enter the clouds.

With the missile hot on Mike's tail, he turns towards the HX2's that were coming at him from his the ten o'clock position.

Then with two HX2's and a missile on his tail and two HX2's now in front, Mike flies in a head on flight path towards them.

As the seconds tick by, the missile is getting dangerously close.

Mike with a helmet soaked in sweat watches his radar, and when he's less than a thousand feet from the lead HX2 and the missile now less than a second from detonation, he sharply banks right, hoping the missile can't turn as quick and locks onto the HX2 instead.

Less than a second later there's a bright flash, which lights up the interior of the EXR3; followed by extremely high heat and a horrendously loud thunderclap with a concussion that shakes the EXR3.

The missile had detonated a mere fifty feet from Mike's EXR3.

Mike figuring he'd been hit, begins to do a systems check to see if there's any damage; after finding nothing wrong, Mike then sees what looks like a Helicopter blade sail pass in front of him.

Mike knows it isn't his, because his Helicopter is still flying Ok.

All Mike wants to do now is to sneak away from this place without the other HX2' getting a blip of him on their radars, so Mike drops down close to the trees, hoping he can hide in the radar clutter.

Mike now begins to fly the nap of the earth as he had done back in tech school.

The Lieutenant and the Staff Sergeant were about to rejoin their men when there was a bright flash that lit up the entire cloud that the Helicopters had flown into; next came a loud thunderclap followed by falling burning debris.

Shortly thereafter the EXR2's and the F30 Fighter entered the same cloud; a few minutes later, the Lieutenant and the Staff Sergeant watch multiple flashes of light that lit up the clouds, just like watching lightning in a thunderstorm including the sharp claps of what sounds like thunder.

After a few minutes the light show ceased and the thunderclaps died out, then out of the clouds came the F30 Fighter followed by the EXR2's, but the EXR3 didn't exit; now everyone watching assumed that the first bright flash of light and thunderclap followed by all of the falling debris was him.

The battle here at this village is over and a major victory for the Coalition forces thanks impart to the 'Soldier and the Tiger'.

With the HX2 Helicopters destroyed by the Coalition aircraft, Mike was now free from any pursuers and flies on looking for a place to land, as it's now sunset and the forest below is starting to darken; if he doesn't find a place soon, he'll have to use his night vision equipment.

An hour later, and darkness had overtaken the forest below, Mike is now using his night vision equipment to see where he's flying.

The sky now has a faint glow the last vestiges of sunlight that was rapidly fading and giving way to the light of the full moon which is just rising.

As the light from the moon lit the forest, the forest took on weird grotesque forms.

With his empty stomach complaining, Mike is feeling the pangs of hunger and also fatigue is setting in; he must find a place to land before he falls asleep or his Helicopter runs out of fuel, either way, he'll crash.

Several minutes later, Mike starts to see the forest below starting to shift and slowdown in its passage, the first signs of a brain wanting to go into sleep mode, and then a loud buzzer snaps him back.

Mike shakes his head to clear his thinking and sees the flashing amber warning indicator telling him, he's only has ten more minutes of fuel.

Running out of fuel and no place to land, Mike is now in panic mode, then suddenly like someone is looking after him, Mike spots a long valley with what looks like a silver snake, snaking its way down the its length.

Mike turns and fly's into the valley and at the first clearing he comes to he lands the EXR3; and just in time too, because just as he's about to shut the engines down they go puff and are dead, he's out of fuel and this Helicopter isn't going anywhere unless it gets refueled.

Mike is hungry and very tired.

With darkness the nocturnal predators are out, and Mike isn't going looking for food with only his MK12 Combat Knife for protection; he'll wait until morning, and then try to make a weapon to use for hunting and protection.

For tonight, Mike decided it was safer to stay and sleep in the Helicopter, and sleep is what he really needs now.

Getting as comfortable as he could, Mike closes his eyes and quickly descends into dreamland.

CHAPTER 2 -- Colonel Waraich.

The next morning, Mike awoke to voices and sharp jabs to his shoulder with a solid object; Mike opens his eyes looking down the bore of an assault weapon.

His EXR3's door is open, and a man is there holding the weapon at him and issues a command in a foreign tongue which Mike doesn't understand.

Mike slowly raises his hands in surrender.

The man steps back and motions with his weapon for Mike to exit the aircraft; Mike complies and exits the Helicopter.

Once outside, Mike is forced into a kneeling position with his hands on the top of his head.

Mike is deeply worried as he figures it's all over and the Pakistanis have recaptured the EXR3, and will probably execute him.

Then as two of his captors talk, Mike notices that these men are a military group, wearing Indian Army uniforms; these men are not of the Pakistani Army, but of the Indian Army.

Then the Soldier, who was previously talking with the other Soldier, comes walking over to Mike and appears to ask him something, which Mike doesn't understand.

He asks again, Mike shrugs and tells him, "I'm an American—I don't understand Hindu or whatever you're speaking."

Then the Soldier looking surprised said, "Americana," in broken English.

Mike nods with, "Yeah—Americana."

Then the Soldier introduced himself, "I's be Captain Jindal, and you's be?"

Mike was about to tell him he was a Corporal, but he thought differently, so he simply tells him, "I'm Mike Troff."

The Captain pointed to the Helicopter and asks, "You's can fly—yes?"

"Yes, but Helicopter no fly or shoot," Mike explained.

"No fly—no shoot," Captain Jindal repeated looking confused, and then asked, "Why no fly—no shoot?"

"No fuel—petrol, so no can fly. No bullets—no missiles, so no can shoot," Mike explained; Captain Jindal nods.

Captain Jindal then orders, "You's come with us—yes."

“What about my Helicopter?” Mike asked a little concerned, because he hadn’t had the opportunity to disable it and is worried that a Pakistani patrol will find it.

“We’s leave it here—we’s come back later to get it,” Captain Jindal replied, and then he motioned to several of his men to attend to the Helicopter.

“You’s come now,” Captain Jindal told Mike, and started leading the way up the valley with Mike and some of his men following.

Mike looks over his shoulder and sees six men commanded by a soldier pushing the EXR3 next to the forest where several tall trees were growing; their branches now covering the EXR3, concealing it, and what was not concealed by the trees they threw a camouflaged net over it.

For the next two hours, Captain Jindal led his small army up the valley until they came to an entrance to a large cave.

The entrance was guarded by two bunkers, each holding a machine-gun and a man with a RPG launcher.

Captain Jindal led the way pass the two bunkers and into the cave.

The front part of the large cave was lit by red lamps to prevent anyone from spotting the entrance at night; further on, the cave is lit normally until finally they exit into very small valley surrounded by tall mountain peaks.

The only way into this valley is through the cave or by aircraft, and the only aircraft that could possibly come in is a Helicopter; which makes this an almost perfect secure base.

Captain Jindal headed to a wooden building with a flagpole flying an Indian flag in front; no doubt the Headquarters of this small unit.

When Captain Jindal arrived, he motioned with his hand to Mike while informing him, “You waits here’s,” then he went up three small wooden steps unto a wooden deck and enters the building.

As Mike waited, he looked around to get the layout of the place.

To the left of the HQ building was a semicircle of six two story wooden buildings that looked like barracks surrounding a large building that could be a mess hall.

On the right there were four more buildings, one had a white flag with a red cross on it, no doubt it was the infirmary, as to what the other three buildings were, Mike didn’t have a clue, but felt he would probably find out before he leaves this place.

In front of everything, there was a large open place, that could serve as an assembly area.

By one of the buildings there were several motorcycles, three four-wheel-drive pickup trucks; several were men walking about on their appointed tasks.

Then Captain Jindal comes back out and motions for Mike to join him; Mike goes up the three steps, walks across the deck and follows the Captain into the building.

Inside, there are three doors to rooms leading off a large room.

Some crude filing cabinets, that look like they came from the mid twentieth century, were stationed next to the rear wall.

A large map of India is mounted on the wall opposite to where the doors to the rooms are located; a pole with a brass ball on top holding an Indian flag is standing next to the wall map.

A large potted plant of some kind sat next to the door that Mike just came through.

The HQ office staff consisted of only five men sitting at desks that were positioned here-or-there in a helter-skelter fashion, in a most unmilitary like order and they were typing away on old outdated mechanical typewriters; there wasn't a computer workstation to be found anywhere in the room.

Motioning with his hand, Captain Jindal orders, "Follows me please—Colonel Waraich wishes to speak with you's."

So, Mike follows the Captain to one of the doors to the rooms.

Upon entering, Mike sees a small man wearing an Indian uniform looking at an open folder with several documents; he jots something down on one of the documents, and then looks up and sees Mike and the Captain standing at attention in front of him.

A smile come to his face, his gray laced mustache turning up, he closes the folder and gets up and walks around from behind his desk.

The man approaching Mike with an out held hand is shorter than him; his black hair laced with streaks of gray.

Mike takes his hand as the man introduces himself, "I'm Colonel Waraich and I command this small garrison, and you's be Lieutenant Troff, a's Pilot I's hear—yes."

"No sir—I'm Corporal Mike Troff," Mike tells him, fearing if he agrees with the lie, it'll catch up with him and he'd be in even more trouble than he is in currently.

"No—not Lieutenant—not Pilot," said the Colonel looking surprised and a bit confused.

"Yes, I'm a Pilot, but not an officer," Mike told him slightly nodding.

"I does don't understands," the Colonel says, "Corporals flies in American Army—no!"

"No, Corporals don't fly in American Army—I'm illegal—I'm not supposed to be flying," Mike explains with a deadpan expression.

"But, you's will fly for us—yes," asked the Colonel with that smile.

"Yes—," Mike replied a bit hesitant of what he might be getting himself into, "but Helicopter won't fly—no petrol, bullets or missiles."

"If we get petrol, bullets and missiles—will you's then fly Helicopter for us?"

Looking surprised, Mike nods with, "Yes—if you can get petrol, bullets and missiles, then I'll fly the Helicopter for you, but before I do I'll also need a flight suit, tools and parts to repair the Helicopter."

"Very well—we'll get you's what you's need to fly Helicopter," replied the Colonel.

Then Mike quickly added, "Throw in a couple of new uniforms for me—this is the only one I've got and it's a bit grungy," pulling at his dirty and smelly shirt laughing.

The Colonel and Captain joins him in laughter, "We gets you new American uniform too," added the Colonel.

Now Mike began to have second thoughts about the agreement he just made, for one thing, he's already in trouble for stealing the Helicopter; now his plans of hiding it in the mountains just went up in smoke.

This agreement he's made to fly the Helicopter for this Indian Colonel, has Mike worried, but then he thinks, how can the Colonel possibly get all of this stuff way out here in the middle of nowhere, "I think I'm pretty safe to assume there's no way he's going to acquire the stuff I need," Mike thinking.

Then the Colonel tells the Captain, "Have Lieutenant Sadana show our new Pilot where he's to live, and tells the Lieutenant to keeps him safe—Ok."

Then Mike and the Captain walked out of the office, and out of the HQ building.

The Captain and Mike located Lieutenant Sadana talking to several men.

When the Captain approached the Lieutenant, the Lieutenant saluted the Captain; after the formalities, Captain Jindal told the Lieutenant what the Colonel had ordered, and after saluting again, Captain Jindal walked away leaving Mike with Lieutenant Sadana.

The Lieutenant looks at Mike and orders, "Come with me Corporal, and I'll show you's where you's be's staying and where's you's eat," and he leads Mike towards one of the two story wooden buildings.

Then the Lieutenant suddenly stops and he holds up a finger, "But first we needs to gets you's some bedding to lie on," and then they take a de-tour to a building at the far end of the group of buildings.

Looking impassive, Mike follows the Lieutenant thinking he's now stuck to this officer with no hope of any privacy; "Just great," Mike grumbles.

After obtaining his bed linen, Mike and the Lieutenant heads over to the two-story building.

Upon entering, Mike finds that this is a typical military barracks with a large open bay with wall lockers and double bunks; the men in the barracks come to attention when the Lieutenant enters the large open bay with Mike in tow.

Expecting to be assigned to one of the double bunks, Mike is surprised when he's led to a hallway in the rear of the building with six doors, three on each side.

The Lieutenant stops at the second door on the right and says, "Here's where's you's sleeps," and opens the door and steps inside; Mike follows him into the room.

The room has two sets of wall lockers and two single beds. The Lieutenant says, "Take you's pick's," pointing to the unused lockers and beds, "make's you's self's at home's—I'll be's back to show you's to dinner later."

Mike pulls at his grimy uniform and replies, "This is all I've got—nothing to put in the wall locker, but thanks anyway."

"I'll talk to the Captain about getting you's something to wear," said the Lieutenant; Mike nods.

After the Lieutenant leaves, Mike selects a bed and begins to make his bed.

Two hours later the Lieutenant returned with an Indian uniform and gave it to Mike with, "Here, try these on they should fit you's and then I's show you's where we's does eat."

Mike swallows hard, at receiving the Indian uniform and tells the Lieutenant, "I don't think I'm supposed to wear your uniform."

"It be just until you's get your own," said Lieutenant; Mike nods hesitantly.

Then Mike notices it has the same rank insignia as is on the Lieutenant's uniform and swallows again; they just made him a Lieutenant.

After the Lieutenant showed Mike the mess hall and had lunch, they came back to the barracks, and then the Lieutenant told Mike to stay in his room and don't go wandering around without an armed escort.

Mike, feeling like a prisoner lays down on his bunk, soon memories of the previous day's action came flooding back; tears formed in Mike's eyes when he recalled how Sheila had died, and when he used his hand to wipe away the tears, he noticed his hand was now missing the last remaining wrinkle.

Mike sits up and closely examines his hand and sure enough that last wrinkle had vanished.

Mike softly whispers, "Sheila was the third wrinkle, Russ was the first, and I wonder which of my family, was the second one.

I'm sure it wasn't mom, and it probably wasn't dad, because he's got a desk job, so it must've been either Brian or Jeff—they're the only ones in harm's way."

With those thoughts, Mike had a very deep feeling of grief, and tears began to once again well up in his eyes.

Wednesday morning, two days after Mike's combat in the village, 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 the large highly polish oak table.

Seated at 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.

After Lieutenant Colonel Cross arranged his notes in front of him, he began, "Good morning Sirs. Let's begin with the Mediterranean."

He pushes a button and a map is lowered; with a laser-pointer, Colonel Cross points to the map informing them, "In this area--the Iranian Union Countries still have made no progress in advancing across the Mediterranean. The European NATO Alliance still has them in check."

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 is looking much better. Israel has regained much of its lost territories, and with our brave Pilots, have taken air bases in both the Sinai and Jordan. I might also add, due to the Islamic HX2 Helicopters we've sustained heavy losses—we're in dire need of experienced EXR Fighter Pilots if we're to hold on to what we've already taken.

Colonel Cross reaches over and pushes a button and a map of India is lowered.

With his laser pointer he highlights the same village on the map that he highlighted at the last meeting, and says, “Our latest intel is telling us that we have retaken the village, thanks to the heroic actions of the mysterious Soldier and his Tiger—they single-handedly defeated the entire garrison, and this Soldier, whoever he is, recaptured the EXR3 Helicopter and used it to defeat the Pakistani Army in the village, then he flew off with it.”

General Griggs pipes up, “So, we can assume this Soldier is a EXR Fighter Pilot. Where is he and the EXR3 currently? What about the Tiger?”

“As for the Tiger—I’m afraid the Tiger was killed, and as for the EXR3 and Pilot, from reports that we’ve received, it was shot down ten miles northwest of the village—the Pilot didn’t survive. A final footnote, the Indian Government has declared the Soldier and Tiger national heroes, and the Tiger will be enshrined in a memorial,” explained Colonel Cross.

“Do you have any idea who this Soldier might of been?” Asked General Snyder.

General Griggs looks pained, because he might have an idea, as to whom the Soldier is, and will now have to break the bad news to Lieutenant Colonel Clark.

“No Sir,” replied Colonel Cross, “but talk in S2 is that he might be a MIA—but it’s only talk, there’s no evidence to lend any credence to it.”

“Then the exploits of those two have come to an end,” General Cook summarizing, “I think we need to find out who in fact this Soldier is, and if he is one of ours, I think he should be recommended for the Army Distinguished Service Cross or the Medal of Honor.”

“The Indian Prime Minister has already recommended to the Indian President that the Bharat Ratna be presented to this Soldier, so I agree whole heartily,” said General Snyder, “He deserves nothing less,” the others vigorously agreeing.

“Is there anything more?” Asked General Cook.

“Yes sir, on a side note,” replied Colonel Cross, “we presently learned from the Indian Intelligence Office that they have a small unit working special operations from a secret base located here,” the Colonel highlights with his laser pointer a location in the mountainous region, near that village where the latest fighting took place.

“Anything else Colonel?” Inquired General Cook, the Colonel shook his head with, “No Sir, that’s all I have at this time.”

“Thank you Colonel,” said General Cook, and then with a nod, the Colonel raises all of the maps; after gathering his notes he walks out of the room.

Then General Cook asked, “Is there any other matters anyone wishes to bring up,” he looks around the table, and seeing everyone shaking their heads he adjourns the meeting; they all get up and leave the room.

The next day Lieutenant Colonel Clark is summoned to Major General Griggs office.

Colonel Clark walks up to General Griggs desk and salutes; when the salute is returned, Colonel Clark seats himself in that plush chair.

Trying to avoid the subject he needs to discuss, General Griggs asks, “How’s the Pilot recruitment coming?”

Colonel Clark shakes his head replying, “Slow Sir—very, very slow. The CO, the Company First Sergeant, HQ Platoon Sergeant, Support Platoon Sergeant, and the two Flight Commanders have been recruited. Only the Second Squad Leader and two Pilots for the Second Squad have been filled. They’re not really what I originally had in mind, but they’re the best I could find in the Army—they’re not to Lieutenant Troff’s skill level by a long shot. If only I had Troff here to train these guys... When am I going to get Lieutenant Troff? You must have some intel as to where he currently is.”

“I have some bad news for you,” began General Griggs, “Lieutenant Troff has been shot down in northeastern India, three days ago. I’m afraid he’s dead, so you must do without him—sorry Colonel.”

“Shot Down!” Exclaimed Colonel Clark in shock, “But how? I didn’t think he was flying—I thought he’s listed as MIA.”

“He was—is,” returned General Griggs, “Remember the meeting where I told you about a mission to recover the EXR3, and then it went sour, and Troff, who at that time was a Corporal, went missing. Well, as it turns out, he’s the mysterious Soldier with the Tiger who’s been freeing villages and kicking Pakistani butt. Three days ago, he entered the battle at a village where the Pakistanis were hiding the EXR3. We went in with a company to recover and destroy the EXR3, and were met with strong resistance—we weren’t doing well and were getting our butts kicked like the last time, because once again we had faulty intel, until he and his Tiger entered the fray and the tide of battle turned. Just before Lieutenant Troff was able to recover the EXR3, his Tiger was killed, then he used the EXR3 to single handedly destroy the entire Pakistani Garrison and saved our guys from more casualties. Then he flew off to the northeast towards the mountains, probably

to return the EXR3 to a local Indian Air Base, when he got attacked from two sides. Two of our EXR2's when to assist, but didn't arrive in time to save him. Troff has been recommended for the Army Distinguished Service Cross for his action in the village and the Indian President is presenting him with their Bharat Ratna medal—thought you'd like to know," he grins.

"Are you absolutely certain that it was Lieutenant Troff who was shot down and not one of his attackers?" Colonel Clark firmly asked.

"Pretty certain," nodded General Griggs, "according to several eye witnesses they saw debris fall from the clouds that Lieutenant Troff flew into."

"Well—I don't believe it," Colonel Clark harshly declared, "he's too good of a flier to let a couple of HX2's to get the better of him. You go and get an accounting of the number of aircraft destroyed verses what was present, and I'll bet you there's one missing. You said the last time he was missing, he was MIA or worst—dead, and now, he turns up alive, recovers the EXR3 and destroys an entire Pakistani Company."

General Griggs just sits there looking at Clark with a stolid expression, and then he opens his right top desk drawer and withdraws a thick brown expanding file pocket and places it on his desk and slides it towards Colonel Clark.

Colonel Clark points to the thick file pocket and asks, "What's this?"

"That's the entire history file of Michael A. Troff," replied General Griggs, "I was going to have Lieutenant Troff declared deceased and have those records archived, but if you're so damn sure he's still alive, then you hold on to em' until you're damn sure he's either alive or dead. Remember, once you archive his files, he's removed from the active database and his status is changed to 'Deceased' or 'Discharged'. I believe you already have his DD201 data disk."

Colonel Clark looks at it for a moment or two, and then he reaches over and grabs the file pocket.

Then Colonel Clark said, "When Lieutenant Troff shows up, and he will, I'll be returning this to you. Is there anything else?"

General Griggs shakes his head and replies, "No—that's all I have at this time."

Colonel Clark gets up and salutes, when General Griggs returns the salute, Colonel Clark turns and walks out of the office.

For the next several days, Mike felt like he was a prisoner, because each time he left the barracks and started to explore, he was halted and told to return to the barracks; plus he was closely watched.

Finally, having enough, Mike walked into the HQ building and up to the nearest desk and requested to see Colonel Waraich; the soldier at the desk got up, went over and knocked on the Colonel's door.

When the Soldier heard, "ENTER," he went in; a few minutes later, he reemerged and motioned with his hand for Mike to come.

Mike walks over and the Soldier tells him that he can go in, so Mike enters Colonel Waraich's office.

Mike walks up to the Colonel's desk, comes to attention and with a salute he says, "Sir—Corporal Troff wishes to speak to the Colonel."

Colonel Waraich returns the salute with, "Yours free to speak."

"Sir—why am I a prisoner and how long are you going to keep me confined—when can I return to my unit?"

Colonel Waraich's brow raised and he replied, "Yours not a prisoner and yours not confined. As for when you's can return to yours unit, that I can't say—we's don't have any means to get you's to yours Army. Everything we's have is by either airdrops or we's captures it. I thought you's said you's would fly for us—we's sure could use's yours help."

"Then why am I prevented from looking around this place, and I'll fly the Helicopter for you if you can obtain the stuff I requested," returned Mike in a firm tone looking serious.

"Yours prevented from wondering too far for you's own protection—there's lots of wild and dangerous beasts in the forest in this small valley. As for you's request—I've already radioed for those things that you's requested and they should be's arriving soon—yes."

Mike was surprised to hear that he'll be able to fly again and nodded with, "Yes."

"Is there anything else you's does wish to ask?"

"No Sir, that's it," replied Mike.

"Ok—then's you's are excused," said Colonel Waraich.

Mike saluted and when Colonel Waraich returned the salute, Mike turned and smartly walked out of the office.

The next day as Mike sat on the steps to the barracks looking quite bored, Lieutenant Sadana walks up holding a M20.

Mike sees the M20 and is intrigued and wonders where the Lieutenant obtained this weapon.

When Lieutenant Sadana gets to where Mike is, Mike gets up and salutes; the Lieutenant returns the salute and hands the weapon to Mike and says, “Here—I’s believes this belongs to you’s.”

Mike takes it with a surprised expression asking, “Where did you get this?”

“From you’s Helicopter—thought you’s could use it—now you’s can go exploring, but stay in the valley—yes,” replied Lieutenant Sadana with a smile and nod.

Mike brings the scope up to his eye and looks into it and finds the power indicator is showing a yellow bar; the batteries are very low and need to be replaced, then he tells the Lieutenant that the M20 won’t work without new batteries and bullets.

Lieutenant Sadana announces, “We’s have NATO bullets and we’s have batteries for you’s weapon—you comes with me’s—yes,” then he starts walking towards one of the buildings that Mike didn’t know what was in it, while motioning with his hand for Mike to follow.

CHAPTER 3 -- Laid to Rest.

On Thursday, Brigadier General Henry Troff and his wife Maria received an official letter from the Marine Corps, informing them that Captain Brian Troff's remains will be arriving at the Quantico Marine Base Air Field in three days.

When Maria read the letter she began weeping again.

That very day, Maria emailed Brenda to inform her that Brian is coming home for the last time.

Two days later, Brenda and little Mary arrived at Ronald Reagan Airport in Washington; Henry and Maria was there to meet them.

Little three year-old Mary was being led by the hand, and when Maria and Brenda met they embraced sobbing.

Brenda kept repeating, "He's gone—he's gone—I'll never be with him again—Mary doesn't have a Father now, *sob*, *sob*."

"My baby is gone, *sob*, *sob*," Maria cried, tears running down her cheeks leaving trails in her makeup.

Maria looked down at little Mary, bent down, picked her up, hugged and kissed her; little Mary looked confused, and when she saw her Mother and Grandmother crying she began crying too.

Henry told them, "Come, it's time to go, we have a lot of things to take care of and funeral plans to make," then Maria and Brenda started crying again; on the way home, Maria and Brenda continued to sob.

That evening after little Mary had gone to bed; Henry, Maria and Brenda sat at the dining room table and began to plan for the funeral.

Henry announced that the Government would provide the casket, grave marker and funeral service.

Henry said composedly, "Since Brian was killed in action he'll be buried in uniform with military honors. The visitation and service will be held in the Memorial Chapel on Quantico Marine Base. Now, we need to decide as to where he'll be interred, who his pallbearers will be and notices sent out to those who want to attend the services. Any ideas—suggestions?"

Henry looks around the table.

Brenda pipes up, "Hold on—I have something," and she got up and went to her bag and retrieved a brown envelope; Henry and Maria looked at each other with confused expressions.

Brenda returned to the table and handed the brown envelope to Henry, telling him, "Just before Brian left for the Middle East, he gave this to me saying, 'If God forbid that something would happen to me, here's

instructions for my funeral—the Marines should take care of everything except what I have written in here’.”

With a surprised expression, Henry takes the envelope and opens it.

After taking a few minutes to read the two pages, as Maria and Brenda look on, when he finishes, he looks up and solemnly relates what’s in the letter, “Looks like Brian has everything planed out. First, he would like to be interred at Arlington since we have no permanent home. Second, he has a list of six individuals whom he wants as his pallbearers, and finally, he wants a small service with only Family members. I guess that makes it easy for us,” and with a small grin, Henry hands the pages to Maria to read.

Maria reads the pages, and then with a quizzical expression asks, “How do you get someone buried at Arlington and outside of Jeff and Mike I have no idea who these other men are, and with Mike being MIA we’ve got a problem with getting someone to replace him—and I hope it will be Ok with Brian that his baby brother can’t be there to carry him to his final resting place. As for the guest, I and Brenda will handle that,” and she hands the pages back to Henry.

“I’ll take care of getting Brian laid to rest in Arlington, it shouldn’t be a problem with him being a war hero en’ all. As for Mike, I’ll get an up-date on his status, and if he’s rejoined his unit I’ll try to get him sent home—I can’t guarantee anything—it’s the Army after all. As for Jeff, he’s Air Force, so there shouldn’t be a problem. I don’t know about the others, they’re Marines, but I’ll see what can be done.”

“When can we see Brian?” Inquires Maria with sadness in her words; Brenda nods as a tear forms.

“In a couple of days if he’s viewable--I would guess,” replied Henry feeling a touch of grief. “Is there anything else we need to take care of?”

Both ladies shook their heads, so Henry took a long steady deep breath and said, “Ok, let’s go and get some sleep, because tomorrow is going to be a busy day,” with that, they got up and went to their rooms.

On Tuesday morning Jeff was summoned to Wing Commander’s office, and when he gets there, he asks a Senior Airman sitting at a desk entering data into a computer terminal, “Airman, the Wing Commander has requested that he wants to see me—is it Ok for me to go in?”

“Just a minute Sir,” the Senior Airman replied; he picks up the handset from the phone, pushes one of five buttons on the front of the phone, a small amber light illuminates next to it, and then he began speaking; listening, he nods several times and ends with, “Yes Sir.”

The Senior Airman returns the handset to the phone and announces, "You may go in Sir—he's expecting you."

"Thank you Airman," said Jeff and starts walking towards the Wing Commander's office wondering what he wants.

When Jeff gets to the Wing Commander's door, he opens the door and enters; the Wing Commander sitting behind his desk greets Jeff with, "Come in Lieutenant," gets up and walks over to meet him with a smile.

Now Jeff thought this was very strange for the Colonel to greet Junior Officers in this manner, something is up and it must be very serious. When the Colonel reached Jeff, he put his hand on Jeff's shoulder with, "Come—let's sit on the couch—there's something we need to talk about," and herded him to a small sofa.

To be sitting on the sofa with the Wing Commander has really gotten Jeff worried, and wonders what could be so serious as to deserve this.

After they're seated, the Wing Commander's smile was now replaced with a grave expression; suddenly, Jeff felt a sense of impending doom.

Then the Wing Commander said, with a tone of sympathy, "I've got some very bad news to tell you and I want you to get a hold of yourself," Jeff held his breath at the tone of the Colonel's voice and what he had said.

"I'm very sad that I'm the one to inform you, that your Brother, Captain Brian Troff, has been shot down in the Sinai and was killed and you'll be going home for the funeral."

Upon hearing the shocking news, Jeff face took on a woeful expression and tears formed in his eyes, and in an undertone he said, "Brian's dead," the Wing Commander nods.

Then Jeff begins to tremble as he feels deep emotional grief.

The Colonel softly asked, "Lieutenant, are you Ok?"

Jeff looks at him with a red face, tears began running down his cheeks and nods.

Then the Wing Commander informs Jeff, "Your Father has requested that you return to the States to be with them and to be one of your Brother's pallbearers. Here's a round trip ticket," the Wing Commander hands Jeff a commercial airline ticket, "your flight leaves tomorrow morning at 0600 for Washington—your Father will be waiting for you at Ronald Reagan Airport, when you arrive he'll fill you in, so if you don't have any questions you may leave, as you have some packing to do and I'll see you in a week or so."

"Thank you Sir," said Jeff as he gets to his feet, and with a very heavy heart, he walks out of the Wing Commander's office.

After Jeff returns to his quarters, he immediately gets his travel bags and begins packing.

The next morning, after breakfast, Jeff gets a ride to the public terminal, and after passing through security he heads for the check in desk; after getting his bags checked in, Jeff heads for the departure lounge to wait for his flight to start boarding.

Sitting there with a very heavy heart, he waits until his flight starts boarding, and then Jeff gets up, wipes his eyes with a white handkerchief and walks to the boarding gate.

After entering the airplane, another L2212 no less, Jeff locates his seat, removes his uniform coat and along with his cap; he places them in the overhead storage compartment.

The seat he's assigned to, as luck would have it, is next to the window, so he sits down, buckles up and leans back for what is going to be a long five-hour flight.

As Jeff waits for his flight to get airborne, he hopes there's no incident on this flight, because he's in no mood to do any flying.

A few days after the fight in the Sinai and Jordan in which Brian was shot down and killed, Captains Warfield and Smith were called to Major Ganley's office.

Neither Bill nor Bob had any idea of what Major Ganley wants, maybe another sortie, perhaps?

"Gentlemen come in," Requested Major Ganley, Bob and Bill enter and salute.

After the Major returns the salute he says, "You two have been requested to attend Captain Troff's funeral—it seems you two have been chosen to be Pallbearers," they both looked surprised and perplexed.

Major Ganley picks up two airline tickets and as he hands them to Bob and Bill, he informs them, "Here are two round trip tickets to Ronald Reagan Airport in Washington. You'll be leaving from Ben Gurion Airport at Tel Aviv."

"From Natbag—huh," Bill Warfield remarked taking the ticket; Bob also takes his ticket.

"Yeah, Major Ganley said in a undertone, and then he continued, "Someone will meet you and take you to the Quantico Marine Base where you'll be staying. That person will assist and answer any questions that you may have, and when it's time, return you to Ronald Reagan Airport. Captain Troff's visitation and service will be held in the Memorial Chapel at Quantico. You'll be informed as to where the internment will be—any

questions?”

“No Sir,” replied Bill.

“No Sir,” replied Bob.

“Ok then, you’re both dismissed,” ordered Major Ganley.

After saluting, both Bill and Bob walk out of Major Ganley’s office and head back to their quarters to pack.

Both Bill and Bob spent the rest of that afternoon to pack; including their dress uniforms for the funeral.

The next morning, Bill summoned Deputy Benassi and asked if he could drive them to Natbag.

On their way to the commercial airport, Bob’s and Bill’s Squadrons take off on another sortie.

Arriving at the airport, Bob and Bill go through security, and because they’re in uniform they pass through somewhat faster than the normal civilian travelers.

Once through, they hurry to ‘Terminal Three’ where they check their bags, and then on to the lounge to await their flight.

At nine-o’clock their flight is ready to board, so they get up and walk to the boarding ramp.

Prior to entering the airplane, a Flight Attendant checks their tickets, once cleared, Bob and Bill continued into the aircraft.

When they locate their seats, Bill Warfield remarks, “Hey—looks like I’ve got the window.”

“Yeah, so I see,” grunts Bob Smith; Bill just grins and after removing his coat and hat and putting them in overhead compartment, he settles in next to the window and fastens his seat belt.

Bob does the same and settles in next to Bill in the middle seat, and then he fastens his seatbelt for the long six-hour flight.

The next morning, Brigadier General Henry Troff was summoned to Major General Howard Snyder’s office; when Henry got the message he said to himself, “I wonder what he wants—anyway, I need to talk to him about Brian’s internment.”

When Henry walked into the Major General’s office, General Snyder greeted him with, “Henry, please have a seat, I need to inform you on some personal and military matters,” offering his hand.

Henry looking surprised walked over and took his hand replying, “Yes Sir,” after shaking, he makes himself comfortable in that plush chair.

Henry was curious as to what General Snyder meant by, ‘Personal and Military matters’.

Then Major General Snyder took a deep breath and announced, “The personal matter that I referred to is about your Son Brian,” Henry has a quizzical expression, “the Chief-Of-Staff General Cook, with the support from the Sectary-Of-Defense, and with your permission, would very much like to have Captain Brian Troff interred at Arlington.”

Henry looked very surprised and just sat there speechless.

“Well Henry—is it Ok?” The Major General asked.

Henry nods, he can’t believe what he heard, now he doesn’t have to ask, and replies, “Yes Sir—in fact I was going to ask if it was possible, because my son had requested that he be interred at Arlington—thank you Sir.”

“Wonderful,” declared Major General Snyder, “I’ll let General Cook know that you fully approve, and may I ask as to where the visitation and service is going to be held?”

“The visitation and service will be held in the Memorial Chapel on Quantico Marine Base,” replied Henry.

“Excellent—I’ll have a talk with Major General Unger and see if he can’t arrange for a military procession to Arlington and a full military burial with honors.”

“Again, thank you Sir—I’m sure Brian would’ve wanted that.”

There’s one other little matter that I would like to discuss with you,” began Major General Snyder, “there are several medals that the Sectary-Of-Defense would like to present posthumously to Captain Troff’s Wife on behalf of Captain Brian Troff. These are the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Purple Heart—he will also be receiving posthumously from General Cook the Joint Service Commendation Medal and the Air Medal. Would you see that she’s present along with, yourself and your wife?”

“Yes Sir—we’ll all be there,” replied Henry looking very surprised and proud.

“Excellent!” Exclaimed Major General Snyder, “Will you be sure to have your Son Lieutenant Jeff Troff with you—I believe he’ll be arriving to attend his Brothers funeral. General Cook will be awarding him the Joint Service Commendation Medal and the Air Medal for his services in the special missions in the Middle East. There will be other awards to two Marine Pilots as well.”

“Yes Sir, we’ll have Jeff there as well,” Henry replied, and then he asked, “Sir—as to my youngest, Lieutenant Michael Troff—can you give me any information as to his whereabouts, he’s been requested to be a Pall-bearer.”

Major General Snyder looks at Henry with a deadpan expression; looking at him with that deadpan expression, Henry felt a sudden prang of grief.

“Henry—I think you’d better look for a replacement—your youngest Son won’t be attending the funeral. As to his whereabouts, I think you need to talk to Major General Griggs—he can better fill you in than I—furthermore, it isn’t my place to inform you of your Son’s status,” and he didn’t explain any further.

“Is there anything else Sir?” Inquired Henry.

“No—that’s all for the moment. If you don’t have anything for me, you may leave,” replied Major General Snyder, he offers his hand again, Henry takes take’s it and they shake, and then Henry walks out of the office.

When Henry gets out into the hall, he goes to the nearest elevator and takes it to the next level.

When Henry exits the elevator, he heads for Major General Griggs office.

Upon entering, Henry walks up to General Griggs receptionist and says, “I’m Brigadier General Henry Troff and I would like to speak with General Griggs if he’s in.”

“Just a minute Sir, I’ll see if he’s available,” the receptionists said, and picks up the phone and begins talking in a low voice; after a few spoken words the receptionists replaces the phone and informs Henry that he can go in.

Henry walks to the General’s office door, opens the door and walks in.

When Major General Griggs sees Henry enter he gets up and walks over to meet him; with an out held hand, General Griggs and Henry meet mid-room and shake.

As they head to General Griggs large desk, he asks Henry, “What can I do for you General Troff?”

“Sir, I was informed by Major General Snyder that you can fill me in as to the status of my Son, Lieutenant Michael Troff.”

The blissful expression on Major General Griggs face gives way to a somber one; he says, “Henry—please have a seat,” indicating to that plush chair with his hand.

Henry seats himself while General Griggs walks around his desk and settles into his padded office chair.

General Griggs takes a deep breath and begins, “Where to start... You know, your Son is quiet a hero, especially in India. Did you know that the Indian President wants to present the Bharat Ratna to him, and he has been recommended for the Army Distinguished Service Cross among other metals, he might even eligible for the Medal-of-Honor.”

“Yes Sir, which makes me very proud, but where is he, and when can he come home?” Henry asked, getting impatient.

“I’m trying to tell you,” responded General Griggs abruptly in a sour tone; Henry looking chagrined dips his chin in a short nod.

And so, General Griggs continues with his narrative, “I learned a few days ago that your Son is the mysterious Soldier with that Tiger we’ve been hearing about. I learned that they single-handedly defeated an entire garrison, and Lieutenant Troff recovered the EXR3 Helicopter.”

General Griggs pauses and with a grave expression he adds, “I’m so sorry to inform you that later that day, he was shot down by a large number of enemy HX2’s from two sides—he didn’t have a chance. That’s what G2 is telling us, I tend to agree, the evidence is overwhelming with eye witnesses, but Colonel Clark disagrees, and he was right before when we thought he’d been killed, so for now, he remains a MIA.”

“So—what are you telling me Sir—he’s dead?” Henry lamenting with tear filled eyes.

“That’s what G2 is telling us, but what do they know,” responds General Griggs with a smile, “they were wrong about this Soldier before and Colonel Clark thinks he’s too good of a Fighter Pilot to get shot down—maybe he’s right, I don’t know, but until we get some definitive information he’s MIA for now.”

“So—nobody knows where my Son is—is that correct?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” replied General Griggs in a soft voice.

Henry feeling dismal sighs, and then gets up saying, “I best be on my way—got a funeral to plan, and now with another pallbearer to locate. Thank you General for all your help, I sure appreciate the update,” and offers his hand; General Griggs gets up, comes over, takes his hand and they shake.

Before Henry turns to leave, General Griggs remarks, “Sorry I couldn’t be more help,” Henry nods, and then he turns and walks out of the office.

Later that afternoon as Henry was in the process of lining up three pallbearers, he received word that Brian’s coffin is at the Memorial Chapel and arrangements have been made for a Marine escort to Arlington

National Cemetery on Saturday.

Henry said under his breath, “That doesn’t give me much time—God—I hope I can get all the final details completed by then—I better give Maria a call.”

Henry dials Maria’s cell-phone and when she answers, he tells her, “Hon, I just got the word that Brian is at the Chapel at Quantico, and Mike’s still MIA, so he won’t be participating—no one in the Pentagon has any idea where he is, they’re ready to declare him dead, but General Griggs still has hopes he’s still alive.”

“I know he’s alive—I just know,” declares Maria, “I wanta’ go and see Brian later this afternoon after you’ve picked up Jeff from the airport—his flight arrives at four, so don’t forget dear.”

Henry looks at his watch and replies, “Yes Hon. I need to go, if I’m to meet Jeff, it’s getting nearly that time, so I’ll see you a bit later Hon—bye,” and hangs up the phone.

Fifteen minutes later, Henry walks out of his office and heads for the parking area and his car.

Thirty minutes later, Henry arrives at the airport, finds a place to park, walk’s into the terminal and on to the arrival gate where he waits for Jeff.

Twenty minutes later, Jeff walks down the ramp carrying his small carryon bag, and when he sees his Father, he hurries to him.

When they meet, Jeff feeling grief looked his Dad in the eyes, and with anguish tear-filled eyes embraced his Father and bemoaned, “He’s gone Dad—Brian’s gone, *Sob*.”

“Yes—I know Son—C’mon lets go and retrieve your bags so we can go home, we have a lot to talk about before your Brother’s funeral,” said Henry; Jeff nods, and with very heavy hearts, they head to the baggage terminal to retrieve Jeff’s large travel bag.

After getting his bag, Jeff follows Henry to where the car was parked.

After another twenty-minute drive, they arrived at Henry’s condo.

When Maria sees Jeff, She rushes to him and gives him a huge hug; Jeff gives her a kiss along with the hug.

Maria sobbing softly cried, “We lost Brian—he’ll never be with us again, *sob*, *sob*.”

Then Brenda comes into the room, her face is red and tear stained; little Mary follows her into the room and when she sees everyone in tears she starts to wail.

Brenda goes to her and takes Mary into her arms and consoles her.

Jeff goes to his Sister-in-law and gives her a peck on the cheek and does the same for his Niece; Mary then cries even louder, because this strange man just kissed her.

That evening everyone sat around the table in the kitchen, discussed the funeral, reminisce about Brian, and then the talk turned to Mike.

Henry, his voice once more was filled with emotional grief said, “Mike—they all think at the Pentagon that he’s dead—they tell me they have witnesses that said he was also shot down and killed, but Colonel Clark doesn’t believe it and has convinced General Griggs, so he had Mike listed as MIA, at least until the this fall.”

Jeff sat there staring at his Father, and with more tears he cried, “Mike too! I’m the only one left—what if I’m kill—there will be no one in our family except you and the women.”

“DON’T TALK LIKE THAT!” Exclaimed Maria to the shock of everyone sitting there; little Mary started to wail again, which required Brenda to quiet her.

Then Maria in a normal voice affirmed, “Mike’s not dead—he’s still out there, you’ll see.”

“Yes Hon—we believe you—don’t we,” said Henry looking at the others sitting there; they nod in return.

Then Henry told them, “I was told Mike is a hero, especially in India. He was that mysterious Soldier with that Tiger that we all heard about on the news and the Indian President wants to present him with the Bharat Ratna. He’s also been recommended for the Army Distinguished Service Cross among other metals. I was told he might even eligible for the Medal-Of-Honor.”

“Wow!” Exclaimed Jeff, “Dad—I believe Mom—I don’t think Mike is dead, he’s just too good of a Fighter Pilot to let some second rate Fighter Pilots get the better of him. Remember what Brian had told us about how skillfully Mike out maneuvered them, and they were the best of the best—our top guns. And, how about those sketches he drew for Brian—remember. Colonel Clark was Mike’s flight instructor and he knows better than anyone how skillful a Fighter Pilot Mike is, and he doesn’t think Mike’s dead either—just go an talk to him—he’ll tell you.”

After hearing Jeff reassuring words, everyone felt better; especially Maria and she smiled for the first time.

After a bit of silence, Henry spoke, “I want to let you all know that Brian’s got some metals coming too. The Sectary-Of-Defense would like to

present to Brian posthumously, on his behalf to Brenda the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Purple Heart—he will also be receiving posthumously from General Cook the Joint Service Commendation Medal and the Air Medal.”

“Wow!” Exclaimed Jeff once again, “I guess Brian’s also a hero—too bad he isn’t alive to receive them personally.”

Once again everyone had expressions of grief.

Then noticing the time, Henry announced, “If we’re going to the Chapel at Quantico, then we better get going before it gets too late.”

They all got up and went to their rooms to change clothes and freshen up a bit.

With Henry in casual civilian clothes, and Jeff wearing jeans and athletic shoes, the women had changed into something comfortable; they got into Henry’s old converted van and headed to Quantico Marine Base.

Arriving at Quantico and after passing through the main gate, Henry drives to the Base Chapel.

After parking the van, they get out and together walk up to the main doors of the chapel.

Once inside, the casket with open lid and partly folded flag covering the lower portion is clearly visible at the front of the chapel.

When Maria sees this she hesitated; Henry looks at her and asks, “Are you Ok Hon?”

She nods and grabs his arm and moves closer to him.

The four of them slowly walk up the center aisle; Maria solidly holding Henry’s arm.

The casket arrangement is simple with a tall white candle at one end and white flowers next to each end of the flag draped casket, and behind are two flagpoles with flags, the Stars and Stripes and the Marine Corps flag.

As they pass the front row of pews, two Marine Officers are sitting together near the center aisle.

Arriving at the casket, Maria held her breath, for there lying in the casket was Brian dressed in his Dress Blues uniform, like he was going to an official ball.

Brian looks peaceful lying there with his eyes close and hands folded; his red hair is neatly combed and his face looks radiant and peaceful.

Standing at the casket they look down and tears begin to flow.

Maria is holding tightly to Henry’s arm for support softly cries.

Now Brenda, she cries a bit harder and is shaking as she tries to

stand there, then her legs suddenly become limp and she stumbles; Jeff grabs her to prevent her from falling to the floor.

Both Henry's and Jeff's eyes are filled with tears, but they are stronger and maintain themselves and the women.

The Minister, a lieutenant Colonel, walks out from a small room on the left and over to the small group standing at the casket; he introduces himself, "I'm Chaplin Peters can I be of service," offering his hand.

Henry takes his hand and introduces the family, "I'm Air Force Brigadier General Henry Troff and this is my Wife Maria.

Upon hearing the name, Troff, the Chaplin offers his hand to her, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"This is one of my other Sons, Air Force Lieutenant Jeff Troff, and with him is Brian's Wife, Brenda."

The Chaplin offers his hand to Jeff and then to Brenda with, "My deepest sympathy."

Then the Chaplin turns to all of them and tells them, "I'll be conducting the services in here and at Arlington. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"As a-matter-of-fact, we do have one small detail we're having trouble with," replied Henry, "and that is the Pallbearers—Brian had requested four and said the Marine Corps would supply the other two—the problem is, we only have one—my Son Jeff here. My other Son is currently listed as MIA and won't be here, and I don't know if Brian's two friends will be able to make it either."

Upon hearing Henry mentioning Brian's two friends, the two Marine Officers sitting in the front pew rose with Bill announcing, "Captains Bill Warfield and Bob Smith are here Sir," and they slid out of the pew and came up and joined them followed by another round of handshakes.

"Well, that leaves three positions to fill by Saturday, which doesn't give us much time," declared Henry.

"Don't worry, the Marine Corps will provide the three Pallbearers," announced the Chaplin with a smile, "The Marine Corps will also provide transportation of the Coffin to Arlington and the Honor Guard."

"Thank you Chaplin Peters, that takes a big load off our shoulders," said Henry, "all we want is for Brian to have a Military Funeral that he rightfully deserves."

"He most certainly will, General Troff, he most certainly will," Chaplin Peters reassuring, and then turning to Brenda he says, "Missis Troff, at the end of the service, prior to lowering the casket, the flag on the Coffin will be folded and presented to you." Brenda nods and simply says,

“Thank you.”

The next evening, the day before the funeral, the Troff's were seated around the kitchen table discussing Brenda and little Mary's future; “I'll move in with my parents in Roseville,” answered Brenda to Henry's question.

“What about your job?” Asked Henry now concerned about Brenda's financial welfare.

“I'll quit,” replied Brenda, “the job doesn't pay enough without Brian's Marine pay to support the rent, utilities, groceries and Mary's needs. Mom and Dad will help until I can get through College and get a good job to make enough to support myself and Mary, besides they can look after Mary when I'm in class.”

“I see,” remarked Henry, “and what College had you planed on attending?”

“The one in Roseville which I originally planned on attending before I fell in love with Brian, besides, most of my friends from High School are still there,” replied Brenda, and then she added to the raised eyebrows of Henry and Maria, “I plan on dating again—I'm too young to be a spinster and Mary needs a Father.”

“You can stay here with Maria and myself—Maria will be happy to look after Mary, and there are a lot of fine colleges nearby,” suggested Henry worrying about Brenda and Mary living so far away.

“Thank you Dad, but what Mary needs is stability and a permanent home to grow up in, not moving every few years to who knows where. After the funeral, Mary and I will be going back to Roseville.”

After hearing this, Maria began to weep; Henry said pleading, “Please, Brenda, don't shut us out of yours and Mary's life.

“I won't,” said Brenda, “you're my family too. I'll be coming to visit lots of times where ever you may be living, and you're all welcome to drop in anytime—Mary must see her Grandparents and Uncles.”

Then the doorbell rang.

Jeff piped up, “I'll get it,” and gets up.

As he heads to the front door, Henry says, “If it's for me, tell them I'm planning my Son's funeral and unavailable.”

“Yeah Dad,” replied Jeff, and continues on to the door.

When Jeff opens the door, there stands Bob and Bill smiling back at him.

Jeff looks surprised and asks, “Mister Warfield, Mister Smith—

what brings you two by?"

"It's Captain Warfield and Captain Smith--Lieutenant," Bill firmly announced in a rough voice looking chagrined, their smiles gone.

"Sorry Captain Warfield--Sir," Jeff, taken aback, politely retorted, and then asked "What are you here for?"

"Came to visit for a few minutes--may we come in?" Requested Bill, his smile returns.

"Yeah, sure, come in," invited Jeff stepping aside and Bob and Bill enter.

"WHO'S HERE," shouted Henry from the kitchen.

"IT'S CAPTAIN'S WARFIELD AND SMITH," returned Jeff, then swiveling his head, he grins at Bill.

"Great--now I can get some answers as to what actually happened over there," Henry announced standing in the entryway to the living room; Maria, Brenda and Mary are just behind him.

Henry enters the living room and offers Bill and Bob to have a seat; Maria makes herself comfortable on the sofa and Brenda announces, "I'll be back after I put Mary to bed."

"Can I get you anything?" Maria asked.

"No thank you we're fine, Missis Troff," returned Bill with a smile.

For the next few minutes they discussed the funeral and Brian's medals, and then Brenda came back and seated herself next to Maria.

With a serious expression, Henry demands, "Now tell me, what the hell happened over there that got my Son killed--he was a great Fighter Pilot--what happened?"

"Yes he was Sir--one of the best," began Bill Warfield, "we were up against several Squadrons of HX2s Fighter Helicopters along with MIGs. The MIGs were no problem--we were knocking them down one after another, but the HX2's were another matter, but thanks to some special maneuvers that Brian showed us, we would've been slaughtered--said he got em' from his Brother, Mike."

"Yes, I remembered when Mike drew and described them--I was there," remarked Henry, in a rough voice remembering that unpleasant evening when he'd confronted Mike about lying to him.

Then Henry asked sharply, "Did a Fighter Helicopter kill him?" Bill looks at Henry for a brief moment and slowly nods.

"Tell me how?" Asked Henry in a pained undertone.

"I don't know all the details--my Squadron wasn't part of that particular mission," Bill replied softly, "Bob and I was in Jordan on our own

mission, so all I know is what the surviving Pilots related—we had our own problems to deal with—we lost a lot of guys that day.”

“What have you heard from the surviving Pilots, who flew with my Son, about what actually happened?” Inquired Henry.

“Well Sir--,” said Bill as he began relating what he had heard, “from what I heard, they had easily defeated all of the MIGs and all but three of the Fighter Helicopters and figured an easy victory was at hand with eleven F30s verses three HX2s. But, those dirty HX2s started to fly in a slow circle forcing Brian’s F30s to fly in a large high speed circle around them, then those bastard’s fired three PL9 missiles into the flight paths of the F30s causing six F30s to flameout and head for the captured airstrip unpowered. Now, only five F30s remained, including Brian. From what Captain Gisler related, there weren’t enough F30s to successfully take on the remaining HX2s, so they decided to use PL9 missiles and surround them in a white cloud, but discovered they didn’t have enough to do the job. Then they decided to ‘go-for-broke’ and use a frontal attack using missiles and cannons. They knew it would be suicide for some, but hopefully they would’ve defeated the bastards and secured the airfield per the mission. Two of the HX2 Helicopters were hit and went down, but Brian missed his target when it suddenly dropped out, and then fired at Brian from below, Brian’s F30 burst into flames and headed down trailing black smoke. Captain Gisler nailed the dirty bastard, but it was too late for Brian—at least they completed their mission. Sir—if we don’t get more Fighter Helicopters and Pilots like Mike, we’re going to lose this war, because if they decide to use Fighter Helicopters instead of MIGs we’ll be hurting bad.”

Then Bill hung his head said nothing more; Bob joined him and both were silent feeling despondent.

Henry said slowly in soft voice, “Mike’s dead—he also was shot down in India.”

These words brought both Bill and Bob out of their silent despondence with Bill sharply exclaiming, “Dead! I don’t believe it! He’s too good of a flier—I know, because I went up against him. Was it confirmed by a witness?”

“Yeah,” Henry replied.

“Did the witness see Mike’s EXR2 get hit and go down?” Inquired Bill in a firm voice.

“Not directly from what I heard,” replied Henry, “from what I heard, the witnesses saw debris fall from a cloud bank which they saw Mike fly into followed by a HX2 and two other EXR2s—the other two EXR2s returned, but Mike didn’t and neither did the HX2.”

“What about the HX2? Did anyone see it fly off?” Asked Bob.

“No—it disappeared after it shot Mike down,” replied Henry.

“How many explosions and how many aircraft's fell?” Bill deliberately asked.

“From what I was told, first only one,” replied Henry, “but later, multiple explosions and lots of debris fell from the cloud.”

“So there were more enemy aircraft hidden by the clouds, and only two EXR2s returned, no enemy aircraft was seen retaliating by pursuing the two EXR2s,” argued Bill; Henry nods.

“That don’t make any sense,” argued Bill, “how can they say it was Mike when no one saw a direct hit, only the result—if you ask me—my guess is it was the HX2s that went down, and probably by Mike’s hand and the two EXR2s. I know Mike’s alive and he’s out there somewhere.”

Maria nods her head hard and firmly declares, “So do I—you just wait, you’ll hear from him again,” and Brenda nods.

“Then, why didn’t he return with the two EXR2s, he’d completed his original mission and should’ve returned,” rebuffed Henry, “no—I’m afraid Mike’s dead and we must learn to accept that—as painful as that might be.”

Bill was taciturn as he looked at Henry, and after a few seconds he just shrugged.

Then suddenly Bob piped up, “He’s doing special Ops again.”

“What?” Bill asked with a quizzical expression; Henry had the same expression.

Bill swivels his head to Bob asking, “What are you talking about?”

“Remember when we participated in the war game over a year ago and Mike did undercover special Ops for the Blue Army—remember how he fooled everyone into thinking he was retarded,” Bob explaining.

“Yeah, I remember,” proclaimed Bill nodding with a big grin, “that little sucker is at it again, and with another EXR. He’s not dead or shot down—he’s on another special Ops mission—a bigger secret mission—that’s why he didn’t return with those two EXR2s. I’ll bet the brass recruited him when they found out he was in the Army.”

“What are you talking about—secret mission?” Henry barked looking very confused.

With a few quick sentences, Bill filled the Troff’s in about how Mike fooled the Red Army and provided vital information to the Blue Army.

A surprised Henry declared, “I never knew, besides, I haven’t heard of any secret special ops being undertaken in India.”

“Like because it’s secret—duh,” remarked Bill.

Henry gives Bill a scornful expression while Maria, Brenda, Jeff and

Bob all laugh heartily, then Bill sees the clock and announces, “I see it’s getting late and we should be on our way. Tomorrow is a big day with being Pallbearers in Brian’s funeral.”

Bill and Bob get up followed by the Troff’s; Bill extends his hand to Henry with, “It was a real pleasure to visit with you and it’ll be an honor to be carrying Brian to his final resting place,” then Bill said with a solemn expression and tone, “Sir, --I just know Mike’s alive—I can feel it—just keep the faith and he’ll show up, and when he does, be ready for something big to happen.”

“Thanks Captain Warfield for the inspiration,” said Henry approvingly shaking his hand, then Bob and Bill walk out of the condo.

Saturday morning, they were seated in the Chapel on Quantico listening to the Chaplin give the eulogy.

The closed casket, draped in the American flag, was positioned in front of the pulpit where the Chaplin was speaking.

Bill, Bob and Jeff, in Military Dress Blue Uniforms, are sitting in the front pew on the right.

The other three Pallbearers, in Military Dress Blue Uniforms, are in the front pew on the left.

Brenda with little Mary sitting next to her, in a black dresses, are sitting next to Jeff followed by Henry and Maria who is also wearing a black dress.

Only a few of the pews were occupied by some of Brenda’s, Henry’s and Maria’s relatives; just a few were able to attend, so the funeral is small.

The service in the Chapel only lasted thirty minutes, then with the Chaplin standing at head of the Casket, the six Pallbearers got up, and walked up to the Casket, stood three on each side and rolled the Casket down the center aisle; the Chaplin following just behind the Casket with Brenda and little Mary next, and behind her Henry and Maria.

Everyone else followed next, as the Casket made its way down the aisle, out the double wooden doors and down the steps to the waiting Hearse.

As the Pallbearers pushed the Casket into the Hearse, the others got into cars.

The Chaplin got into the Hearse and the six Pallbearers got into a car next to the Hearse.

Finally, the Hearse pulls out onto Barnett Avenue and the rest of the cars in the funeral procession follow with their headlights on.

After a mile or so, the avenue became Fuller Road which leads out of the base until several miles later they turn unto US Highway 1 and head

north.

As they drive north, the highway becomes more urban with intersections and traffic lights.

After about thirty minutes, they pass by Fort Belvoir on their way to Washington.

Upon reaching the Pentagon, they exit US Highway 1 onto Highway 110 and continue on this road until they reach North Marshall Drive; exiting onto North Marshall Drive they enter Arlington National Cemetery.

About a block up this road, they make a left turn and couple of blocks later a right turn onto Weitzel Drive.

A short distance down this road the Hearse pulls off on a wide shoulder and stops; the Pallbearer's car pulls up behind the Hearse and stops, everyone else locates a place to park nearby.

As the Pallbearers unload the Coffin, and everyone is getting out of their cars, an Army Bus arrives from Fort Myers and pulls up a short distance behind the Hearse and the Pallbearers car.

Eight Soldiers, seven with M1 Carbines, one with a shiny brass bugle and an Officer all in blue dress uniforms disembark from the Bus.

The six Pallbearers carrying the Coffin follow the Chaplin unto the cemetery grounds with the Family, Relatives, and others following; the Military Honor Guard marches behind.

The plot where the grave was located is covered by a green carpet; a mechanism with four shiny brass posts with two shiny silver shafts, one between each of two posts.

Two brown web straps stretched across the hole and wrapped around the two shafts, and on the end of each shaft a brass crank was attached.

The Pallbearers carefully placed the Coffin on the web straps over the hole and stepped back.

The Chaplin walked to the head of the Coffin, Henry, Maria and Brenda holding little Mary's hand.

Brenda stood next to Maria who stood to the right of the Chaplin; Jeff took his place next to Henry after temporary leaving the Pallbearers.

The Honor Guard formed up in a line a short distance away and the officer stood nearby along with two cemetery workers.

Once everyone was gathered the Chaplin began the gravesite service.

When the Chaplin had finished with the prayers, he asked if anyone had any parting words that they wanted to say.

Henry raised his hand and took a step forward and began a short watery-eye eulogy; Brenda and Maria with white handkerchiefs were sobbing and wiping their eyes, even Jeff was teary-eyed.

After Henry had rejoined his Family, the Chaplin gave a nod to the Officer and Jeff rejoined the Pallbearers and they took their positions on each side of the Coffin.

The Officer ordered the Pallbearers to attention, and then he ordered the Honor Guard to fire seven rounds three times for a 21-gun salute; when they finished, the eighth member began playing taps on the bugle.

As taps were being played, Brenda and Maria began sobbing even harder, almost crying; even Henry was weeping, as tears were now running down his cheeks.

Standing at attention, Jeff was trying very hard to hold it in, but his eyes became watery with sorrow.

When taps were done, the Officer gave a command and the Pallbearers grabbed the US Flag and pulling it tight removed it from the Coffin and held it just above.

Then as the Pallbearers holding the taut flag started to move to the rear of the coffin, everyone started to sing Amazing Grace; the two cemetery workers stepped up to the two cranks and began to turn them.

The Officer gave another command and the Pallbearers began to fold the flag, and as the Coffin slowly descended into the grave, everyone continued to sing.

After finishing folding the flag into a triangle which Jeff was holding, wearing white gloves, he makes an about face and with one hand on top of the folded flag, he walks over to Brenda, comes to attention and presents the flag to her.

After Brenda receives the flag, Jeff takes a step back, makes an about face and marches back to rejoin the other Pallbearers.

The Coffin has now reached the bottom of the grave, its permanent resting place.

As the two cemetery workers pull the straps from the hole, everyone starts to leave; Brenda, Maria and Henry momentarily glance into the grave.

As Brenda and Maria walk back to their car, they're sobbing with handkerchief held to their faces.

The Army Bus pulls away as Henry and the two women get into their car; the Chaplin gets into the Hearse with the Undertaker and it also pulls away. As they wait for Jeff to join them, Maria asks, "How do we find Brian's grave back?"

“It’s just across the street from the Netherlands Carillon,” Henry pointing to the tall structure across the road.

Finally Jeff arrives and slides into the front seat next to Henry; Maria is seated in the back with Brenda and they both are still teary-eyed and wiping their eyes with their handkerchiefs.

Finally as all of the cars are leaving, Henry starts his car and follows them out to the Highway.

On Wednesday, Henry, Jeff, Bob and Bill all in uniform along with Maria and Brenda in black dresses were in the Pentagon to get presented medals.

The Sectary Of Defense along with General Charles Cook and all five of his staff generals were there to present the medals.

After a speech from the Sectary Of Defense, he presented the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Purple Heart, Posthumously, to Brian’s Wife, Brenda. Then General Cook stepped forward and presented, posthumously, to Brian’s Wife the Joint Service Commendation Medal and the Air Medal.

Next, General Cook said, after he stepped up to Jeff, “In recognition for your dedication for flying several important and dangerous missions to help shorten this war we’re in, I present to you the Joint Service Commendation Medal and the Air Medal,” and places the two medals around Jeff’s neck.

Jeff salutes the General as Henry’s heart is filled with a huge amount of pride in his two Sons.

General Cook also presents the Joint Service Commendation Medal and the Air Medal to both Bill and Bob for heroism in the skies above Jordan and Israel.

On Friday, Bob and Bill are at Ronald Reagan Airport waiting to catch their return flight to Israel.

On Saturday, Jeff said goodbye to his Family and prior to walking up the boarding ramp, Maria beseeched him to be careful, he told her he would, and just before he left she hugged and kissed him one last time; as he walked up the boarding ramp Maria began to sob again as she waved goodbye.

Henry and the two women waited until the airplane had flown out of sight, and then they walked back to their car and headed home.

CHAPTER 4 -- Requisition.

On the last Thursday in June, Mike was watching a cargo plane circle overhead, and then out of the back of the plane came a dozen or so very large boxes with huge parachutes.

As the large boxes with the huge parachutes drifted towards the earth, there was a lot of activity in the compound, where Mike was.

As Mike watched, Colonel Waraich walks up to him and says, “Looks likes you’s petrol and ammo for you’s Helicopter has arrived, thanks to Indian Air Force—yes. Now you’s can fly’s Helicopter—Yes?”

Mike looked at him and asked, “Did all of the stuff I requested arrive?”

Colonel Waraich looked at him and shrugged, “Let us sees,” he replies; Mike looking at him nods.

Colonel Waraich orders Lieutenant Sadana to take Mike and a Platoon of men to recover the supply drop.

Mike is sitting in between Lieutenant Sadana and the driver of a large military truck as they go slowly through the tunnel, the truck just missing the roof in several places.

If the truck would go any faster, the rough floor of the tunnel would cause the truck to bounce and crash into the tunnel roof.

For the next hour or so, the men remove the parachutes and store them in the back of one of three large trucks.

The supply drop was large pallets with wooden boxes, and four of the pallets contain two large 55-gallon steel drums, which Mike assumes are filled with fuel.

As one of the drums is removed from one of the pallets and rolled over to the Helicopter by two men, a forklift exits the cave tunnel.

When the drum, the men were rolling, reached the Helicopter they righted it.

While the forklift began loading the pellets unto the trucks another man walked from another truck with a hose and some strange device with a crank and pipe on one end.

As the man with the strange contraption began to unscrew the two-inch bunghole cap, inserts the contraption, pipe first, and screws it tight onto the drum, several men uncovered the Helicopter.

Lieutenant Sadana walks over to Mike and tells him, “Now’s you’s show where petrol goes—yes,” Mike nods and hurries over to where the men

are waiting, and there he shows the men where the fuel filler cap is located.

Mike watches as one of the men removes the filler cap and another holding a hose from the contraption insert's it into the Helicopter's fuel receptacle, and then the man, who screwed the contraption into the drum, began to madly turn the crank.

Ten minutes later, the Helicopter was full and the filler cap replaced; once this was done, the contraption was removed and the bung hole cap was screwed back on, the drum was lowered on its side and rolled to a truck with the other drums.

As six men began rolling the Helicopter out away from the forest and into the open, Mike was a bit confused.

Lieutenant Sadana walked up to Mike and told him, "Now's you's fly's Helicopter to our compound," pointing towards the tall mountain, Mike swallows because he doesn't have a flight suit and the top of those mountains look to be over ten or twelve thousand feet tall.

Mike looks at Lieutenant Sadana with a fixed expression, 'like you got to be kidding', then Lieutenant Sadana told him, "You's must fly's Helicopter now before its discovered—yes."

Mike looks at Lieutenant Sadana with that same expression, and then he slowly nods and Lieutenant Sadana hands him the keys.

Mike is uneasy about taking the Helicopter over those mountains without the protection of his flight suite, as he does a walk-around inspection to be sure nothing was damaged and nothing is missing, because of those thieving Monkeys.

As the last of the trucks enter the cave entrance with the forklift following, Mike enters the EXR3 Helicopter, retrieves the helmet with the gloves inside from behind his seat.

After putting his helmet on and plugging it in, he puts the Oxygen mask on, because at and above ten thousand the air starts to get really thin, next he puts on the gloves.

Mike powers up the Helicopter and does a complete systems check.

While waiting for the turbines to come up to operating temperature, Mike looks at those tall mountains with trepidation.

Mike figures he needs to reach thirteen thousand feet to clear the highest peak, and it's going to be freezing at that altitude, then Mike notices that there's no snow on the mountaintops and thinks maybe the freezing level is higher than thirteen thousand, this makes him feel better, but it's still going to be numbing cold and hopefully without frostbite; thanks to the gloves, at least his hands won't get cold, but his poor feet and body.

Finally, all is ready and Mike takes a deep breath and utters, “Well—here goes and it’s going to get cold.”

Mike raises the EXR3 to the takeoff hover and gritting his teeth, he prepares for the ascent.

Not wanting to dawdle, Mike quickly took the EXR3 up to around eight thousand feet and there still was lot more mountain above him.

Mike swallowed hard figuring he had miscalculated the mountain height, it now looks to be closer to sixteen thousand and below freezing for sure; it’s already cooling down in the cockpit, “Why didn’t they design a cabin heater for this thing,” grumbled Mike.

Mike turns away from the mountain and flies in the opposite direction for a several miles, then he makes another hundred and eighty degree turn and starts flying straight at the mountain gaining speed.

When he gets about a mile from the mountain, Mike pulls back on the cyclic and punches the afterburners; he shoots skyward like a rocket.

Higher and higher he goes, the altimeter’s numerical indicator increasing as well as his airspeed indicator, and the mountain is still there!

The OAT (Outside Air Temperature) indicator is displaying thirty degrees; it’s now below freezing, the cabin is getting very chilly and the mountain is still there.

As the now barren rocks fly by, Mike is defiantly beginning to feel cold, but his hands are nice and warm, but little good that does for the rest of his body, especially his feet, they’re down right freezing, almost numb.

Now with the OAT indicating ten degrees, the altimeter indicating eleven thousand, the mountain top falls below, Mike has cleared the summit and with his teeth clacking uncontrollably and his whole body shivering, he pulls into level flight and rapidly starts to descend down the other side of the mountain into the valley far below where it’s much warmer.

Mike makes a vow to not fly this thing again until he gets the proper gear; fifteen minutes later, Mike had landed in an open area next to a small group of crudely constructed buildings and was shutting the EXR3 down.

Mike, still shivering and with very cold numb feet, stumbles out of the Helicopter and falls to his knees wrapping his cold arms around his body; and the fact the Sun is in the western sky and not shining into the valley, causes the entire compound to be in the mountain’s shadow, which isn’t helping to warm him either.

Lieutenant Sadana brings him a blanket and Mike wraps himself up with it.

Lieutenant Sadana asks, “You’s Ok—yes.”

Still shivering with clacking teeth, Mike nods, and then he tries to move and stumbles, his feet are still numb.

Lieutenant Sadana says, “You’s come with me’s to the Infirmary, I’s helps,” Mike nods.

So with an arm around Lieutenant Sadana’s neck and with Lieutenant Sadana’s arm around Mike’s waist they head for the infirmary.

The following day, Mike is in the infirmary recovering from a slight case of frostbite when in walks Colonel Waraich, Captain Jindal and Lieutenant Sadana.

Colonel Waraich asks smiling, “How’s you’s be’s?”

“I’ll live, but I’m not going to fly again until I get the proper gear,” grunted Mike, and then he asked, “Did everything I requested arrive?”

Colonel Waraich shakes his head and said, “Only the fuel, ammo, parts and tools. I radioed and inquired as to the rest of the requested items, they’s tell’s me that they can’t provide the flight gear and American uniforms, and that they will pass the request on to UN Command.”

“Thanks for all of your trouble, but I’m not flying without proper flight gear,” Mike flatly and firmly tells him.

With disappointment written on Colonel Waraich’s face and with a reluctant nod, he, Captain Jindal and Lieutenant Sadana leave, and Mike rolls over and closed his eyes, figuring the war is over for him.

Monday, the first week in July and General Cook summons Major General Griggs to his office.

When General Cook sees Major General Griggs enter his office he greets him with, “Rick—come in and have a seat—I’ve got some good news for you and Colonel Clark,” motioning with his hand to the chair in front of his desk; General Griggs sits down wondering what possible good news it could be that would also involve Lieutenant Colonel Clark, and asks with a quizzical expression, “And what kind of good news would be of interest to myself and Lieutenant Colonel Clark?”

“I have here,” General cook laying his hand on a document in front of him, “a requisition for a complete flight suit, and get this, three sets of US Army BDU’s and three sets of US Army work fatigue uniforms including boots for a Corporal Michael Troff. The requisition comes from UN Command in New Delhi. It seems as if our MIA isn’t so missing after all, but has joined up with the Indian Army in the mountains not too far from where he recovered the EXR3. It seems as if he wants to start kicking some ass, and if his past history is any indicator he may just do that,” explains General

Cook, with a big grin.

“My I see that?” Asked General Griggs pointing to the document lying in front of General Cook; General Cook nods and hands the document to Griggs.

A smile comes to General Griggs face as he reads, and then remarks, “Clark is going to be mighty happy that we located Troff—he’s been very anxious to have Troff in his Battalion—he’ll now want Troff sent home before he goes MIA again or worst—gets killed.”

He hands the document back to General Cook, Cook held up his hand refusing to accept it with, “You keep it for your records. I don’t want Lieutenant Troff transferred just yet—we need him over there—it seems, he’s the best we’ve got at the moment. If he can do as much damage like he did in that village, he’s in the right place for now, so give him anything he needs, I’ll personally clear it with G1, 3, and 4. And one more thing, General, this must be kept Top Secret—no one is to know we have a key player in the field—his name, location and the group he’s with must remain Top Secret—you got that General Griggs?”

Major General Griggs nods with, “Yes Sir—Colonel Clark won’t be happy—can he be included?”

“Yes,” replied General Cook, “I want him to be the one to have direct contact with Colonel Waraich, who’s in charge of the small Indian Company, so the chain of command will be myself, you, Colonel Clark, Colonel Waraich and Lieutenant Troff. Colonel Clark will be the one to authorize and to supply logistics and material support—you’ll be in command and report directly to me. Be sure to impress upon Colonel Clark that this is a Top Secret operation—once the operation had been completed, Colonel Clark can have Troff transferred to his battalion. You can tell Clark that Troff is officially assigned to him—Ok General?”

General Griggs replies, “Yes Sir—anything else, Sir?”

“No, that about sums it up for the time being,” Announced General Cook, “now, I want to be kept well informed and if you don’t have any questions or concerns you may go.”

General Griggs shakes his head, gets up, extends his hand with, “I’ll keep you well informed Sir,” and they shake; Major General Griggs walks out of General Cook’s office.

Later that day, Major General Griggs summons Lieutenant Colonel Clark to his office.

As Colonel Clark walks to General Griggs’s desk, he asks, “Is there something you want to see me about, Sir?”

"Yes, there is--," replied General Griggs, and motions with his hand to the plush chair, "please have a seat Colonel—I have some news concerning your MIA."

As Clark seats himself, he has a haunted look on his face, worried that the news isn't good and Troff might be dead.

"It seems as if Lieutenant Troff isn't dead and the EXR3 hasn't been shot down—he and the EXR3 are currently with a small group of Indian Soldiers in the mountains near that village where he recovered the EXR3," elucidated General Griggs, handing the document from General Cook to Clark; Clark receives the document and starts to read, when he had finished, he hands it back to general cook and declares, "This is great news—now we can have Lieutenant Troff transferred back here—his duffle with all of his uniforms and boxed up civilian clothes are in storage in my Battalion Quartermaster supply unit—we don't need to reissue anything—except flight gear to fly the EXR3 back. I've waited a long time for news like this—now I can finish putting together that special unit you wanted," looking ecstatic with a blissful expression, but that soon changed when General Griggs shook his head.

As Colonel Clark looks at him, his expression turned quizzical, remarking, "No—you're not having Lieutenant Troff transferred?"

"No Colonel," said General Griggs, "General Cook wants him to remain there and perform special missions, and as soon as he gets supplied, the General wants Lieutenant Troff to cause as much damage to the Pakistanis as possible. So, --your orders are to fulfill this requisition," holding up the document.

"Perform special missions—cause as much damage as possible!" Exclaimed a wide-eyed Colonel Clark, "You'll just get him killed, then what--Disband the Battalion?"

"No—not hardly—and we're not disbanding the 83rd. you said it yourself, Troff's flight skills are way above anyone's in our military—hell—he'll probably win this whole damn war. If anyone is to come out of this war alive, it's him. Just look at his record so far, twice, he was written off as dead and both times he proved everyone wrong—he's a survivor and a fighter," General Griggs pontificating.

"So—what do you want me to do?" inquired Colonel Clark quite bluntly.

"Like I just told you," began General Griggs, "First, fulfill the current requisition—send him the flight suit and uniforms. Second, you will be in charge of supply logistics and material support. And---Lieutenant Troff has been assigned to you, but--he's on temporary duty with an Indian Army

unit.”

“And third?”

“Third, this is classified Top Secret,” said General Griggs in a serious tone, “I believe you still have Lieutenant Troff’s DD201 file and data disk. I want you to secure his records in the classified vault and issue another 201 file with only minimal records containing information such as, his name, his previous rank—his real rank is now classified. Date of birth, date of when he entered the Army, all records from basic training, and other training he’s received, except anything to do with his flight training and his current deployment location and mission—that must be kept secret. Also, you can include his medical records, but no medals earned except for qualifying badges—anything tying him to flying Helicopters. And finally, Colonel, what we discussed must not leave this office, strict classified protocol involving Lieutenant Troff is in effect—you understand?”

Colonel Clark nods and asks, “How come Lieutenant Troff’s true rank is classified?”

“Because, Colonel, it would be easy to connect an officer rather than an enlisted man to flying the EXR3. So for the time being, only you, myself and General Cook will know that Lieutenant Troff is an Officer and Pilot—everyone else will only know of the EXR3 Pilot by his call sign when he becomes known, which I suspect won’t be very long after he starts flying.”

“But General!” Blurted Clark, “his family and close friends already knows he’s an Officer and a EXR Pilot and they already know his call sign, so I don’t see the need for secrecy in this regard. If you ask me Sir, this whole thing with his 201 file is a big mistake.”

“Yes—unfortunately there are some people,” grunted General Griggs, “so, there will be a security probe by the FBI and NSA to find out who has ties to Lieutenant Troff and how much they know, and if they know anything that’s classified, they’ll be hushed up—silenced. I’d like to have it known that Lieutenant Troff is dead, but as soon as he starts flying and his call is made known, they’ll know immediately he’s alive—I think it’s best to do the security probe and silence them. Colonel, we can-not let the other side know that we have a Phantom EXR Fighter Pilot hidden in the mountains.”

Colonel Clark blinking retorted, “Sir—you’ve got to be kidding---a Phantom EXR Fighter Pilot--really.”

“Well---the way he’s flies, fights and vanishes afterwards—he’s just like a Phantom,” explained General Griggs giggling.

“R r i ght,” drawled Colonel Clark with a jeering expression. “If you say so Sir. Is there anything else Sir?”

“No—that should about do it,” replied General Griggs, “I think you have enough to keep yourself busy for a while, and don’t forget to take care of Lieutenant Troff’s requisition—can’t have our Phantom a running around half naked—now can we? And he needs the flight gear to fly.”

Colonel Clark gets up and walks out of General Griggs office, and on the way back to his office, looking bilious, he mumbles, “This is totally insane—Phantom indeed—this non-sense is going to come back and bite us—he’ll see—and then he’d wished he’d hadn’t come up with this hair-brain scheme.”

The middle of July, Tuesday, and Mike was watching another cargo plane drop some more supplies.

As the white parachutes gently brought the cargo boxes down to earth, Mike was thinking in another week or so, he’ll turn twenty-one and there’s no bar to celebrate in—maybe one of the Indian Soldiers might have some liquor.

The next day, Captain Jindal came into Mike quarters with four men carrying two large boxes and leaves them in the center of his room.

After the men left, Captain Jindal said, “Complements of Colonel Waraich, your American Uniforms and Flight gear should be in those boxes,” pointing to the cardboard boxes, “Colonel Waraich says, ‘Now you’s fly’s Helicopter for the Colonel, Indian and UN forces—yes?’”

Looking surprised, Mike nods.

For the next several hours, Mike unpacks the boxes and finds new uniforms and two complete flight suites; when he got to the helmet, it had ‘PEGASUS’ stenciled across the front.

Then Mike found a small green box, and when he opened it, he was shocked to discover a complete set of First Lieutenant’s bars and Pilot’s Wings; the wings are Ok, but the Lieutenant’s bars?

Somebody has made a big mistake, and no way is Mike going to wear them; in a worst-case scenario, he’ll wear nothing.

At the very bottom of the last box, Mike found an envelope.

Inside, Mike found two sheets of paper, one was a letter from his old friend Larry Clark and the other was a new set of orders.

With a bit of excitement, Mike began reading Larry’s letter, and in it he discovered that Larry was now a Lieutenant Colonel and is in command of a Battalion at Fort Belvoir near Washington.

The rest of the letter explained the orders, and that they came directly from General Griggs at the Pentagon.

Mike learned, he's now assigned to Colonel Waraich's group and he's to engage any hostile aircraft and do as much damage as possible.

Mike also learned, he's to assist any UN aircraft that's engaged in aerial combat.

The last thing Mike learned was, anything he needs he will get; he's got high priority, and all he needs to do is issue a requisition through Colonel Waraich.

Larry ended the with, "The best to you, Mike, I always knew you were meant for something special and this is it, so good luck and good hunting, your best friend Larry Clark.

Mike smiled as refolded the letter and put it back into the envelope; the orders he will present to the Indian Clerk after he has a chat with Colonel Waraich.

Mike said to himself with a sigh, "Well Mike, looks like you're a member of the Indian Army now."

Looking at the First Lieutenant's bars, Mike remarks, "Well—if I'm a Lieutenant in the Indian Army I guess it's Ok to wear the First Lieutenant's bars, but once I leave they come off, and I'm not wearing them when I'm flying."

The next day, Mike enters Colonel Waraich's office and hands him the orders he'd received.

Standing there, Mike watches and waits as Colonel Waraich reads the orders.

When Colonel Waraich had finished he looks up and before he can speak, Mike says, "Looks like I'm a member of your Company now."

"Yes you's is—and welcomes," greeted Colonel Waraich with an out held hand; Mike takes his hand and they shake. Then Mike asked, "So—when do you want me to start?"

"I's wants you's to be's ready to fly on a moments notices," replied Colonel Waraich; Mike nods.

Colonel Waraich hands the orders back to Mike, telling him, "You's may go's—don't forgets to tell our Company Clerk about orders," Mike nods again and walks out of Colonel Waraich's office.

On the way out, Mike stopped by the Company Clerk and handed him the orders.

For the time being, Mike is temporary attached to this Indian Company.

That afternoon, with helmet in hand and dressed in his flight suit, Mike gives the EXR3 a walk-around inspection, and then he gets in and after performing a pre-flight, he fires it up and makes ready of his first official flight; this time when he tops those mountains he won't be freezing.

For the next few days, Mike familiarizes himself with the area; jotting down the locations of new valleys, canyons, et cetera; anything that might come in handy in case he needs to secretly sneak up on an adversary or make a secret hasty retreat or escape.

As the days ebbed by in peace and his Birthday drew closer, Mike was beginning to think the war had passed him by and soon he'll be returning to the States and get discharged, since he's only got two years left to serve; it was about two years ago this month he got drafted, "Has it been that long?" Mike quipped, and then Mike's thoughts turn to Pam in College, "She must be nearly through by now."

God, how Mike missed her and his entire family.

CHAPTER 5 -- Air Ninja.

Mike was inspecting the weapons pods on the EXR3 and thinking what a waste--these dudes will never be used, when Captain Jindal hurries up to Mike, and in an excited voice announces, "There's an aerial battle happen' about therty miles from here and our guys are getting their butts handed to them's. Colonel Waraich order's you's to's goes and try's to's help them's out--yes?"

Mike looks at him blinking and nods.

After Captain Jindal shows Mike on a map where the aerial battle is taking place, Mike hurries back to his room to change into his flight suit.

Several minutes later, Mike, with helmet in hand, hurries to his Fighter Helicopter and climbs into the cockpit seat of the EXR3 and puts his helmet on and connects it to the control console; now he has his HUD (Heads Up Display).

After firing up the EXR3, Mike goes through a quick pre-flight and weapons check, because he doesn't want any surprises, his life is at stake.

After checking the map one last time for entrances and exits to the aerial battle, there are two in this case, Mike takes off and leaves the valley.

After popping over the top of the ten thousand plus mountain, Mike heads to the sight where the aerial conflict is taking place.

Using the route he previously scouted, Mike using stealth uses this as an entrance to the fray, and suddenly pops in behind an HX2 Helicopter that's trying to kill a UN Command EXR2.

Mike fires a quick burst from his canon and the HX2 bursts into flames; with its main blades going in two different directions the fuselage heads towards the forest below trailing black smoke.

As Mike hunts for another target, which isn't hard as there are lots to choose from, he notices that the UN Command aircraft are outnumbered two to one.

After selecting another target, Mike sees how badly the Pakistani aircraft have out classed the UN Command aircraft.

Mike just shakes his head and verbally declares, "What are they teaching these guys in flight school?"

Then recalling the time when he secretly gave flight training to several officers in Turkey, Mike answered, "Notin'."

Pulling in behind the new target, Mike easily locks this guy up, fires and this HX2 follows the last.

By the time Mike had arrived the Pakistani aircraft had wreaked carnage on the UN Command aircraft, but now with Mike's help, the numbers are looking better; but for how long?

As another UN Command EXR2 heads to the forest below trailing black smoke the advantage shifts back to the Pakistani forces; Mike can't believe his eyes and shakes his head. "This isn't a battle—it's a rout."

Mike thinking, "C'mon you guys—you can fly better than that."

Then as Mike pulls in behind a third HX2, he hears on the radio, "Who's the new EXR—where did he come from?"

"Don't know Sneaky Snake—he's shootin' down HX2's, so, I guess he's a friendly."

"Help," came a shouted cry on the radio, and then a muffled explosion; as Mike killed his third HX2, followed by a grateful, "Thanks—whoever you are."

"No problem," responded Mike, "but, you've got to fly better than that if you want to stay alive—you guy's fly like shit—the HX2's are flying a whole lot better and you're being out classed, so get your shit together and fast."

Silence followed, and then Mike heard, "This is Griffin—who is this?"

Mike didn't reply and said to himself smiling, "Wouldn't they like to know," and took out after another HX2, that's trying to pull in behind another EXR2.

As the HX2's keep falling by Mike hand, the Pakistani aircraft began to take notice and soon two of the HX2's head over to engage; Mike sees them coming, and using cunning pretends that he doesn't notice them.

Now the two HX2's figure Mike for an easy kill, and afterward they'll finish off the rest of the UN Command aircraft.

When the two HX2's split up and head in two directions, Mike smiles and says to himself, "You guys aren't really going to try an pull that one—are you?"

Then as they head straight at Mike from the two directions, he remarks, "Yup—they are."

Mike sits right there cunningly drawing them in for the kill, just like Clark had taught him several years ago when he was in high school.

Two of the EXR2's see what's happening, and one of the Pilots announces on the radio, "Yellow Jacket here—looks like we can say goodbye to our good friend mister smarty pants."

As the two HX2's rapidly approach, Mike starts counting down, and when he gets a missile lock from both HX2's and sees the smoke from their launch tubes, he suddenly lowers collective and drops to the forest and out of radar tracking.

Both HX2's loose lock, and then the missiles lock onto each HX2, and a second later two bright explosions.

Mike recovers just before reaching the forest canopy and heads back into the fray and retorting on the radio, "You were saying Yellow Jacket."

Now the EXR2 Pilots are in stunned awe at what just happened, and as Mike heads back to acquire another target, the tide of battle has turned in-favor of the UN Command forces; now with three HX2's verses five EXR's, including Mike, the remaining HX2's hi-tail it towards Pakistan.

Then Mike hears on the radio, "Friend, this is Griffin—who are you, and where are you from. You know with the number of kills you just scored that makes you an Ace."

Seeing the fleeing HX2's Mike knows the battle is over and heads for his secret exit point, and as he approaches a large crevice between two mountains, which he knows these amateurs won't be able to follow, he responds, "You really can't count the last two—actually—they killed themselves—I'll see you guy's later—in the meantime you guy's need to practice—you're terrible," and he flies into the crevice and disappears.

"Where did he go? Did anyone see where he went?"

"Sorry Sneaky Snake, missed that one," replied Second Lieutenant Chris Griffey.

"Missed it too," announced First Lieutenant Todd Holz.

"Very mysterious, that one. Suddenly appearing outa' nowhere and kicks butt, and then just as suddenly disappears, just like one of those Ninjas I've seen in the movies," remarked second Lieutenant Keith Davison.

"Cut the chatter," barked Captain Keith Deniger on the radio, "everyone—form up—enough for one day—time to head home."

Colonel Waraich was waiting for Mike as he set the EXR3 down next to the building that's being used as a repair shop.

After the EXR3 had been shut down and secured, Mike gets out and walks up to Colonel Waraich and gives him a salute.

Colonel Waraich returns the salute, Indian version, and inquires, "How's did it go—have any problems?"

Mike shakes his head and replies, "No Sir, it went great. It was like shooting ducks in a barrel."

"That's good—yes," said Colonel Waraich; Mike looks at him with a

bleak expression and retorts, “Well, if getting ones ass kicked is good, then yes—it was good.”

“I’s don’t understands—you’s says it went great,” said Colonel Waraich looking confused.

Reaching the junction where the path splits, one going to Mike’s quarters and the other to the Headquarters building, there they stop and Mike turns to face Colonel Waraich and explains, “For me it was great—easy, but for rest of our guys—it was a slaughter. The Pakistanis were much better trained and were out classing our guys. If we’re to win this war our guys need to have a lot more training or each encounter will be another slaughter—might as well use F30’s, they’re a better match—anyway, I can’t be everywhere—at every battle—that’s simply impossible—the next time you talk to UN Command, you tell them that.”

Colonel Waraich nods and asks, “Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” Mike replies nodding, “I need to change the color scheme on my Helicopter to make it more stealthy, because if I’m going to continue bailing these guys out I’ll need some extra protection, so I would like to requisition some paint, a paint sprayer, brushes, masking tape, a stencil of a fly-ing horse and a tent to enclose the Helicopter until the paint dries.”

“Just fill out the paperwork for the items you’s needs and I’s will sends it through—Ok?” Advised Colonel Waraich, and then they saluted and headed down separate paths.

Captain Keith Deniger and his depleted Squadron of Fighter Helicopters, lands at the UN Command Airbase at Chandigarh.

As they walk to the flight control building, they’re surrounded by war correspondents all asking questions.

A Correspondent from England shoves a microphone in Captain Deniger’s face asking, “What was it like—what happen to the rest of your Squadron?”

“It was hell,” responded Captain Deniger, “we’re all that’s left,” and pushes the microphone away and briskly heads for the control building with the Correspondent shouting after him, “HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO RETURN UNSCATHED?”

Captain Deniger ignores him and continues on, but Lieutenants Griffey, Holz, Mathews and Davison aren’t so lucky; they’re completely surrounded and blocked from proceeding.

An American Correspondent isn’t so easy to give way and presses for more information, “If it was so bad—how is it you five managed to make it back—the people back in America have a right to know.”

“So do the People in Britton, France, Germany, Spain and Italy,” the British Correspondent added.

Lieutenant Griffey blurts what could be classified information, “We wouldn’t have, if another mysterious EXR3 hadn’t show up and started kicking ass—we were outnumbered better than two to one.”

“What mysterious EXR3?” Asked the American Correspondent.

“Don’t know—he didn’t identify himself—but he sure was awesome,” replied Lieutenant Griffey smiling.

“Yeah, he sure was—you never seen such awesome flying,” Lieutenant Davison adds, “he was like some Ninja—one moment he’s there kicking ass, and the next—he’s gone—vanished—just like those Ninjas in the movies.”

“A Ninja in the sky—that’s what he was,” added Lieutenant Holz.

Then the Military Police arrived and escorted the four Pilots to the control building.

In the control building, the four Pilots were reprimanded for divulging what could be classified information to the press; they are escorted to the debriefing room by Security Personal.

That night every newspaper and news program on TV in America, Briton, France, Germany, Spain and Italy had headlines, ‘AIR NINJA SAVES THE DAY’.

The next day in General Cooks office in the Pentagon, he had Major General Griggs seated in front of him; and on his desk in front of him were copies of the Washington Post and the New York Times.

Looking quizzical, he sternly demands, “What and who is a Sky Ninja?” Tossing the two publications to General Griggs.

General Griggs begins reading one of the publications shrugging, and then his face lit up and he replied, “It’s Lieutenant Troff—it has to be,” then he returns the publications.

“Are you sure Griggs?” Inquired General Cook.

“Yes Sir, he’s the only one that’s skilled enough to have done it—yes Sir—I’m sure.”

“Well then—let’s keep Lieutenant Troff well supplied and for now his identity a secret, and here’s another requisition—just received it this morning—came in by satellite communications—it seems Lieutenant Troff is in need of additional supplies—let’s not disappoint him,” said General Cook with a sarcastic grin.

“Yes Sir, I’ll have it taken care of stat—anything else?”

"No, that's all I have for now, replied General Cook and they got up shook hands, and then as Major General Briggs walked out of the office, General Cook sat back down.

Later that afternoon, General Briggs summoned Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark.

When Colonel Clark enters General Griggs's office, he's greeted with, "Come in Clark and have a seat—I have some additional news about our fly-boy," Colonel Clark walks over and seats himself, once again, in that plush chair.

General Griggs begins the conversation, "Have you heard, our Pilot has made every news media here and in Europe, they're calling him the 'Air Ninja'. So far, he's kept his identity secret, but for how long is the question."

"You know Sir, eventually they'll find out—then what?" Questioned Colonel Clark, "Air Ninja—indeed—humph!"

"Ha, ha, ha," General Griggs laughing, then he hands Clark the requisition he received from General Cook, "Here's another requisition. It seems our Ninja needs some more stuff, and rather strange stuff to boot. See to it that he gets it, Colonel."

Clark receives the requisition and when he reads what is requested, he raises his eyebrow, and acknowledged, "Yes Sir—anything else Sir?"

"No, that about does it for now—keep me up to date Colonel—you can go," said General Griggs.

With a nod, Lieutenant Colonel Clark got up and saluted, when the salute was returned, he walked out of Griggs's office.

On the twenty-third of July, Mike's birthday, another cargo plane arrived and made another airdrop; it was the paint sprayer, paint and the large tent to enclose the Helicopter.

Colonel Waraich walked up to Mike and commented, "I's see's from you's file, that today is you's birthday—Happy Birthday and you's presents have arrived," and points to the descending parachutes.

"That's right," declares Mike, turning to look at the Colonel, "today I'm twenty-one."

"So's you's going to repaint Helicopter gray—yes," remarked Colonel Waraich.

Mike nods and expounds, "With the upper part of the fuselage dark bluish gray and the belly light blue gray, the Helicopter will be virtually invisible in the fog and clouds in these mountain valleys," lightly nodding.

The next day, under Lieutenant Sadana supervision, several Indian Soldiers erected the large camouflaged tent over the Helicopter.

After power from the generator was installed with several outlets and lights, Mike had his own private portable shop to work on the Helicopter and was now ready to start painting.

For the next few days, Mike masked off parts of the Helicopter he didn't want to paint.

Finally, he was ready to apply the first coat of the Light Blue Gray paint.

Mike spent the better part of a day spraying underneath the Helicopter including under the two stubby wings; with the infrared heat lamps, the paint was baked to a nice hard finish.

When the paint job was cool, it was time to mask where the Dark Bluish Gray was to go.

The following day, Mike started applying the Dark Bluish Gray paint, the next day he applied a second coat and two hours later, he removed the masking tape separating the Light Blue Gray section from the Dark Bluish Gray part, and then he turned on the heat lamps; for the next ten hours the lamps baked the paint to the Helicopter until there was a nice hard finish.

After the Helicopter's paint job had cooled for the second time, Mike, holding the stencil, looked at the Helicopter trying to determine the right place to apply the decal.

Finally, Mike settled on the upper part of the vertical stabilizer.

Locating the ladder next to the vertical stabilizer to gain access to the location where the decal is to go, Mike tapes the stencil to the vertical stabilizer.

Using a brush with Black paint, Mike paints the stencil's image onto the vertical stabilizer, and then he repeats it on the other side.

Later, Mike stands back and admires his new Helicopter and remarks, "Awesome."

The next day with Colonel Waraich, Captain Jindal and Lieutenant Sadana in attendance, Mike pours beer over the nose of the Helicopter and declares, "I christen thee Pegasus."

"What's a Pegasus?" Asks Captain Jindal.

"A horse with wings—the flying horse from Greek Mythology," replied Mike looking surprised, "I thought everybody knew that."

"Ah' yes of course, a flying horse," replied Captain Jindal, trying to mend his blunder.

"And it's my call sign—now they'll know who I am," remarked Mike, "except now I'm probably in trouble for changing the Helicopter's color scheme—now its not to Army Regs."

The next day, as Mike and several Indian Soldiers move the Helicopter out of the tent, Colonel Clark gets a phone call from General Griggs; "Colonel Clark, I've just received word that our EXR Pilots in the field need training and fast, according to our Ninja, they suck. Notify Colonel Waraich and tell him to inform Troff, that he's to start training our Pilots ASAP—you got that?"

"Yes Sir—I'll get right on it," replied Colonel Clark.

The following day, Mike was summoned to Colonel Waraich's office.

Mike walks up to Colonel Waraich's desk and comes to attention and salutes with, "Corporal Troff reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease Lieutenant," command Colonel Waraich, after he returned the salute; Mike raised his eyebrows when he heard his title and thought, "He still thinks I'm a Lieutenant—I'm tired of trying to correct him, so I'll just play along."

"I've just received a message from UN command instructing you's to start giving's advanced flight instruction to our Helicopter Pilots—it says you's says they suck," said Colonel Waraich with a grin.

Mike stood there in shock, because he went through this once before and there isn't enough time to train these guys; anyway, they should have received this training in flight school.

Mike complains, "They really suck—and there's not enough time to properly train these guys—with the war and all. They should've had this training in flight school. Now, how am I going to find the time to give flight lessons and fight the war at the same time?"

"I's don't knows," replied Colonel Waraich, "all I's knows is I've got orders to have you's give flight lessons to our Pilots, so—I's guess you'll just have to find's time."

"Is there anything else?" Asked Mike being a bit peevish.

"No—that's be all I's have—you's may go," responded Colonel Waraich.

As Mike walks out of Colonel Waraich's office, he grumbles silently, "Find's time he says—there's no way I can teach these guy's how to perform evasive and assault maneuvers without first teaching them how to perform basic flight maneuvers—it's just impossible with the amount of time avail-

able.”

The last week in July was quiet, and Mike was beginning to think the war had once again moved to western India and Pakistan and left them behind.

The first week in August dawned hot and muggy.

Clouds like large clumps of cotton drifted by the mountains, some engulfing the highest peaks.

Mike was giving his Helicopter a quick check, to make sure everything was in order in case he had to make a hasty takeoff.

Captain Jindal came running up to Mike and hotly announced, “There’s a big aerial battle taking place fifty miles to the southwest of us. Our guys have intercepted several Squadrons of aircraft—Helicopters and Fighter Jets, on their way to Chandigarh Air Base, and as usual our Helicopters are getting slaughtered, here’s the coordinates, so get yours butts in the air and see’s what you’s can do’s to help.”

“Gotcha’,” says Mike taking the paper and runs to the tent where he’s got his flight gear stashed; ten minutes later, Mike climbs into the EXR3 and fires up the Helicopter.

When the EXR3 is up and running, Mike performs a quick run-up check and prepares to take off; skipping the walk around and preflight, because he had already done those, for just this kind of occasion.

After taking off, Mike tops the mountain peaks and heads for one of his entry points to pop in on his adversaries.

When Mike approaches the fray, his radar lights up with targets all across the display; He whistles and remarks, “Wow—what a mess—let’s find somebody in trouble and see what we can do to help.”

As soon as Mike arrives, from seemingly nowhere, he spots an EXR2 in big trouble and goes to assist.

Pulling up behind the enemy HX2, Mike locks on and gives him a burst from his cannon, followed by black smoke and the HX2 is heading for the fields below.

With one down and many more to go, Mike soon locates another HX2 pulling in behind another EXR2; Mike dispatches this guy in short order.

After making several more saves, Mike declares with disgust, “They still fly like shit.”

Then suddenly, an HX2 pulls in behind Mike, when Mike’s radar indicates a lock, he pulls back on the collective, punches the thrusters and his

EXR3 shoots skyward accelerating all the while; the lock indicator goes out.

Mike sees his adversary is still following and says, “And, just what do you think you’re doing? If you think you can follow me—you’ll be making a big mistake—looser.”

At eight thousand feet, Mike executes his favorite maneuver, the Möbius, and when he comes out he’s lined up for a kill, which he quickly executes with another burst from his cannon and another HX2 heads for the earth trailing black smoke.

Now, this engagement didn’t go unnoticed and soon the radio was alive with chatter, “Sandman here, did you see that!” Lieutenant Jorgenson exclaimed.

“Yeah, I sure did—what kind of maneuver was that?” Asked Lieutenant Holz in an excited voice, “I don’t think our EXR2’s are capable of doing those maneuvers.”

“Must be something only the newer EXR3’s can perform, Yellow Jacket,” replied Lieutenant Griffey.

Upon hearing them, Mike keyed his microphone and tells them, “Your EXR2’s are fully capable of performing this maneuver plus others—you guys really suck—you’re all lucky the Pakistani Pilots aren’t very good, or you all would be dead by now.”

The Radio suddenly went quiet, and then Captain Deniger came on, “This is Griffin, you know you just downed their best Pilot—and with the other kills you made today—that makes you and Ace.”

“Sir, this is Sidewinder, if he’s the one who helped us a while back, that makes him a double Ace,” piped Lieutenant Mathews.

“Sneaky Snake here, he’s the Sky Ninja we heard about in the news,” piped Lieutenant Davison.

“I’m not some dumb Sky Ninja, and I’m not out here to become an Ace—I’m here to do a job bailing your sorry asses out,” grunted Mike, and then the radio went silent again; Mike silently said, “If that was the Pakistanis best Pilot, then we got nothing to worry about, we got the war won—on second thought, their worst Pilot is better than our best—we’re screwed.”

“Cut the chatter,” barked Major Nickerson, “this fight isn’t over yet—there’s still lots of bogies out there, so get you heads out of your asses and concentrate on the job at hand--Acid Burn out.”

While the Fighter Helicopters were having it out, higher up, the MIGs and F30s were having their own battle.

One of the MIGs seeing an EXR3 Helicopter cleaning house on their HX2’s broke off and headed towards the EXR3 that’s doing all of the dam-

age; the F30's seeing him depart assumed he was hi-tailing it for home.

Lieutenant Hodges radioed, "Acid Spit here—looks like one of the MIGs had enough and is headin' home, ha, ha, ha."

Mike's radar suddenly came to life and flashed, 'HOSTILE AIR-CRAFT'.

Mike looks at his radar and sees a bogey rapidly approaching from his two o'clock.

From the speed and direction it was closing, Mike figures it's a MIG, because there's no HX2 up there only MIGs and F30's having it out.

So, Mike heads off at a right angle to the incoming bogey.

Now it's a Fighter Helicopter against a very fast Jet Fighter, so Mike prepares to do battle, similar to when he took on those three F30's back at Miramar when he was learning to fight; this time it's for real.

The MIG Pilot sees the EXR3 veer off and figures he's running, so the MIG banks in that direction; by now, Mike has pulled into a hover and cunningly began to set up his prey.

As the confused MIG Pilot flew in a circle around the EXR3, he couldn't believe this stupid Helicopter was just sitting there asking to be shot down.

Mike was waiting for him to make the first move, and it wasn't long in coming; the MIG suddenly started toward Mike, then Mike got a missile lock.

Mike suddenly headed straight at the oncoming Missile and MIG while locking onto the missile; he still had a lock indication from the missile.

When the MIG Pilot figured he had his kill, Mike fired a short burst from his canon, lowered collective, chopped power and dropped straight down; the missile exploded and the surprised MIG Pilot was caught off guard and lost the EXR3.

Mike maneuvered so he was now facing the departing MIG, raised collective and brought his EXR3 back to the altitude he was at previously, and watched the MIG start another circle, but this time, instead sitting there waiting for the MIG to attack again, Mike launched a PL9 Missile.

The MIG Pilot was caught unprepared and when the PL9 Missile detonated he couldn't respond fast enough to avoid the dense white cloud.

Mike said smiling, when he saw a puff of black smoke come from the jet engine as it flared out, "Now let's see how good you are at executing a dead-stick landing—the last time your buddy did this, he failed," and then Mike watched him glide rapidly towards several fields below.

Now this amazing spectacle was witnessed by the F30's and the EXR2's as well as several enemy aircraft.

As three MIG's broke off, to engage the EXR3, Air Force Pilot, Lieutenant Joe Finnson exclaimed, "Did you see that! That EXR3 Helicopter just downed a MIG with a PL9 no less—awesome!"

"Kinda' reminds you of someone from a mission to Ladapur—huh, Acid Spit," remarked Lieutenant Finnson.

"Yeah—sure does. I wonder if he's the same one, Nutcracker?" Asked Lieutenant Hodges, "This Helicopter is a EXR3 and different color, that one was a EXR2."

"Acid Spit, do you recall what call he used?" Inquired Lieutenant Finnson.

"Nutcracker—it was Pegasus, just like what's painted on his tail," replied Lieutenant Hodges.

Now Mike heard them converse on his radio and just smiled, because he remembered these F30 Pilots from his little stint at Ladapur.

Then Mike noticed three more MIG heading in his direction, and then, Captain Jorgenson broke in, "Pegasus, if that is you, this is Sandman—you got three MIGs headed in your direction—do you need assistance?"

Mike keyed his radio and replied, "Thanks Sandman, I see them—I guess these guys haven't been told about taking on a Fighter Helicopter—I'll make short work outa' these three—if I need ya' I'll call, Pegasus out."

"It's him alright," said Lieutenant Finnson, "you guy's now watch how a real Fighter Pilot flies, Nutcracker over,"

As Mike got into a defensive position, he softly said to his Helicopter, as he observed the three MIGs approach, "Girl, let's see if these guys will split up—if they do we might be in some deep shit," then sure enough they separate.

Mike exclaims and starts to sweat, "Shit! Now's it's going to be who's got the best strategy and flying skills—this might be my last flight."

Mike picks a point in the sky, heads for it and begins using the skills Clark instilled in him.

Mike figures if these guys were taught the proper procedures for an encounter with a Fighter Helicopter, there's very few options to take these guys out; so the best course of action is to call for backup or make a run for it and hope one or all of them will take out in pursuit, then the advantage moves back into my ballpark.

Then as Mike pulls into a stationary hover, he hears on his radio, “Yellow Jacket—did you hear what Sandman called him—this guy is Pegasus—the legionary Pilot we all heard about in school—my God—he’s real!” Exclaimed Lieutenant Davison.

“Yeah—well, we’re about to see him get killed,” announced Lieutenant Griffey, “there’s three MIGs after him.”

As the three MIGs circled, and they weren’t even evenly spaced at one-twenty degrees to keep Mike from targeting them, Mike now whispers, feeling relieved, “I have em’ –these guys don’t know what they’re doing,” because he now knew these guys haven’t been properly trained.

Mike now waits for the MIGs to make the first aggressive move; a few minutes later it happened.

One of the MIGs, having heard what this EXR3 had done to kill two HX2s that were coming from opposite directions, descends, figuring to catch the EXR3 when it drops down.

The other two MIGs proceeded to attack from opposite directions as the two HX2’s had done, but were slightly offset laterally to keep from shooting each other, unlike what they heard the two stupid HX2s had done.

Mike smiled when he saw what the three MIGs were doing and said to himself, “You guys think I’m so stupid as to repeat the same maneuver I used a few weeks ago—I’ve got a bunch more to try on you guys,” grinning inside his helmet.

When Mike got a missile lock from the MIG approaching from his six o’clock, he waited and cunningly enticed his prey to come and get him.

Then Mike got a second missile lock from the MIG approaching from his twelve o’clock position.

Patently, Mike waits, sitting there like a duck in a barrel, waiting for the right moment.

Then suddenly with a puff of white smoke from the MIG’s launch tube at Mike’s rear, it’s time to move.

Mike launches a countermeasures flare and pulls up hard on the collective, just as the second MIG in front of him launches its missile.

Mike’s EXR3 rapidly ascends, the missiles lock onto the flare, and then Mike executes a reverse loop, and as the two missiles zero in on the false target, Mike comes out of the loop right behind the MIG who was at Mike’s rear.

Quickly, Mike acquires the MIG and locks on; he then launches his own missile.

As soon as Mike fires, he gets a targeting solution on his weapons computer and locks onto the second MIG; and just as quickly launches his second missile.

As the four missiles head toward their targets, Mike, using all of his flight controls, lower the nose of the EXR3, and gets a targeting solution on the third MIG, locks on and launches a third missile.

Finally, Mike pulls collective again to gain altitude and out to the danger zone.

As Mike ascends, he hears three explosions, not five as he expected, so he levels off and scans for errant missiles and a missed MIG.

Mike sees three large black clouds and dozens of fiery pieces of two MIGs falling from two of the clouds.

Then as Mike continuing to scan, he spots one of the missiles making a large turn and heads straight for him, Mike holds his breath, it's one of the original two missiles launched from the MIGs.

Now where is the third MIG and Mike's third missile?

Then Mike spots the MIG hi-tailing it towards a large cloud with his missile hot on the MIG's tail; Mike sarcastically announced, "Idiot—what are you doing? You can't outrun a missile like that," then the cloud lit up as the MIG exploded, "looser!"

Then it was Mike's turn to evade the errant missile announcing, "Time to go," so he lowered collective, cut power and headed straight down towards the earth.

As the seconds ticked by and the missile quickly closed, Mike was hoping the missile couldn't maneuver as quickly as he can, or he'll be the idiot looser.

With the missile getting very close, only a few seconds from detonation, Mike pulls into level flight at one-hundred feet from the ground, and then he launches another flare and pulls collective, hits his thrusters and shoots skyward like a rocket; the missile losing the EXR3, locks onto the flare and explodes.

Lieutenant Hodges exclaims, "Did you see that? He killed the three MIGs and out flew a missile!"

"Yeah Acid Spit, I sure did—that's six MIGs he's killed and more than any of us," said Lieutenant Finnson, his voice filled with awe.

"Pegasus—this is Sandman—congratulations—that makes six MIGs that you downed—nice bit of flying."

"Thanks," replied Mike, "but, I'm not keeping score. You Fix-

Wingers aren't so bad yourselves."

"Thanks Pegasus—we've had lots of training, but nothing like what you shown us," replied Captain Deniger.

"I've had lots of training too," Mike declares, "had several awesome flight instructors."

"And it shows," announced Captain Deniger, "So what are you doing here? You should be back in the States training Pilots."

"Bailing these EXR2 Fighter Pilot's sorry asses out—they fly more like Attack Pilots—hell, Attack Pilots fly a whole lot better than these guys," argued Mike.

"Well then teach us," barked Major Nickerson in a gruff tone, "instead of just bitchin'—we're right here listening you know."

Silence followed, then Captain Jorgenson announced, "Sandman here, looks like the Pakistani's had enough and are hi-tailing it home—I think we should do the same—everyone form up we're headin' back."

"Then Major Nickerson also announce, "Acid Burn here, time for us to head back as well, so form up on your Squadron leaders—time to head back. Well Pegasus—will you train us or not?"

Remembering his orders, Mike keyed the radio and replied, "Yeah, I'll train you, but only those of you who can perform a roll and loop. Those who can't I suggest return to the States and learn basic flight maneuvers—without being able to execute those maneuvers you're dead meat over here. I'll see those who can, fifty miles southeast of Chandigarh Airbase at 0900—next week--Tuesday—Pegasus out," and Mike flew into the nearest cloud, and then to his secret exit point.

CHAPTER 6 -- Special Flight Training Redux.

August arrived hot and sunny in Washington; in the Pentagon, Major General Griggs was attending a weekly General Staff meeting with General Cook presiding.

Lieutenant Colonel Cross from G2 was standing at the short podium, sitting on the top of the large board table, briefing the staff on the latest war campaign results.

With a large map of India and Pakistan behind him, on which zones of control are defined, he said informing, “Since the death of the Tiger at the battle of Kartagarth there hasn’t been any major engagements, just a lot of skirmishes. The war in India had come to a stalemate, that was until after several aerial engagements. Both were victories for us and moved us closer to airspace domination in northwestern India. That was done in part to one exceptionally skilled EXR Fighter Pilot who is being referred to as, of all things, an Air Ninja, because he suddenly appears, shoots down numerous enemy aircraft and disappears when the aerial engagement is over. Now we believe he’s the same man who fought with the Tiger, and after he recovered the EXR3 Helicopter and the Tiger was killed, he proceeded to single handily destroy the enemy garrison in the village of Kartagarth sparing many lives. He then flew off and was reportedly shot down, but apparently that report was in error. Last week, Northwest of Chandigarh, a large contingent of enemy aircraft consisting of MIG’s and HX2’s was intercepted by UN Command aircraft consisting of F30’s and EXR2’s. The F30’s were doing fine and were in control during their engagements, but the EXR2’s were having a hard time—it would seem the enemy HX2’s were out classing them, which resulted in heavy UN Command losses, that is, until the EXR3 suddenly appeared and turn the tide. We received combat video of this EXR3 in action, and if you please I would like to show it to you.”

“Yes Colonel—please do,” proclaimed General Cook; Colonel Cross picked up a remote control and pushed several buttons.

The lights in the room dimmed and a projection screen was lowered in front of the large map, and then the video of the battle was projected on the screen.

Colonel Cross explains, “This video was taken by Captain Jorgenson, an F30 Pilot who was fortunate enough to witness this Pilot’s outstanding flying ability.”

As the video displayed Mike's unbelievable flying skills, the General Staff was in awe at the maneuvers Mike executed and the number of enemy aircraft that fell.

When the video showed a dark gray EXR3 Helicopter with a silhouette of black winged horse on the tail being attacked by three MIG's coming at him from three different directions at the same time, and after he had defeated them, the General Staff was astonished; even Major General Griggs didn't know he was that good, and now General Griggs understood Colonel Clark's concern about Mike's safety.

When the video ended, the General Staff just sat there staring at the blank screen in silence, not believing what they just witnessed.

When the lights came back up, Colonel Cross continued, "All we know about this Pilot, outside of him being the one who recovered the Helicopter and is the Soldier with the Tiger, is his call sign, which was revealed at that aerial engagement and is Pegasus—hence the silhouette of black winged horse on the EXR3's tail. Gentlemen, this is all I've got at this time and ends today's G2 briefing."

"I have a something to add," piped General Griggs.

"Go ahead—Griggs—let's hear what you have to say," said General Cook unassumingly.

"The name of this Pilot is First Lieutenant Michael Troff and he's currently assigned to the 83rd Battalion, 660th EXR Tactical Response Company at Fort Belvoir. He's currently attached to an Indian Army detachment under the command of Colonel Waraich. His identity and assignment is classified for security reasons—only his call is known. Also, after a few derogatory statements from Lieutenant Troff about the UN Command EXR2 Pilots flying skills, I ordered him to give flight training to those Pilots lacking the appropriate skills," said General Griggs composedly.

"What kind of derogatory statements did he make?" Asked General Cook with raised brow.

"Well Sir—they weren't too kind," replied General Griggs looking Elfish, "he said they fly like shit—Sir."

The rest of the General Staff looked appalled, especially General Cook, and then he declared, "I totally concur with your decision to have Lieutenant Troff give flight training to those Pilots, and I want you to elevate him to the rank of Captain, and when he's finished with the training I want him transferred back to the 83rd."

"But Sir!" Exclaimed General Griggs, "he doesn't have enough time in grade to be elevated to O3—he was just recently elevated to O2 with a waiver for insufficient time at O1."

“From what I saw of his flight skills and the mere fact that he’ll be training O1’s through O4’s—he’s to get another waver for O3—is that understood?” Declared General Cook; General Griggs nods with, “Yes Sir—understood, —Captain it is.”

Then General Cook’s attention returns to Colonel Cross and dismisses him with, “Thank you Colonel Cross—you’re excused.”

Colonel Cross gathers up his papers and walks out of the room.

Then General Griggs asks, “If there isn’t any more information to be presented and no questions, then this meeting is adjourned.”

The next day, Lieutenant Colonel Clark was summoned to Major General Briggs office.

After Colonel Clark was seated comfortably in that plush chair, General Briggs asks, “Did you pass on my training order to Colonel Waraich?”

“Yes Sir, and he assured me Lieutenant Troff had received it,” replied Colonel Clark nodding.

“After the General Staff had viewed some aerial combat video, General Cook ordered Lieutenant Troff to be elevated to the rank of Captain, and as soon as he’s finished training those UN Command Pilots, he’s to be transferred back to your Battalion, so as soon as the orders for his change in rank comes through, be sure it’s entered into his DD201 file,” said General Griggs.

“He was just elevated to O2,” declared a surprised Colonel Clark. “Does this come with another waver?” General Griggs head dipped in abbreviated nod.

“May I see this video?” Requested Colonel Clark, “I want to see what was so spectacular that prompted this unprecedented elevation in rank.”

“I’ll set it up,” said General Griggs, “and because the video is classified Top Secret, you’ll have to view it in a secure room and the content of the video must not be revealed—is that understood Colonel?”

“Yes Sir—fully, and thank you Sir.”

“Any concerns or questions, Colonel?”

“Just one, and that is—I would feel a whole lot better if Lieutenant—I mean Captain Troff is immediately transferred back here rather than after he’s finished training those UN Command Pilots,” declared Colonel Clark with deep concern.

“The General is deeply concerned about our UN Command EXR2 Pilots being able to effectively engage the Pakistani HX2 Helicopters, so for

the time being—Captain Troff will remain in India to train our UN Command Pilots and intercept and destroy the enemy—remember Colonel—we’re at war, and we can’t win if we can’t effectively engage them,” argued General Griggs looking resolute.

“I’m afraid that with each passing day may be his last—I’m afraid he might get shot down,” expressed a distraught Colonel Clark.

“From what I and General Cook saw, that won’t happen—he’ll be one of the men that’ll survive this war,” surmised General Griggs trying to alleviate Colonel Clark’s concerns, and then he harshly tells him, “As I’ve said, Captain Troff will stay in India for the time being—is that clear?”

“Yes Sir,” sighed Colonel Clark feeling discontent.

“Anything else?” Asked General Griggs; Colonel Clark shook his head, and then the General dismisses him.

A few days later at 0900, fifty miles southeast of Chandigarh Air-base, Mike arrived at his designated place to find five EXR2 Helicopters waiting for him.

When Mike saw only five Helicopters he sarcastically asked, “Is this all—just five? Where’s the rest?”

“You pacifically said, ‘I’ll train only those who can perform a roll and loop’, so we’re the only ones on the base who can meet your qualifications,” replied Major Nickerson.

“Ok--, so who do we have here? You know who I am, but I don’t know who you are,” Mike declared.

“I’ll start,” announced Major Nickerson, “I’m Acid Burn.”

“Polecat here,” said Major Booker.

“Black Raptor,” said Major Debolt.

“Sneaky Snake a sneakin’ in,” stated Second Lieutenant Davison.

“Gas Attack, seepin’ in silently and deadly,” proclaimed Second Lieutenant Griffey.

“Sneaky Snake, Gas Attack, enough with the colorful metaphors—this is serious business,” scolded Major Nickerson.

“Now that we’re all properly introduced, we’ll start by seeing just how well you can execute controlled rolls and loops,” Mike pontificating, “all of the advance maneuvers use these two basic flight maneuvers including pitch and yaw as well, and if you’re not proficient in their execution you will not proceed until you are. Are there any questions before we begin?”

With a minute or so of silence, Mike assumed they understood everything and didn’t have any questions, so Mike told them, “I’ll demonstrate a

controlled roll—I assume you all can execute a roll, but can you execute a controlled roll, that’s what I’m going to find out.”

So Mike flew a slow straight flight path and slowly rolled his EXR3 to Ninety degrees, held it there, then he continued to One Hundred-eighty degrees, held it there flying inverted; he then proceeded on to Two Hundred-seventy degrees, holding it, and finally, returning to normal flight.

Now Mike knows both Lieutenant Davison and Lieutenant Griffey from Helicopter repair school; they were in his Pre-flight class, the only class with both student Pilots and maintenance students, and he was curious as to how these two could execute loops and rolls when practically no one else could.

So, Mike commanded, “Sneaky Snake, let’s start with you. Execute a controlled roll just as I had done.”

Lieutenant Davison proceeds to mimic Mike’s control roll.

He starts out with a ninety degree roll, but couldn’t hold it at Ninety degrees and continues on to hundred and eighty degrees.

Now here he’s not having any problems and holds a perfect inverted flight for the allotted time, to Mike’s surprise, but at Two Hundred-seventy degrees, he once again is unable to hold the Helicopter at that position and continues the roll to normal flight.

Gas Attack almost held the ninety degree and like Sneaky Snake was able to execute the hundred and eighty degree inverted flight.

Acid Burn was able to execute perfect controlled roll, but Black Raptor and Polecat couldn’t; they couldn’t even execute inverted flight, only a complete roll.

Mike shakes his head and complains his disapproval over the radio, “Gentlemen—this isn’t going to work. I can’t teach you any of the advanced maneuvers until you’ve mastered a controlled roll in both directions as well as a controlled loop both inside and outside. Until you can do that—we can’t proceed—sorry.”

There was a long period of silence, and then Mike came on the radio and inquired, “Say, Snake where did you learn to execute a roll and fly inverted?”

“At Rucker—in flight school—Rock Hound taught us after he said he flew with you, Pegasus,” replied Lieutenant Davison.

Mike then remembered his flight down the river in the dark with Rock Hound; it was a flight, that Mike will never forget and apparently neither did Rock Hound.

Then Mike remarked, “Gas Attack, I assume that goes for you as well—Rock Hound taught you.”

“Yeah—how did you know?” Asked a confused Lieutenant Griffey.

“You two were in the same class—weren’t you?” Replied Mike.

“Yea h h,” drawled a very confused Lieutenant Griffey.

“Acid Burn,” Mike changing the subject to him, “You’re the only one who properly executed the control roll, may I ask—where did you learn it?”

“At Fort Irwin from Major Barq and Captain Tripp,” replied Major Nickerson; Mike is bug-eyed upon hearing the names of Barq and his old friend and fellow Ground-handler Wayne Tripp.

Mike says to himself, Barq is a Major and Wayne is now a Captain! I wonder if Scott is also a Captain. Boy—guy’s sure move up in rank now—wow!”

Then Mike declared, “Acid Burn—if Wrecking Ball and Gremlin trained you, then I assume you can also execute a controlled loop as well. I can’t teach the rest you any of the advanced maneuvers until every one of you can execute those basic maneuvers like Acid Burn. So Acid Burn, it’s now your job to train your fellow Pilots those maneuvers, and when you’re ready I’ll give you all another flight test—until then, there’s nothing more I can do for you. Any questions before I leave—Pegasus out.”

“Yeah, since you seem to know Wrecking Ball and Gremlin—you didn’t happen to train them, did you?” Surmised Major Nickerson.

“Nope—they were trained by the same awesome instructors that trained me. Anymore questions?” Said Mike, and when he heard nothing more, he departed and flew north towards the mountains and once again disappeared in a large cloud.

For the next two months, Mike became a one-man army, as Iranian Alliance aircraft fell; his legend grew and grew until the Iranian Alliance issued a bounty for any Iranian Alliance Pilot to end his dominance and his legend. “Pegasus must die,” the Iranian Alliance commanders cried.

Pegasus, the stealthy Blue Gray Helicopter, had become a hunted prey.

Like a gunfighter in the old west, Mike had become the top gun in this war, and every aspiring enemy Pilot, HX2 or MIG, looking for fame was looking to take him on and become the new legend.

For Mike, this wasn’t about being the best EXR Fighter Pilot anymore, now it had become a fight for survival and he was beginning to tire.

There were many nights where he wished he’d never learned to fly and wanted to go home and be with his family, friends and Pam; Oh, how he missed being with her.

In Washington, fall had arrived and from the Appalachians through Pennsylvania and New England, the forests became colorful displays of reds, yellows and browns; the days were warm with musky odors of fallen leaves and the nights were chilly and clear.

The sky outside the city lights was dark and filled with bright twinkling stars.

Lieutenant Colonel Clark was sitting in Major General Griggs plush chair in his office; Colonel Clark had gone to see him on what he considered an urgent matter.

Colonel Clark began with, “Sir, I’m very concerned about Captain Troff—I think he should come home—he’s done enough and now he needs to be with his family before it’s too late.”

“General Cook doesn’t agree,” argued General Griggs, “Captain Troff is making it possible for NATO and UN Command to make major advances in all theaters. The Iranian Alliance has become obsessed with Captain Troff to the point of ignoring NATO and UN Command—because of him we have air domination now—so no—Captain Troff will remain where he is and continue to play his part in winning this war.”

“Please... He needs a rest before he’s killed—is that what you want—for him to be killed?” Pleaded Colonel Clark.

“Of course not, but he’s now playing a vital part in keeping the Iranian Alliance preoccupied, besides, the guy is indomitable—they have no one to defeat him,” replied General Briggs dismissively.

“indomitable!” Colonel Clark hotly declared, “He’s Human—and sooner or later he’s going to make a mistake, and when he does, it’ll be his last—then what are you going to do about your war—huh!”

General Griggs doesn’t respond he just glares at Colonel Clark with an obstinate expression.

Finally, General Griggs barks, “That’ll be about enough—Captain Troff will not be coming home—is that clear Colonel?”

Colonel Clark sadly nods with, “Yes Sir.”

“That’ll be all—you may leave,” commands General Griggs; Colonel Clark reluctantly gets up, salutes, turns and walks out of the office a very unhappy man.

Just before the end of November, Mike was informed that the five EXR Pilots were ready for their flight test; so, on the morning of November Twenty-first, Mike flew to the location where he had met them back in August.

They were there waiting when Mike arrived with Major Nickerson announcing on the radio, “Acid Burn here, my Squadron is ready to take your flight test and begin learning those advanced flight maneuvers.”

“Well—we’ll see,” returned a skeptical Mike, “first, I wanta’ see if you all can execute those basic flight maneuvers that I had Acid Burn teach you. So, let’s start with Polecat, I want you to execute a roll to the right, holding for ten seconds at each of the four radial positions that I demonstrated last August.”

After Polecat had successfully completed the maneuver, Mike informed him, “Very good—now I want you to repeat that maneuver by rolling to the left.”

When Polecat had finished, it wasn’t as clean as Mike would’ve liked, but good enough to pass scrutiny.

Then Mike announced, “Very good—not perfect by any means, but good enough to pass muster. Now let’s try something a bit harder—for your next maneuver, I want you to execute an inside loop—that is, with your rotor facing inward starting at the bottom or base at an altitude of four-thousand feet AGL, and when you reach the top, hold it there inverted for ten seconds. Upon completing the loop you must exit no more than one hundred feet from where you started. If you don’t have any questions you may begin.”

Once again, Polecat was able to execute the maneuver holding his EXR2 at the top of the loop inverted for the requested ten seconds, but when he exits the loop he was two hundred feet high, very sloppy in Mike’s book.

A little concerned about safety from what Mike had observed, he said on the radio, “That was a bit sloppy, for the next maneuver, and for safety sake, I want you to take her up to five thousand—no, make that six thousand feet AGL. That’ll be your starting point this time—I’d have you execute it lower, but you’re really sloppy. From that position I want you to execute a full outside loop—that is, with your rotor facing outward, and holding inverted for ten seconds at the bottom. When you exit the loop, you must be within one hundred feet from where you started—if you don’t have any questions you may begin.”

This time when Polecat executed the outside loop, it was very sloppy, more so than the inside loop.

Mike critiques, “Polecat—that one needs a lot of work—very, very sloppy. Ok Black Raptor, it’s your turn—let’s see how good you are.”

When Black Raptor had finished, he hadn’t done any better; the outside loop was just as sloppy as Polecats.

Then it was Griffin's turn and he did slightly better than Polecat and Black Raptor; his outside loop was more controlled, but it still wasn't what Mike was hoping for.

Finally, it was Gas Attack's and Sneaky Snake's turns and their loops were just out right bad.

Shaking his head and with a sigh, Mike informs them, "This just isn't going to make it—your rolls are just passing and your loops are uncoordinated and sloppy. With the way you guys are flying—there's no way I can teach you those advanced maneuvers—maybe some of the more simple ones, but there's not many of those. You all need a lot more practice doing those four basic flight maneuvers—when you can do those with your eyes closed and by feel, then you'll be ready to learn the maneuvers I can do."

For a minute or two, the radio was silent, then Major Nickerson came on the radio, "The war will be over by the time we're able to meet your criteria. We might all be dead—is that what you want, Pegasus?"

"No—of course not--without you being proficient in basic flight I cannot teach you dangerous maneuvers that'll get you killed. You should've never graduated from flight school without being proficient in all aspects of basic flight."

"You mentioned that there're some simple maneuvers—can you teach them to us while we practice the rolls and loops," inquired Major Nickerson.

"Yeah—provided you don't kill yourselves practicing or get killed by a HX2," returned Mike.

"Ok then," announced Major Nickerson, "we'll be here every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 0900 for flight instruction, unless we're out on a mission."

"Fine—I'll be here," said Mike with reservations, "but if no one shows by 0915, I'll figure you're out on a mission or all dead and I'm headin' back to my FBO (Fixed Base of Operations)."

For the rest of November and well into December, Mike instructed the five EXR Pilots on how to execute several simple defensive and offensive maneuvers while they practiced those four basic flight maneuvers on their own.

As the days progressed with Christmas and the New Year approaching, the five EXR Pilots were getting better; at least now with knowledge of the simple maneuvers they had a fighting chance when they went on a mission.

CHAPTER 7 -- A Not So Merry Christmas.

Two days before Christmas a young woman steps out of a Cab followed by a two-year-old girl.

After retrieving her large travel bag, she grabs the handle and extends it, she then takes the little girls hand and pulling the travel bag on its wheels, she walks up the sidewalk to the front door of the condo; she rings the doorbell and waits for an answer.

Inside, Henry was in his easy chair watching the news on TV, Maria was in the kitchen baking cookies and a fruitcake, then the doorbell sounded; “WILL YOU GET THE DOOR DEAR,” shouted Maria from the kitchen as she fills a bread pan with fruitcake batter.

Henry gets up and walks to the door.

When he opens the door there stands Brenda and little Mary; “Mary Christmas Dad,” greeted Brenda.

“Please come in,” said Henry with a big smile, “and Merry Christmas to you.”

“WHO’S HERE—IS IT JEFF OR MIKE?” Maria called from the kitchen.

“ITS BRENDA AND MARY,” returned Henry in a loud voice.

“THAT’S WONDERFUL,” came a loud reply from the kitchen, followed by, “TELL BRENDA I’LL BE OUT IN A COUPLE OF MINUTES—I’M UP TO MY ELBOWS IN CAKE BATTER.”

“YES HON, I THINK SHE ALREADY KNOWS,” Henry responded again in the loud voice, and then he confided in Brenda, “Maria is having a hard time handling this Christmas, with Mike in India, Jeff in Germany and they can’t come home this Christmas, but worst of all is knowing what happen to Brian—that’s having the worst impact on her, so she just keeps herself busy baking, and baking—heaven knows how we’re going to eat all this stuff, so I hope you’re prepared to be stuffed and ready to put on a few extra pounds.”

Brenda smiles and tells Henry, “Brian’s passing is hard on me as well—that’s why I’m here. I feel closer to Brian here then if I were at my parents’ home, so it’s a not so Merry Christmas for me too.”

Henry gives her a hug and a peck on the cheek, then Maria scurries into the room apologizing, “I’m so sorry Brenda, but I was in the middle of filling baking pans. I’m so very happy you and Mary can be with us this Christmas—for a while it looked like Henry and I were going to celebrate it alone.”

Then two-year-old Mary pipes up, “Mery Christa-mus, Granma.”

Maria puts her hands to her face in surprise; Henry looks bug eyed at her in shock and Brenda just smiles with pride.

Maria blissfully inquires, “When did she start talking?”

“Oh, about a month or so ago,” replied Brenda.

Then Maria bent down and said to Mary, “And a very Merry Christmas to you too.”

Then she opened her arms and Mary hurried to her; Maria hugged and kissed Mary as Maria’s eyes filled with tears of joy until one rolled down her cheek.

After a minute or so in the embrace, Maria said to Mary, “Why don’t you go into the living room with your Grandpa and sit on his lap while he tells you a story, just like he did when your Father was a little boy. Later you can join your Mother and me in the kitchen baking cookies—would you like that?”

Mary happily nods with, “Yes Granma,” and takes Henry’s hand and together they head for the living room.

Maria says to Brenda, “Come and I’ll show you where you and Mary will be sleeping,” so as Maria heads for the back hallway, Brenda grabs her travel bag and heads after her.

On Christmas Eve, the small gathering of the Troff Family is hurrying to put the last minute finishing touches on the tree and decorations; now there were many packages under the tree, most were for little Mary.

That evening, the entire family got into Henry’s van and they drove into Washington to see the huge Christmas tree and all the lights.

That night at the Christmas Eve service, Henry is dressed in a suite instead of his uniform, because he’s missing his eldest Son, who was killed in the on-going war.

Henry now wonders how many more of his Sons he would lose, so this year, Christmas wasn’t so merry for him.

For Maria sitting next to Henry, this wasn’t a Merry Christmas either, because of the death of her Son and she missed him so much.

Now Brenda, she was next to Maria with little Mary sitting on her other side; and this wasn’t a Merry Christmas for her, but a sad and empty one with the loss of her Husband.

The foursome was all that represented the Troff’s this Christmas, and it was a not so merry one.

When they arrived back at the condo, with sadness and emptiness they all went to bed; no one sang carols or opened any packages, that’ll wait

for tomorrow.

Christmas morning dawned bright and sunny.

When little Mary opened her eyes, they were bright with excitement; she threw the covers off and hopped out of bed and ran to the living room, where the big Christmas Tree stood.

When she entered the living room the grownups were already there waiting for her; she asked, “Did Santa come?”

Brenda nodded with, “Yes dear,” pointing to the tree.

Mary dashed to the tree and there she found a huge stuff orange Tiger with black strips; and hugged it tightly.

Then Henry told her, “That’s just like the one your Uncle Mike had in India.”

Maria looks at Henry with surprise and comments, “You never mentioned that Mike was the legendary Soldier with the Tiger.”

“Sorry dear—that’s supposed to be classified information, so don’t say a word to anyone—and that goes for you as well, Brenda, —Mike’s life depends on it remaining secret for the time being,” now looking at Brenda; both women nod.

“What else haven’t you told me?” Maria bluntly asked; Henry just looked at her with a fixed deadpan expression.

Maria looks back with a glowering expression, feeling there’s more that Henry isn’t telling her.

To avoid trouble with Maria on Christmas, Henry changes the subject and announces, “I think it’s time to open the packages,” pointing to the presents under the tree.

“Well—who’s going to do the honors?” Asked Maria.

“This year—how about we delegate that honor to Brenda,” replied Henry looking at Brenda with a bright smile.

“I’d be happy too,” announced Brenda, and she went and knelt down in front of the tree, grabbed a package and read the name on the label; it was to Mary, and announced with a smile, “This one’s for Mary,” and hands it to Mary with, “it’s for you dear.”

After all of the presents were handed out and opened, there was paper wrappings and ribbons all over, so the two women gathered up the mess.

After the mess was cleaned up, little Mary sat on the floor and played with her new toys, Henry sat down in his big easy-chair and turned on the TV, and the two women went out to the kitchen to prepare the Christmas feast; everyone is finally having a Merry Christmas.

At ten thirty the doorbell rang; “Now I wonder who that can be?” Questioned Maria, and then her face lit up and she declared, “Its Jeff—he gotten a leave,” and wiping her hands on a towel, she rushed to the front door looking ecstatic.

But, when Maria opened the door her glowing expression vanished, when she saw Larry Clark standing there dressed casualty holding a shopping bag full of presents.

“Merry Christmas,” greeted Larry Clark with a blissful smile, “may I come in?”

“Yes Colonel Clark, please come in and a very Merry Christmas to you.”

“Please—just Larry. Its Christmas and we can dispense with the titles,” Larry tells her as he enters, and handing her the shopping bag he adds, “and these are for you and your family.”

“Thank you,” said Maria receiving the presents, and then she informs him, “you may hang your coat and hat over there,” pointing to a coat rack. As Larry hangs his coat on one of the hooks, Maria asks, “What may I ask brings you to us?”

“It’s Christmas and I have no one or nowhere to go to spend Christmas, so I thought I might spend the day with you and your family—I dearly hope I’m not imposing—I can leave if I am,” replied Larry with a doleful expression.

“No of course not—you poor man,” declared Maria looking sympathetic, “you’re very welcome to spend Christmas with us—we’ll set another plate at the table, heaven knows we have more food than we can eat by ourselves—you’ll find Henry in the living room watching TV.”

Larry walks into the living room where Henry is watching the latest news on the war.

When Henry sees Larry, he gets up and offers his hand in greetings, “Ah—Lieutenant Colonel Clark, a Merry Christmas to you and welcome.”

Larry takes his hand with, “Thank you, and a Merry Christmas to you as well Sir, and please, today its Larry if you don’t mind,” and they shake; Henry returns, “And while you’re in my home, you can dispense with the formalities—it’s Henry if you please.”

“Then Henry it is,” Larry remarks with a smile.

“Please make yourself comfortable—is there anything you care to drink—perhaps some coffee, eggnog, or hot cider?” Henry asks pointing to the other easy chair, and then they both sit down.

“Hot cider sounds great,” replied Larry, “it’s been a very long time since the last time I had any hot cider.”

"HON—OUR GUEST WOULD LIKE A MUG OF HOT CIDER,"
Henry calls.

"YES DEAR—WILL BE THERE IN A MINUTE," Maria hollers back.

Then as they wait, they begin talking about the war, and then in the middle of discussing what Iran is doing, Maria comes in with a large plate of assorted homemade cookies and a steaming mug of cider.

She places the plate of cookies in the center of the coffee table, and as she places the hot mug on a coaster, she warns, "Careful—the cider is very hot," and then she adds, "please help yourself to the cookies—we have lots—more than we can eat I'm afraid."

After Maria had departed, both men reach for a cookie with Larry commenting, "Wow—that's a lot of cookies and they sure look good."

"Yeah—Maria is having a hard time coping this Christmas with the loss of our eldest and Mike in India—so she bakes cookies to get her mind off of things—for the record—I'm having a hard time of it myself."

"I'm also having a hard time as well," Larry sympathizing, "every Christmas has been hard since my Wife and Child were killed in an auto accident. I thought it would get easier as the years went by, but it never did, it just keeps resurfacing. Now Mike is added to that burden."

"Mike! My Mike?" Asked Henry blinking; Larry nods.

"How is Mike a burden?" Henry asks searching.

Larry reached over and felt the mug, being satisfied it wasn't too hot he picks it up and eases back into his chair.

"Mike's become like a son to me. If my Son had lived, he would be about Mike's age, so now I worry about him as if he were my own," said Larry looking down into the mug of cider.

Larry's voice now becomes doleful and he begins speaking slowly, "now I don't wanta' worry you and your Wife, but Mike needs to come home—he's been over there long enough and has done more than his share in this war, and now it's time he comes home,"

"Why—is there something I should know?" Inquired Henry with uneasiness.

"I've tried to have Mike transferred back to the 83rd, but General Cook won't hear of it—he says, 'Captain Troff remains right where he is'," explains Larry in an angry tone, his voice harsh, "he thinks Mike's invincible, because of his skill level there's no one able to defeat him, but that's bull and he knows it. Sooner or later, Mike will make a mistake and that'll be his last."

Then with a sigh and in a softer tone, Larry remarks, “From my communiqués with him, he seems tired, lonely and bored, and that state of mind is dangerous for an EXR Fighter Pilot—for any Fighter Pilot. Henry, Mike has a place in my Battalion if only I can get him transferred. I need your help to convince the General Staff—in particular, General Cook, to have Mike transferred back to CONUS.”

“Did I hear you right?” Questioned Henry, looking surprised, “he’s a Captain—isn’t that moving up the ladder rather fast?”

“Yes, you heard right,” replied Larry smiling, and then he takes a sip and explains, “I don’t know if you heard, but your Son’s a war hero and has earned the waver for the raise in rank. I only hope he’ll be alive to receive all the decorations due him.”

Looking somber, Henry says, “I’m only an assistant with not much pull, but I’ll mention it to Major General Snyder and hope he can convince General Cook.

“If Mike doesn’t come home soon—he’ll be carried home, or worst, in a box,” stressed Larry in meaningful terms; Henry looks at him with a grave expression, and then Larry adds, “There’s one other important reason he needs to come home.”

“And, what is that?” Asks Henry.

“Mike’s got a price on his head,” said Larry with an etched expression, “the Iranian Alliance has place a huge reward for his death. Now every Iranian Alliance Pilot and their Soldiers too, will be out to claim the reward and the notoriety of defeating a legend. Mike is like a famous gunfighter where every other gunfighter wants to be the one who defeats him and earn the notoriety.”

“Mike’s a legend?” Remarked Henry blinking; Larry nods.

“You know about Mike’s adventures with the Tiger, but what you probably don’t know is, he has more aerial kills than any Pilot in all the previous wars—right now he’s the highest ranking Ace in modern history, and he doesn’t even care—to him it’s just a job,” says Larry pontificating.

Now Henry with a pallid face and choking with pride said, “As soon as I get to the office I’ll have a talk with General Snyder,” then Maria announces from the doorway, “It’s time to eat,” and so Larry and Henry get up and follow her to the dining room.

Mike awoke Christmas morning feeling not so merry knowing it was Christmas and spending it alone in a foreign land for a second time.

Mike remembered last year spending it in the Day Room watching TV and laying in his bunk feeling really bored, that was a very lonely and

not so Merry Christmas too.

So, he got up and put on his uniform, since he hasn't any civilian clothes and heads for the mess building thinking this is going to be another really boring and lonely Christmas.

Then he hears what sounds like Christmas Carols being sung, coming from one of the buildings off to his right, so Mike heads over to investigate.

On the way an Indian Soldier passes him and as he does, Mike grabs him by the arm, and when he turns, Mike asked, "There's Christians here?" The Soldier nods and replies, "I'm a Christian—my name is Neel Sumag."

"I'm Christian too," Mike announced, "my name is Mike Troff."

"Yes I's knows Sir," Neel responded.

"Please—no Sir today if you don't mind—just call me Mike," said Mike, "and may I join you in celebrating Christmas—I'm all alone."

"Yes—you's sure welcomes," Neel told Mike with a smile; so Mike and Neel walked to the building and went inside.

Upon entering, Mike was surprised to see a large room all colorfully decorated with ribbons, tinsel, garland, paper cutouts and holly.

In one corner there stood a large white artificial Christmas tree; Mike pointed to it and piped in astonishment, "But, how?"

"We's have our ways," Neel remarked with a smile and walked over to a group of six other Soldiers gathered around something and softly singing Silent Night.

Mike follows Neel and when he makes room between two men, he sees a large manger scene and joins in singing.

For the next few hours they sing carol after carol, some more than once, then as Mike was getting tired of singing he heard a lot of commotion which sounded like men moving furniture, but because Mike was now surrounded by other taller men, he couldn't see what was happening.

Then the noise ceased and a short while later, Mike began to smell aromas of hot food.

When they finished singing and turned around, they found a long table with a red tablecloth loaded with platters and bowls of food.

Neel said to Mike, "You's welcomes to join us."

"Thank you," Mike politely replies; and so he and Neel walked over to the table and picked up a tray and placed a large plate, a small plate and some silverware on it, and then they went over and started to help themselves to the food.

With all of the strange food, Mike didn't know what it all was, so Neel would explain what it is as Mike pointed to it.

Mike took some Spiced Lamb Meatballs, Spiced Chickpeas, Potato and Cauliflower in a cream Curry, a dish of Sour Cream Cucumber Salad, a hot bowl of Carrot Soup with Ginger, and finally, he grabs a glass of Mango Lassie; he almost took the Mango Cocktail with Vodka, but figured that was a bit much, plus he needs a clear head if he's called to fly.

Mike and Neel walk with loaded trays to a table with two other guys and sit down.

After Neel introduces Jason Saluga and Sai Jindal they began eating and talking.

After the meal, they partied for the rest of the day until it was time for Dinner, and then more food was brought and Mike and his new friends feasted again.

That night, when Mike lay in his bed, he thanked the Lord for giving him this nice day, and then he felt forlorn for not having anything to give in return, to Jesus on his Birthday.

Mike also wondered if his two Brothers had made it home for Christmas and if they were having a Merry Christmas.

Mike fell into a peaceful sleep after a not so Merry Christmas turned into a very Merry Christmas.

CHAPTER 8 -- Advanced Flight Training.

The days following New Years, Mike was giving flight training to the small group of EXR Fighter Pilots who didn't even know how to perform basic flight maneuvers; maneuvers that the flight schools back in the States should have taught them.

After Major Nickerson, Acid Burn, who was the most proficient of the five, had trained them; they were now ready for some of Mike's easier advanced maneuvers.

So for the next several months, Mike did his best to give these Pilots the skills necessary to survive.

As the war raged on with NATO making headway in India, Mike and his small group of EXR Fighter Pilots were neglected and the aerial fighting was now to the west closer to Pakistan; India was regaining its lost and contested provinces.

In early April, Colonel Waraich was hinting of closing the camp and rejoining the Indian Army, because his small garrison had less and less to do.

Mike's morale was higher with the prospect of finally leaving this place, rejoining a regular American unit and maybe head back to the States on leave, which he hadn't had for over two years.

In May the war had once again become stalemated, neither side, gaining nor losing ground.

Henry had made his and Colonel Clark's concerns about Mike known to General Cook, but to no avail; General Cook refused to bring Mike home.

At a General Staff meeting, General Cook had a glowering expression listening to Lieutenant Colonel Cross from G2 give a bleak report on the latest war intelligence.

After he had finished, he gathered up his notes and with a straight face, he swiftly walked out of the room.

As soon as Colonel Cross had exited, a very annoyed General Cook barked, "What seems to be the matter gentleman? Griggs—what's the damn problem? Why can't we make any headway?"

"We're not getting antiquate air support—without air support we can't advance—in fact, I'm surprise we haven't lost the ground we've gained—we can thank our well trained and brave men for that."

All eyes turn to the Air Force and Marine Generals Snyder and Unger.

"Well, --Snyder—what's the problem? Why haven't your Pilots provided the necessary ground support?" Demanded General Cook glaring at Air Force Major General Snyder.

"We're doing our best Sir," replied General Snyder, "but, the Islamic Alliance is using their version of our PL9 and preventing us from securing the airspace above the battlefield. F30 Fighters have a very difficult if not impossible task of avoiding those missiles. That job is better suited for EXR Helicopters that can outmaneuver said missiles. I do believe the Marines and Army are in charge of that department."

General Cook with cold glaring eyes, turns to Marine Major General Unger, "Ok Unger—what's your excuse—why aren't your EXR2's clearing the way and supporting our men on the ground?"

"We're also doing our best, Sir," said General Unger apologetically, "but the Islamic HX2's are out flying our EXR2's. They seem to be better-trained in advance tactical maneuvers—our Marine Pilots are lacking in that area Sir, —we don't have any flight instructors proficient in those types of advance tactical maneuvers Sir."

General Cook eyes Major General Griggs and harshly asks, "Griggs, why aren't you providing air support? What has Captain Troff been doing the last four months—playing hopscotch?"

"No Sir—those advance tactical maneuvers requires the Pilots to be proficient in some basic flight maneuvers which wasn't taught in flight school, so he had to teach basic flight maneuvers first—sorry Sir."

"How much more time does he need Griggs?"

"I really don't know, Sir—maybe another two or three months—possibly four," General Griggs weakly, replied.

"ANOTHER FOUR MONTHS!" Blared General Cook, his eyes glaring, and the arteries in his neck, swelling; Griggs weakly nods.

"Well, you get a hold of his Army Commander and find out, --and as soon as you do you let me know," commanded General Cook in a firm tone, "and you tell his Army Commander to impress upon him to quickly get the job done. We don't have the time to pussy foot around—you got that Griggs?" Griggs nods with, "Yes Sir, I'll make sure he gets the message."

"By the way—how many Pilots is Captain Troff training?" Inquired General Cook with a quizzical expression.

"Five Sir," replied General Griggs.

"Just five!" Exclaimed General Cook, "I thought he was training an entire Squadron."

"No Sir," replied General Griggs, and then he explains, "Only five Pilots out of the entire brigade in India met the skill requirements Troff

required.”

General Cook looking stunned with bug-eyes exclaimed, “In the entire brigade—only five!”

“Yes Sir,” replied General Griggs.

“Ok, --here’s what I want to happen,” began General Cook with a stern face and tone, “When Captain Troff has completed training the five Pilots, and I want it to be completed in the next two months.”

“Two months,” gasped General Griggs, “I don’t think that’s possible Sir, --proficiently requires time in the cockpit—flight hours. Isn’t that right Howard?”

“He’s right Sir,” General Snyder agreeing; “in order for a Pilot to become a proficient Fighter Pilot, he needs flight time—hours in the air at the controls of his aircraft.”

“We don’t have that luxury, Gentlemen, we’re at war—if you haven’t notice—they’ll have to get that flight time in combat,” rebuffed General Cook in a very firm tone, “Troff’s got two months to teach these Pilots and no more. At the end of July I want orders cut for two of those five Pilots to be transferred to Fort Rucker in August, to begin training our EXR Pilots on how to execute all of the basic flight maneuvers. The other three—well—leave one in India, to train those Pilots, send one to a NATO base in Turkey, and the last one to a NATO base in Europe.”

“So, --what about Captain Troff Sir,” asked General Griggs.

“What about him?”

“Where do you want to transfer him too?” Asked General Griggs in a firm tone, “I would like to see him transferred to the 83rd Battalion at Fort Belvoir—he’s too great of an asset to lose Sir.”

“You’re right about him being an asset, General Griggs, that’s why he must remain right where he’s at,” argued General Cook, “any more suggestions, comments, questions?”

No one had nothing more to add, so General Cook adjourned the meeting.

A week later Colonel Waraich informed Mike he had to complete the training within the next two months.

Mike gasped, “In two months Sir, --that’s impossible. There’s no way I can’t train these guys in two months—it took me three months to learn some of those maneuvers—these guys are total greenhorns.”

“Greenhorns?” Asked Colonel Waraich looking confused, “What is greenhorn?”

“Inexperienced,” replied Mike with a half-smile.

"Oh, I's sees—a greenhorn," says Colonel Waraich, "very colorful, --anyways, you must complete training of Pilots by end of two months, which is end of July—orders from UN Command in New Delhi."

Mike threw his arms up in disgust grumbling, "Ok, Ok, but don't blame me if they get themselves killed."

"Sorry, those are yours orders Captain Troff," said Colonel Waraich.

"Yes sir," said Mike in a firm voice, "anything else—Sir?"

"No's that be's all Captain," commanded Colonel Waraich in an authoritative tone, "You's dismissed."

Mike comes to attention, salutes and when the salute is returned, he turns and walks out of Colonel Waraich's office.

As Mike walks to his quarters, he shakes his head mumbling, "Two months is nuts. And what's up with the promotion—now I'm a Captain—really! The Indian military sure likes promoting people. In my Army I'm still a Corporal, ha, ha, ha..."

The next day when Mike met his students at the appointed place, he informs them, "I've been ordered to get you guys trained by the end of July—that gives you two months to learn how to perform my advanced maneuvers. So, --starting today we'll meet here on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The training is going to come fast and hard—there will be no washouts—you'll either learn how to perform those maneuvers or die trying. Any questions?"

With no response, Mike takes that as having no questions, so he continues in a firm tone, "Starting today you're going to perform controlled rolls and loops—by the end of this week you will be doing them with precision or you're going home in a box, because gentlemen, we're at war and no more playing it safe. You will learn how to quickly transition from forward flight to reverse flight without slowing or stopping. You will learn how to fly the nap of the earth at very low altitudes and very high speeds, both day and night. You will learn how to target and accurately fire as you transition between forward and reverse flight, and you'll do this day or night. And finally, I'm going to teach you one of the most difficult maneuvers I know—the Möbius. During the last week in July, I'll be giving you all a test—the only test you'll receive. This will be a test by fire—real fire—if you fail—well—be sure to have your affairs in order, because you won't be returning alive. Now, do you have any questions?"

Once again there's no response and Mike takes that as no one has any questions, so he says in a firm tone, "No questions, huh? Ok then, let's

start with loops. We'll start with an inside loop at 4000 feet—remember—you must halt for thirty seconds at each ninety degree position and exit the loop within 100 feet of where you started. Each day you'll be doing them at ever decreasing altitudes until on Thursday you'll be at 500 feet AGL (Above Ground Level). That gives you a 50-foot safety margin. For those who can't complete the loop within 100 feet of where you started, will wind up hitting the ground and burn. Ok—Griffin, let's start with you."

When Mike returned to his base, he ordered five non-lethal paint missiles, like what was used in the Powder Horn maneuvers several years ago.

As May ended and June arrived, the training of the five EXR Pilots progressed at a rapid and intense pace.

Mike's harsh and somewhat questionable training methods were beginning to show amazing results.

Each of the five Pilots knew that they must learn these maneuvers or face the possibility of not returning home alive and were very concerned about the final flight test in July.

Out of the five, only Lieutenant Davison (Sneaky Snake) was having problems, and that had to do with executing precision loops; he just couldn't seem to be able to maintain a fixed ninety degree and two hundred seventy degree position along with not exiting the maneuver within 100 feet.

When the last week of June arrived, Mike figured it was time they learned his most difficult maneuver, the Möbius; and of course Sneaky Snake was having trouble with this maneuver as well, because it involved a complex version of the loop and roll.

By the time mid-July arrived, Mike's unusual training methods had paid off and his students, except Sneaky Snake, were at a skill level near Mike and way above anyone in the military; Army, Navy and Air Force including anyone on either side for that matter.

As the day for the flight test drew near, the five student Pilots became very worried, especially Sneaky Snake.

When they had finished on Friday, the Twenty-first, Mike informed them, "This is the last training I'll be giving—you're done and I'm proud of you all. You are now ready for that flight test I told you about when we started back in May. Starting on Monday, I'll be giving the final flight test each day to one of you starting with Acid Burn. On Tuesday it'll be Polecat's turn, on Wednesday its Black Raptor, Thursday, Gas Attack and on Friday its Sneaky Snake. I only want the one I'd just assigned for that day

to be present—no one else is to accompany him—I don't want anyone to see the flight test until it's his turn. Does everyone understand?"

For a while there was silence, and then one by one, Mike got an affirming acknowledgment.

Then Mike told them, "Great--now go spend the weekend to rest and prepare yourselves. I guess that's all I have—any questions?"

"Gas Attack here," Lieutenant Griffey began with in a nervous weak voice, "were you serious about using live fire?"

"Of course," replied Mike in a firm convincing tone, "you'll be facing a live missile and you'll be expected to handle it in the way I trained you to—to fail is to die in a fireball. Any more questions?"

The radio was dead silent and Mike took that as no one had any questions, so then he told them, "Ok, you're all dismissed and I'll see Acid Burn on Monday—have a pleasant and restful weekend—over."

As the five EXR2's headed back to their base and Mike to his special exit location, he was smiling and thinking, "I'll bet they'll be having nightmares and nervous fits for the next few days until it's their turn, then stark fear will present itself—it'll be interesting see how these guys will handle it."

When Mike got up Monday morning, he had a smile on his face for two reasons; one, today is his birthday and he made it to Twenty-two and next month he'll be starting his fourth and last year in the Army, and two, it's test time, and time to see how well these guys and handle a missile.

When Mike arrived at the appointed place, Major Nickerson (Acid Burn) was there waiting all by himself.

Mike keyed his radio with a cheery greeting, "Good mornin' Acid Burn. It's a beautiful morning and shaping up to be a great day for your test—so are you ready?"

"Roger that and rarin' to get started—Acid Burn out."

"Awesome," replied Mike on the radio, and then he explains, "I'll give you a series of offensive and defensive maneuvers to perform, and somewhere in those maneuvers when you least expect it I'll launch a missile. I'll expect you to detect it and take defensive action and destroy it. Remember—this will be a live missile—if you fail, you won't be returning. Your unit will be notified that you were killed in combat. You have any last minute questions? If not, then good luck—Pegasus out," and the radio went silent.

Mike waited for five seconds, and when he didn't hear a response, he figured it was time to begin.

Mike keyed his radio and told Acid Burn what maneuvers to execute and that he could execute them in any order he chooses until told to stop.

Mike also informed Acid Burn that he would be observing how well he executes them.

For the next ten minutes Acid Burn executed the assigned maneuvers, and then while executing an outside loop, Mike launched the paint missile.

Mike got out of the way; because he didn't want the missile to lock on him when and if Acid Burn issued a counter measures flare or be in Acid Burn's return fire.

When Acid Burn got a missile detect warning message, he launched a counter measures flare, which Mike figured he would, but it was too early and the missile ignored it and continued to its target.

Mike smiled and shook his head remarking, "That's to early bud—keep your cool, take your time and think--else you're dead."

When Acid Burn sees the missile is still after him, he breaks from the maneuver and panics, and starts flying away in haste.

Mike shaking his head rebuffing, "What are you doing? You can't out run a missile—cool down and think. Remember what I taught you."

As the missile closes, Mike follows at a distance, watching a failure in the making, then Mike keys his radio, "Acid Burn—what are you doing? You can't out run that thing. Unless you want to die, I suggest that you get your head together and remember what you learned in our training exercises. You better act very soon or it's going to be too late."

Then with the missile within five seconds of detonation, Acid Burn suddenly heads for the earth, the missile hot on his tail and closing; three seconds from detonation.

Mike holds his breath, he knows what Acid Burn is trying to do and it's risky and very dangerous.

When Acid Burn gets to hundred feet of the ground, he suddenly pulls back on the cyclic and hits the afterburners; he shoots skyward and the missile less than a second from detonation impacts the ground with a big red splat.

Mike shaking his head flies to where Acid Burn is now waiting.

When Mike gets there he keys his radio and begins to harshly criticized Acid Burn's actions, "Well—you're still alive. The maneuver you employed was out of haste and one I wouldn't have used. From where I observed, you flat out panicked and if I hadn't intervened—you would be dead now. As far as the test goes—you failed and until you can get your head

straight, you're not an EXR Fighter Pilot. I'm going to recommend that you be reassigned to an Attack Helicopter unit. Do you have any questions or comments?"

After a minute or so and no reply, Mike keyed his radio and said, "That's all for today—tell Polecat I'll be waiting for him tomorrow—you're dismissed."

Acid Burn turned and headed back to his base, and Mike to his exit location.

The next day, Mike gave Polecat his test, and unlike Acid Burn, kept his head and used what he'd learned and destroyed the missile; Mike was smiling when he informed Polecat he has passed and was a true EXR Fighter Pilot and had joined an elite group of Pilots.

Black Raptor and Gas Attack were the next to join the elite group of EXR Fighter Pilots, leaving Sneaky Snake as the last student to face the test.

When Friday arrived, Mike headed out to meet Sneaky Snake at the appointed place to give him the test.

When Mike arrived, Sneaky Snake, like the other four, was waiting. Mike keyed his radio and greeted with, "Good morning Snake, it's a fine Friday shaping up, are you ready for your test?"

"I guess-s so-o," Lieutenant Davison replied in a nervous shaky tone.

"What do you mean, 'I guess so', don't ya' know?" Mike asked in a tart argumentative tone.

"I just don't know if I'm ready today—maybe next week," replied Lieutenant Davison in a weak shaky voice.

"It's today or never—the training is over—you're taking the test today--now," barked Mike in a harsh commanding voice.

"I'm not ready—I still can't execute a loop—I don't wanta' to die," cried Lieutenant Davison.

"Pull yourself together man," scolded Mike, "you're supposed to be a EXR Fighter Pilot, so get ready to fly."

"Please—I don't wanta' die, Pegasus," begged Lieutenant Davison with a snuffle.

"Stop your whining," scolded Mike, and then informed Sneaky Snake just as he told the other four, "I'm going to give you a series of offensive and defensive maneuvers to perform, and somewhere in those maneuvers when you least expect it I'll launch a missile. I'll expect you to detect it and take defensive action and destroy it. Remember—this will be a live missile—if you fail, you won't be returning. Your unit will be notified that you were killed in combat. Do you have any last minute questions?"

Before Mike could finish Sneaky Snake piped up pleading, “Please Sir—I beg of you—I don’t wanta’ do this—please.”

“Sorry, you’re not backing out,” replied Mike in a firm tone, “so, get ready and good luck—Pegasus out,” and the radio went silent.

Mike waited for a couple of minutes to give Sneaky Snake time to pull himself together, and then he keyed his radio again and told Sneaky Snake what maneuvers he was to execute and that he could execute them in any order he chooses until told to stop.

Then Mike added that he would be observing how well Sneaky Snake executes them.

For the next fifteen minutes Sneaky Snake executed the assigned maneuvers, and when he executed the requested loop, it wasn’t very good, in fact, with the added stress it was horrible and definitely failing.

Then, while executing a very bad outside loop, Mike launched the paint missile.

Mike quickly got out of the way, because he didn’t know what Sneaky Snake would do in his nervous shaky condition, and Mike didn’t want the missile to lock onto him.

Mike figured it would be over in a matter of seconds and Sneaky Snake, like Acid Burn, would fail miserably.

When Sneaky Snake got the missile detect warning message, like Acid Burn, he launched a counter measures flare, and like Acid Burn it was too early and the missile ignored it and continued to its target.

Mike shook his head remarking, “Too early Snake—to early.”

Then, when Sneaky Snake realized it didn’t work, instead of hi-tailing it, Sneaky Snake started to execute some strange maneuvers.

As Mike watched dumbfounded, Sneaky Snake started to fly in a combination of wide side-to-side, roller coaster, and spiral patterns.

This was confusing the guidance system on the missile and it began to fly erratically trying to lock on.

Seeing this, Mike prepared to defend himself in case the confused missile decided to lock on him.

Then as the missile and Sneaky Snake’s EXR2 closed, Sneaky Snake swung his Helicopter around and fired a burst from his canon and the missile exploded to Mike complete surprise.

This was one for the books; Mike has never seen anything like this, chalk one up for Sneaky Snake, he passed with flying colors.

Sneaky Snake with a sigh of relief pulls into a hover and waits for Pegasus to arrive; figuring he’s failed the test.

When Mike pulled into a hover a short distance in front of Sneaky Snake, Sneaky Snake keyed his radio and began apologizing, “I’m really sorry Sir, but I told you I wasn’t ready.”

“What do you mean,” Mike told him, “that was incredible as to how you out maneuvered that missile—you totally confused its guidance system—wait until the brass back in the Pentagon here’s about this—looks like we need to make adjustments to the guidance systems of our missiles before the other side gets wind of this. As for that loop—you need a lot more work on that one. Congratulations Snake, you passed the test and now have joined an elite group of EXR Fighter Pilots. So, no more whining, you hear—and for your information—that wasn’t a real missile, but a paint missile that’s used in war games, hee, hee, hee... Any last minute questions or comments before I let you go?”

“The missile wasn’t real?” Remarked Lieutenant Davison sounding barbed.

“Yeah,” Mike began explaining, “needed an incentive to get you guys to learn these maneuvers in two months—sorry, but I had no other choice—I was ordered to get you guys trained in two months—now you can use the same methods on your students, which I suspect you’ll be training in the very near future.”

“I’ll be giving flight training?” Questioned Lieutenant Davison now sounding surprised.

“Yeah, don’t be surprised if some of you guys will be getting transfer orders very soon,” remarked Mike, “I gotta’ get back, so if you don’t have any more questions you can go, and good luck—Pegasus out.”

So when Mike saw Sneaky Snake turned and head back to his base, Mike turned and headed to his exit location.

CHAPTER 9 -- Air Battle over Kathlaur.

When the first Monday in August arrived, all of the Pilots Mike had trained received transfer orders, except Lieutenant Davison (Sneaky Snake).

Second Lieutenant Griffey (Gas Attack) was promoted to the rank of First Lieutenant.

When Colonel Clark got news of the Pilot's trained by Mike and were being transferred to other units, he went to see General Griggs and requested the five Pilots be transferred to the 660th EXR Tactical Response Company and was flatly turned down.

When Colonel Clark asked why, General Griggs response was, "Priorities Clark, priorities."

"Priorities Sir—what priories?" Asked Colonel Clark, "I thought the formation of the 83rd had top priority."

"As you are well aware—the war we're engaged in has top priority, that's if you hadn't noticed," General Griggs replied in a hard sarcastic voice; Colonel Clark's head dipped in a short nod, and then he remarked, "So—the 83rd is no longer important, huh."

"The 83rd is still a high priority," barbed General Griggs, "—just not at the top—the war has that honor. Anyway—you're getting one of those Pilots—a First Lieutenant Chris Griffey is being sent to your 81st Tactical Training Company at Fort Irwin."

"Thank you, but what about the Tactical Response Company, are you giving up and dissolving it?" Colonel Clark bluntly asked.

"No—of course not," replied General Griggs in a softer tone, "since you're having problems staffing it with qualified Pilots I'm lowering its priority until after the war when there will be Pilots with the qualifications that'll meet our requirements—instead, the mission focus will be to quickly train our EXR Pilots to Captain Troff's skill level, and your 81st Tactical Training Company will be crucial to that mission."

General Griggs pauses with Colonel Clark looking despondent at him, and then the General sighs, and in a softer voice and addressing Colonel Clark by his first name he says, "Larry—the war isn't going well, with terror attacks happening all over the world on a daily bases, and with very little in the way of advancement of the front lines it's almost at a stale-mate. It reminds me of my history class at West Point about the battle lines of World War One. The only place where any advances have been made is in India. Larry—we're having a hard time providing air support to our ground troops. Since the Iranian Alliance introduced their own version of

our PL9, we haven't been able to secure the airspace above the battlefields. The only aircraft able to penetrate the Iranian PL9 umbrella are the EXR2 Helicopters and of course the HX2's, and that's where the major problem lies. Our EXR2 Pilots are being out classed by the HX2 Pilots—it seems they're better trained, and the main reason for the high priority on advanced flight training. That's why your Tactical Training Company at Fort Irwin is so important.”

“What about our F30's helping with the battlefield support?” Suggested Colonel Clark.

“They wouldn't last thirty seconds against the HX2's and the PL9 flack umbrella,” replied General Griggs shaking his head, “you should know that Colonel. We're trying Drones as they're smaller targets for the HX2s and are unaffected by the PL9's. Anyway, the jury is still out as to their effectiveness.”

“Ok,” sighs Colonel Clark, “I'll put the 660th on temporary hold and concentrate on quickly getting the 81st fully operational.”

“That's what I want' hear,” said General Griggs in a blithe voice, “Is there anything else you want to address?”

Colonel Clark feeling and looking disappointed shook his head, and then General Griggs said in dismissing him, “Ok then, since you've got lots of work ahead of you to get that Tactical Training Company at Fort Irwin up and running, I'll let you go Colonel.”

They saluted and Colonel Clark walks out of the office looking and feeling despondent.

August went by uneventful; the front lines still are stagnant and Colonel Clark got the 81st fully operational with the arrival of several instructors.

When the first week in September arrived, so did the first group of eight Pilots to receive training; two weeks later a second group arrived and by end of October the school was at full capacity with four classes.

When November arrived, the first group was ready to graduate; with six out of the eight original Pilots successfully completing the training, the other two were washed out and reassigned to Attack Helicopter companies.

Colonel Clark kept track of Mike through Colonel Waraich, because he was concerned about his welfare and he wanted Mike in his EXR Tactical Response Company.

As for Mike, he began training another four Pilots, or at least try too, because these guys were worst then the last; they couldn't execute any

loops or rolls.

“What the heck,” Mike thought, since he’s more and likely to remain here for the remainder of his time in the Army, “so why not there’s plenty of time.”

When November arrived, Mike began to plan how to leave this place in June or July and rejoin a regular US Army Unit, so he can go home and get mustered out; August isn’t that far anymore, only nine months away.

Then in the second week in November, the Iranian Alliance made simultaneous moves on three fronts to reclaim lost territory; these sudden and unexpected moves caught NATO and the UN Coalition by surprise and they paid dearly.

Especially in Israel and Turkey where NATO and the UN Coalition lost large areas of territory.

In India, Pakistan advanced back into the heart of Punjab province very near to where Mike and Colonel Waraich’s little garrison was located.

With the two British aircraft carriers and numerous cruisers and destroyers in the Arabian Sea, the Iranian Navy were kept busy, so they couldn’t help Pakistan from the south, so Pakistan’s advances were mainly in the north.

Mike got up on the second Tuesday in November and when he stepped outside he was met with a lot of activity; men were running with their weapons towards the entry tunnel.

When Lieutenant Sadana hurried by, Mike grabbed him asking, “What’s happening?”

“The Pakistani’s are coming—they is in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Western Rajasthan Provinces,” said Lieutenant Sadana in a tense voice looking worried; Mike looking somber, figured the war had once again caught up with him, so Mike hurried over to the Headquarters building to see Colonel Waraich.

When Colonel Waraich saw Mike enter, he motioned to him to come into his office; Mike went and followed Colonel Waraich into his office.

After Mike had entered, Colonel Waraich closed the door, walks over and stands facing a large map of India on the wall and a map of the Punjab province next to it.

Colonel Waraich turns his head to Mike and motions with his hand for Mike to join him; Mike walks over and stands next to Colonel Waraich facing the Map.

Pointing to the locations where the Pakistani Army has pushed into India, looking grave, Colonel Waraich tells Mike, “According to reports

from New Delhi the Pakistani Army has advanced deep into these four provinces, bypassing our positions and cutting off most of them's from's our main forces—many of them's have surrendered. We's also in danger from here,” pointing to the map.

“What can I do?” Asked Mike wide-eyed.

“You's and the Pilots that you's has trained must halt their further advances at these four's places and pushes them's back,” replied Colonel Waraich pointing to the places on the map—especially here's else you's has no places to come back too's.”

“Yes Sir, I'll do my best,” affirmed Mike, “but—to let you know—those Pilots I trained, they all been transferred except one, and he's got some problems. As for the rest, well, they're next to useless against the MIG's and HX2's. Just so you know—if anything happens to me you're on your own.”

“They all's got transferred?” Repeated Colonel Waraich blinking, Mike nods with a sarcastic grin.

“Then nothings mustn't happens to you's, and hopes our Jet Fighters can helps,” retorted Colonel Waraich looking grim.

When Mike walked out of Colonel Waraich's office, he wasn't feeling to blissful; with less than a year left to his term of active service he still might not make it to the end alive, but at least now, he's flying and that made him feel better.

For the next two final weeks in November, Mike and Sneaky Snake along with all of the Coalition forces halted the Pakistanis and forced them back to their own border.

Single handily, Mike achieved air superiority over the Punjab and the other two provinces, Sneaky Snake and the other EXR2's helped to maintain air superiority over Northwest India; the other Coalition Jet Fighters maintained air superiority over the remaining Indian airspace.

The first Wednesday morning in December was a cloudy, cold, blustery day with flakes of snow blowing in the wind.

Lieutenant Colonel Cross from G2 walked into the General Staff meeting room to brief the General Staff on the current status of the war.

At the short podium, on the end of the huge polished dark oak table, Colonel Cross with a grim expression arranged his notes, and with the white projection screen already lowered, he turned the dimmer control and the room lights dimmed.

With a map of the Middle East projected, Colonel Cross begins the G2 briefing, “Gentlemen—with one exception—the war isn't going well. As

you know we got caught with our thumbs up our butts—sorry Sirs for the colorful metaphor, --and as such, we lost large areas of territory,” with a laser pointer, he indicates as he lectures, “first, they made no attempt to cross the Med and attack Europe, because we currently have a huge naval fleet stationed there. Second, Egypt has retaken the Sinai Peninsula along with a large area of western Israel. The Saudi’s and Jordanians have retaken the west bank along with a portion of east Israel, leaving the area from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean Coast still under Israeli control. Gentlemen—I don’t need to remind you—unless we act soon and decisively, Israel is all but lost. Third, India—the only bright spot in this war;” Colonel Cross displays the map of India.

With a laser pointer, he indicates India as he continues with the briefing, “As you’re aware the NATO naval fleet in the Arabian Sea prevented the Iranian and Pakistan navy from invading India from the south, but as you know, Pakistan advanced into Punjab and these three provinces,” highlighting them with his pointer, “and were subsequently pushed back across the Pakistani border by the UN Coalition forces.”

Then General Cook pipe up, “How was the UN Coalition forces able to achieve this when the NATO forces in the Middle East couldn’t—were the Pakistan Forces that bad?”

“No Sir,” replied Colonel Cross, “the UN Coalition Forces had a rough time, but got effective air support and with the UN Coalition achieving air superiority.”

“How was that possible—considering NATO in Eastern Europe and the UN Coalition in Israel are unable too?” Asked General Cook with a slack-jawed expression.

“It was achieved by one EXR3 Blue-Gray Helicopter and maintained by another EXR2 along with other EXR2’s and F30 Fighter jets—mind you, this air superiority is shaky, because none of the UN Coalition aircraft can execute effective defensive maneuvers against a Pakistani PL9 munitions with the exception of the Blue-Gray EXR3 Helicopter,” replied Colonel Cross.

“Pegasus,” Major General Griggs softly remarked.

“Yes—Pegasus,” repeated Colonel Cross, “he single-handily was able to gain air superiority over north western India.”

“This other EXR2—do you know who he is?” Inquires Major General Unger.

“I believe he is First Lieutenant Keith Davison, call sign Sneaky Snake,” replied Colonel Cross with a slight grin.

“Isn’t he one of the first five Pilots Captain Troff trained?” Re-marked General Cook.

“Yes Sir,” replied General Griggs, “the other four have been reassigned, with three to other units in the theater and one to the 81st at Fort Irwin.”

“Well done,” said General Cross nodding in approval, “now maybe we can get some skilled Pilots to turn this damn war around.”

As everyone nods, Colonel turns the projection off and brings the room lights back up, and then concludes the briefing, “That’s all I have at this time—any questions?”

General Cook looks at all of his staff shaking their heads, and then he says, “We don’t have any questions and thank you Colonel—you may go.” Colonel Cross gathers up his notes and walks out of the room.

The next week, with two more weeks to Christmas, Mike is wondering what his family will be doing this year for Christmas, and if everyone is going to be home.

With a big exhale and sigh he says, “Well—looks like this will be another missed Christmas and hopefully my last—I’ll defiantly be home for Christmas next year.”

Then a knock on the door; Mike gets up, goes and opens the door and there stands Lieutenant Sadana.

As Mike looks at Lieutenant Sadana, he announces, “Colonel Waraich wants to see you’s in his office—looks like maybe big fight in air—yes.”

“Ok,” replied Mike; he gets his boonie hat and follows Lieutenant Sadana to the Headquarters building.

Mike knocks on Colonel Waraich’s door and when he hears, “Enter,” he opens the door and walks in.

When Mike gets to Colonel Waraich’s desk he comes to attention and salutes, “Sir, Mike Troff reporting as ordered.”

“At ease Captain,” Colonel Waraich returning the salute.

Then Colonel Waraich gets up from his chair and orders, “Over here Captain,” as he walks to the large maps of India and Punjab Province on the wall.

Colonel Waraich starts informing Mike, as Mike joins him looking at the map of Punjab Province to which he’s pointing, “Apparently, we’s didn’t push them’s all back as we’s thought—Pakistan still has control over Himachal Pradesh Province and is now trying to re-enter Punjab Province from the North from Himachal Pradesh Province and from Pakistan here.”

"I thought we have air control over this area," Mike interjected.

"At the moment we's do—thanks to you's and you's Pilots," remarked Colonel Waraich.

"So, how do they figure to send ground forces into Punjab Province without air support?" Asked Mike with a quizzical expression.

"At the moment they're not," replied Colonel Waraich, "at least not until they's can regains air control over's area."

When Mike heard that, he got a very bad feeling and was afraid to ask the next question, "So—what are they planning—what have you heard?"

"What I hears is," Colonel Waraich explaining, "they's preparing three major air strikes from here, here and here," pointing to three locations on the map.

"I don't know if I can hold them in all three locations," Mike earnestly announced, "I can't be in three places at the same time, and I don't know if our guys are good enough—we need more planes."

"Well, you's wills have too," declared Colonel Waraich, "if you's don't, and Pakistan regains air control—then they's Army will come and we's have big battle--here."

"So when will they come?" asked Mike; Colonel Waraich shrugs and says, "Don't knows—maybe anytime. You's stands by until you's get word to goes—yes."

Mike nods mouthing, "Yeah."

Then Colonel Waraich dismisses Mike, and Mike walk out of the office and heads to where his EXR3 is parked and begins giving it a good inspection; an inspection he won't have time for once he gets the word to go.

Mike waited until the end of the week and nothing materialized.

The next week arrived and the Christian men, who Mike celebrated Christmas with last year, were getting the gathering room all decorated for the Christmas festivities next week.

As the week drew to a close, Mike began to think the UN Coalition Air Force presented a large enough deterrent to dissuade Pakistan from attacking without Iranian aid.

Then on Tuesday, three days before Christmas, the word came that an air assault was occurring and Mike took off to assist in repulsing the incursion.

Mike flew northwest towards the Ravi River.

When he arrived the sky was filled with aircraft battling it out in the skies over the village of Kathlaur and the Ravi River.

It was chaos with dogfights happening all over; exploding fireballs with burning debris falling to earth, along with Jet Fighters spiraling to earth, trailing trails of black smoke.

Most of the Planes were Pakistani, but of the Fighter Helicopters, being killed, they were EXR2's.

Mike pulled in behind a HX2 trying to kill an EXR2; it wasn't long before the HX2 was heading to the ground trailing black smoke.

The EXR2 Pilot radioed his gratitude, "Yellow Jacket here—thanks Pegasus—I owe you one," when he sees it's the Blue-Gray EXR3 who saved him.

"No problem, but you've got to learn better defensive maneuvers if you want to stay alive out here," Mike radioed back.

Then Mike heard, "Hey guys—the Blue-Gray EXR3 has arrived; now the fun really begins."

"Pegasus has arrived," a transmission remarked.

"Yeah—he sure has and about time," from yet another transmission.

"Cut the chatter—watch your six o'clock and keep your wingman insight, Wild Coyote over."

The radio went silent except for a few excited cries for assistance.

Then a nearby cry for help, "Sidewinder--Please help me—I can't shake this Guy."

"Sneaky Snake--I got this," a calm voice replied on the radio; Mike smiled knowing Sneaky Snake is up to the task, because he trained him.

Then as Sneaky Snake sends his bogey to the earth trailing smoke another nearby excited cry for help is heard and Mike responds, "Pegasus here—I've got this one," and heads for the EXR2 in distress and soon the HX2 is history.

Then the unspeakable happens, a puff of white, and a Pakistani PL9 was detonated in front of a F30 causing it to flare out and head for earth; when a white parachute deployed a HX2 headed for it.

Mike saw to his unbelieving horror what was about to happen, so he headed to engage the rogue HX2 issuing angry words, "No you don't—you dirty son-of-a-bitch!"

Mike approached him from the upper rear and fired a burst from his canon through the HX2's main rotor blades.

As the blades of the HX2 flew off and the HX2 heads straight down, Mike barked sarcastically, "How you like your blew-blades, you dirty bastard. Yeah—one blew north and one blew south, ha, ha, ha."

Mike kept an eye on the parachute until it touches down.

Then more PL9's went off, issued from both sides, a lot of aircraft was lost that day, and a lot of parachutes were deployed from the F30s and the MIGs, but Mike and Sneaky Snake were able to avoid the white chemical clouds.

Unfortunately, Alley Cat flew right through one of those nasty white chemical clouds, and soon after, down he goes in an auto-rotation with both engines shut down; he lands in a small clearing near the village of Kathlaur and radio's for help.

Sneaky Snake comes on the radio, "I'll go and assist—Sneaky Snake, over."

"How?" Asked Mike bluntly, "Unless you know how to clear two clogged engines there's nothing you can do—you surly can't pick him up, unless you're flying a trainer—which you're not—you have no room for a passenger—I'll land and get him back into the air—you cover me."

"Roger that, Snake out."

So, Mike circled once to verify that there's a clear place to land near the downed EXR2, and there was.

Mike makes his approach and sets down a short distance from Lieutenant Picklemyer.

Mike shuts his Helicopter down, removes his helmet, Grabs his M20, and then he dismounts and runs over to where Stan Picklemyer is hunched down waiting, holding a pistol.

Mike points to the pistol and in a gruff tone says, "Put that useless thing away—it ain't going to do you no good out here—don't you have an M20?"

Stan shakes his head with, "Pilots don't get issued assault weapons, besides this is so I can protect myself out here."

"Like I told you," Mike barbed, "that thing isn't going to do you any good unless your target is within hundred feet of you, and if you're any good with that thing. Anyway, it'll be infantry that you'll have to contend with, and with that pistol, you'll be long dead before any enemy soldier gets within range of that thing."

After giving Stan a sarcastic grin, Mike climbs into Stan's Helicopter and opens the toolbox, hoping its properly stocked.

After opening the toolbox, Mike finds the tools he's looking for, but only one can of unclogging agent.

As Mike crawls back out of the EXR2 and prepares to climb up to the first engine, Stan asks, "Why aren't you wearing' your insignia and don't they make you shave and cut your hair?"

Mike pauses and looks at him with a fixed expression, and then grunts, “Where I stay there’s snipers, and they target officers and Pilots first—with no insignia they’ve got a guessing game, besides, everyone knows each other’s rank. As for the hair and beard—I just haven’t gotten around to it—any more stupid questions?”

“Only that you look and sound familiar—like I know you from somewhere,” said Stan speculating.

“I don’t think so,” Mike grunted, “do you want me to get you back in the air or not?”

“Yeah, if you can,” replied Stan a smitten.

“Ok then, enough with all the questions, so I can get this done,” retorted Mike.

Mike climbed up to the engine compartment, removed the cover and engine plug, inserted the nozzle from the can and injected the contents until it was visible in the exhaust port; after removing the can and nozzle, he replace the engine plug, closed the engine compartment and climbed down, and then he repeated the same procedure on the other side.

After returning the tools and empty can to the toolbox, he told Stan to wait twenty minutes and then start the Helicopter.

“It’s going to take a bit of effort,” Mike portentously informed him, “don’t give up—she’s going to cough and sputter a bit before she running, but it’ll soon pass and you’ll be back in the air before you know it—Ok?”

“Yeah, and thanks Pegasus.”

“You’re welcome,” Mike graciously replied, “now don’t go flying into anymore PL9 clouds, because you don’t have any more unclogging agent, and now I’ve got some unfinished business upstairs.”

And as Mike is hurrying to his EXR3 the sound of a firecracker is heard coming from the village.

A hot painful sledgehammer like blow hits him in the left shoulder which spun him around and onto the ground.

With extreme numbing pain, Mike clutches his left shoulder with his right hand; he tries to get up, but the pain in the shoulder is to great, he lies there and wants to cry out.

Looking at his right hand, it’s coated in blood and his flight suit is saturated; he’s bleeding copiously, raises his right hand in a signal for help, and then he passes out.

Stan (Alley Cat) is horrified by what he witnessed and gets down and rushes over to Mike.

Finding him lying still and blood soaked, he checks to see if he's alive, and he is, just barely.

Sneaky Snake circling nearby also saw what happened and notices a reflection coming from a rooftop near the edge of the village.

Seeing Mike lying on the ground with Alley Cat kneeling beside him, Sneaky Snake knew what happened, so he gets on the radio and calls for a Medevac Helicopter; "We have a downed Pilot and require an immediate Medevac Helicopter, also require a Pilot to fly the downed Pilots Helicopter—Sneaky Snake out."

"Did I just hear you request a Pilot?" Major McGrane (Wild Coyote) firmly asked.

"Yeah—Pegasus has been shot," replied Lieutenant Davison (Sneaky Snake), "He was fixing Alley Cat's Helicopter and was on the way back to his EXR Helicopter when a rooftop sniper shot him—Alley Cat is with him—Shit! That stupid bastard on the rooftop is zeroing in on Alley Cat!" Exclaimed an excited Sneaky Snake.

Sneaky Snake acquires the Sniper and locks on, and then he launches a missile before the sniper can fire; a second later there's a huge explosion and the once nice house is a smoking, burning pile of rubble.

For the next ten minutes, Lieutenant Picklemyer applied pressure to Mike's shoulder wound to control the bleeding, hoping and praying that Mike wouldn't die.

Twelve minutes later the Medevac Helicopter landed and two medics with a stretcher hopped out and hurried over to where Mike lays.

After tending to Mike's wound, the two Medics put him on the stretcher and carry him to the Medevac Helicopter; a couple minutes later it takes off and heads towards New Delhi, Alley Cat hurries back to his EXR2.

Fifteen minutes later an EXR2 Trainer lands and a Pilot gets out and runs to Mike's EXR3 and climbs in; all the while Sneaky Snake is circling overhead keeping an eye out for more snipers.

As the replacement Pilot gets Mike's EXR3 ready for flight, Alley Cat, with a bit of effort gets his EXR2 running, and then a few minutes later they both take off.

CHAPTER 10 -- Phoenix Burn.

After the Medevac Helicopter had landed at the Military Hospital in New Delhi, they wheeled the stretcher with Mike on it, into the Hospital Emergency Entrance.

Then a second Medevac Helicopter lands and a second stretcher with another Pilot is also wheeled into the Emergency entrance, and parked nearby.

Four Doctors and several Nurses rush out and start tending to the two wounded men.

Two clerks with clipboards came out; one went to the other patient and one walked to where Mike is being treated.

She inquired of one of the Medics who brought Mike in, “Whom do we have here? I see he doesn’t have any insignia and he’s wearing a flight suite—what can you tell me?”

“Not much,” replied the Medic, “when we arrived he was already down and being attended to by another Pilot—the Pilot said he was Pegasus and was a Captain—he didn’t know his name. You’ll have to check his Data Link; it should have everything you need to know.”

“Thank you—I will,” the Clerk said in a stiff voice and removes the small beaded chain from around Mike’s neck with his Dog Tags and Data Link, and then she did the same with the other man.

Then both clerks assigned the men to the same semi-private room.

The next day when the Nurse attending to Mike inserted his Data Link into the reader, she was shocked and very confused, because it reported his rank as a Corporal.

Four days later, Mike awoke being wheeled down a hallway; dazed and confused by all of the chaos and bright lights rapidly moving above him, he cries out, “Help—where am’ I?”

An upside-down woman’s face appeared above him and softly told him, “It’s Ok—you’re in Hospital in New Delhi. You’ve been wounded in battle and is being transferred to new room with other wounded men. Soon you’ll be fine,” she smiled, and then her face disappeared.

The next day when Mike awoke, he sees he’s once again connected to machines with tubes and wires, and is amid cacophonous moans and groans; Mike is shocked to find himself once again back in the same scenario he was in several months ago.

Three officers walk up to the Nurses' Station and inquire of a Clerk, "I'm Major McGrane—could you tell me the room of Pegasus? I don't know his name, but I believe his rank was a Captain. He was admitted about a week ago. He was emergency air-lifted with a shoulder wound."

"Just a minute Sir," she replied and began typing on computer terminal; a minute or so later, she returned, "I'm sorry Sir, but the only Captain that was brought in at that time had passed away two days ago—I'm so sorry."

"Are you sure?" Pressed Major McGrane in a dispirited tone.

"Yes, according to our records—I'm sure—I'm really sorry."

"Thank you," said a dishearten Major; he and the three officers slowly walk out the door.

This time when Mike woke up it was the day before Christmas, Christmas Eve, he groans, "Where am I? What day is it?"

A nearby Nurse comes over and checks his monitor replying, "You's in a Military Hospital in New Delhi and it's December Friday the Twenty-fourth."

"Christmas Eve," Mike feebly remarked, "how did I get here?"

"You's were brought in by Medevac Helicopter—don't you's remember?" Replied the Nurse; Mike looks at her with fixed eyes trying to remember, but all he can recall is seeing an upside down woman's face and bright lights going by.

Mike slowly shakes his head and grimaces with pain, and then he vaguely remembers, like a dream, another guy and they're in a room by themselves and feebly asks, "Was I in a private room with another guy?"

"Yes—when you's first arrived," She replied nodding, "we's were told that you's were Captain, but finds out later you's Corporal, so's you's are moves to here. Good thing too—poor Captain, he's not survive."

"He died!" Exclaimed Mike; the Nurse nods repeating, "He dies—now you's get some rest or's you's dies—the Doctor will be in later—yes;" Mike closes his eyes.

UN Coalition Aircraft defeated and repulsed the Pakistani incursion and now the UN Coalition Forces are preparing to enter Pakistan.

On Monday following Christmas, Lieutenant Colonel Cross was in the General Staff briefing room updating General Cook and his staff on the latest intelligence information; "Germany, Canada, Norway, Italy, and France have landed in the Sinai and are proceeding in three directions. French forces are heading to join up with American forces in Israel.

German and Canadian Forces are moving toward Suez Canal and the cities of Port Said and Ismailia. The Norwegian and Italian Forces are heading south towards the Red Sea. Now in India, with the defeat of the Pakistani air incursion, the UN Coalition Forces are preparing to enter Pakistan. That's all I have at this time—any questions?"

With no questions, General Cook announces, "Gentlemen—finally, we have the momentum. I think it's time for an all-out assault on all fronts—especially in India. If we can force Pakistan to submit, then Afghanistan will follow. Once we get these two countries under our control we'll be on Iran's eastern doorstep. And with NATO Forces coming from the west, we just might get Iran to capitulate and this nasty war will be over. This operation will be code-named Phoenix Burn. We will use our newly trained EXR Pilots to lead the main elements. Griggs—be sure to get word to your man, Captain Troff, in India, that I want him to lead the assault into Pakistan."

"Excuse me Sir, but we got word that Captain Troff was killed trying to assist a down EXR Helicopter—he was killed by a sniper heading back to his aircraft—sorry," piped Colonel Cross.

All the Generals looked shocked, especially General Griggs.

"Well—that's just ducky—just when he could be the most useful, he gets himself killed," grunted General Cook, "well, now we'll just have to do without him. This operation will begin in three weeks—except the NATO forces in the Sinai, they can continue with their current objectives but under the new code name. If no one has any questions or concerns, then let's get Phoenix Burn underway. This briefing is over."

In the morning of the next day, Major General Griggs sent word to Lieutenant Colonel Clark that he wanted to see him that day; Colonel Clark enter General Griggs office at two. When Colonel Clark walked in he asked, "You wanted to see me Sir?"

"Yes Clark I did," replied General Griggs, "Please have a seat—there's something I need to tell you and you're not going to like it."

With that foreboding greeting, Colonel Clark seated himself on that plush chair.

Then with a bleak expression and a voice devoid of emotion, General Griggs calmly said, "Get a hold of yourself Clark," he pauses and slowly says, "Captain Troff has been killed."

And before Colonel Clark can respond, he adds, "it's been confirmed—we have his remains and they'll be returned to the U.S. in a few days."

“Was he killed in action?” Asked Colonel Clark in a weak voice; General Griggs nods.

“When and where?” Colonel Clark asked again.

“The place was near Kathlaur by the Ravi River on the twenty-second,” replied General Griggs in a gentle tone.

“How was he shot down?”

“He wasn’t,” blurt General Griggs in a clear quick reply, “his Helicopter was recovered.”

“Not shot down! Wasn’t he flying?” Asked a confused Clark; General Griggs shakes his head.

Looking irate, Colonel Clark barked, “Why was he fighting as infantry instead of flying—I thought he was through playing infantry, that’s why he was given a commission so he could fly.”

“Hold on Clark—don’t get your skivvies in a uproar,” barked General Griggs in response to Colonel Clark’s rant, “for your information there wasn’t any ground forces present—this was an air operation—Captain Troff along with several arms of Indian and UN Coalition Air Forces, which included F30’s and F32’s, repulsed a Pakistani air incursion at three locations. And, thanks to Captain Troff and some of his trained Pilots, they stopped the incursion dead in its tracks and have now set the stage for a Major operation we’re calling Phoenix Burn to begin in all theaters in a couple of weeks. This, Colonel, is going to be as big as the D-Day invasion in the last century.”

“So if he wasn’t shot down—just how did he get killed?” Colonel Clark bluntly asked looking quizzical.

“He was downed by a sniper on his way to his Helicopter,” replied General Griggs, “he had repaired a EXR2 after it was downed by a Pakistani PL9 missile—he died later in a military Hospital in New Delhi. His remains will be transferred to a morgue at Fort Belvoir in a few days.”

“A sniper--huh,” remarked Colonel Clark looking a bit sheepish.

“Yeah—and it’s going to be your job to inform the Troff’s, since he’s under your command,” announced General Griggs with a sarcastic grin, and then he reaches into his desk drawer and retrieves a white envelope and hands it to Colonel Clark telling him, “here’s the formal notification of Captain Troff’s death along with a description of how he was killed and where.”

Colonel Clark receives the envelope, slides it into an inside pocket in his uniform coat, and then he inquires, “Since I lost my primary Pilot, do I still get first dibs on those Pilots he trained?”

General Griggs nods, and then he reminds him, “Don’t forget to update Captain Troff’s file and have his status changed to deceased. I guess

that's all I have at this time—any questions or concerns, Colonel?”

Colonel Clark shakes his head and gets up, followed by General Griggs.

After saluting, General Griggs adds as Colonel Clark is about to leave, “Really sorry about your Pilot, Clark, really sorry,” Colonel Clark sorrowfully nods as he walks out the door.

Later that evening, Colonel Clark arrives at Brigadier General Henry Troff's residence and rings the doorbell; Maria answers the door and when she sees Colonel Clark she blissfully greets, “Colonel Clark—how nice to see you, please do come in.”

Larry Clark enters telling her, “Thank you—is the General in—this is an official business call?”

“Yes—he's in the family room. How's Mike, have you heard from him?”

“Yes, matter-of-fact I have news about Mike,” said Larry looking and sounding grim.

They both walk into the family room where Henry is watching TV; when Henry sees Colonel Clark in uniform, he turns the TV off, gets up and offers his hand with, “Colonel Clark what do we owe this pleasure too?”

Larry takes his hand and they shake with Larry replying, “I wish I could be here under more pleasant circumstances.”

“I must assume this is a business call by the tone of your voice—please have a seat Colonel,” said Henry portentously, motioning with his hand to one of the large overstuffed easy chairs.

As Larry sits down, Maria turns and starts to leave when he says, “Missis Troff please stay, this involves you as well.”

When Maria heard this she got a dreadful feeling, went over and sat down on the sofa.

Larry began in a slow somber tone, “Missis Troff, you asked when I came in if I heard of any news of Mike—yes.”

Larry takes a deep breath and softly utters, “God this is so hard.”

Henry feeling that this isn't going to be good news gets up, goes over and sits next to Maria.

Larry reaches into his inside coat pocket and withdraws the envelop that General Griggs gave him that day.

As Larry hands the envelop to Henry, he solemnly in a weak voice informs them, “This is an official notification that Captain Michael Troff has been killed in action in India.”

Maria breaks down shaking, crying and moaning, “Now Mike’s gone too.”

“Colonel—are you sure this time he’s dead,” Henry firmly asked, “the last couple of times he was declared dead, he shows up later much alive.”

“Yes Sir I’m sure—this time we have his remains and they’re being returned to the U.S.,” replied Larry with a tear running down his cheek, “his remains are being shipped to the Morgue at Fort Belvoir to be prepared for visitation and burial—I presume at Arlington.”

Henry nods with, “Yes—Arlington is fine—we want him interred next to his Brother,” and then with a quizzical expression he asks, “why is Mike’s remains being shipped to Belvoir? I would’ve thought he would arrive at Andrews.”

“Captain Troff is assigned to my Battalion at Belvoir—that’s why I’m the one delivering the bad news, instead of some administrative staff officer from the Pentagon.”

“If he’s assigned to your Battalion, then why isn’t he at Belvoir?” Henry sharply asked.

“Because, he was attached to a Indian Special Ops unit under the command of a Indian Army Colonel by the name of Waraich,” replied Larry, “and believe me I tried to get him transferred back here, but General Cook and General Griggs wouldn’t hear of it. They wanted him where he could do the most damage.”

Henry glares at Larry and slowly nods, and then looking at his watch, Larry having delivered the bad news sees it’s time to leave and gets up saying, “It’s getting late, I must be on my way—that letter will explain everything and if you need any more information please feel free to call me,” pointing to the letter, Henry is holding, and then he starts walking towards the door with Henry and Maria following.

On December 31, the air raid sirens went off and ten minutes later short range Ballistic Missiles landed in New Delhi; all of the patients were quickly moved to a bomb shelter.

When it was over an hour later, the Hospital lucked out and wasn’t hit, but the UN and Indian Army Base scored direct hits just narrowly missing the Hospital; the commercial airfield was spared, but for how long.

The Hospital went into emergency procedures as the wounded were brought in; Mike was moved back into the ward which is now full of moaning and groaning wounded.

That night was one which Mike didn't get very much sleep, because of all anguish that was loudly chorused.

The next day, a staff Nurse came into the ward and informed Mike that he's being transferred to a Hospital in Germany, to make room for the incoming wounded.

As soon as she left, several Nurses and an orderly pushing a gurney prepared Mike for the transfer; he was moved to the gurney, covered with a blanket and rolled out of the room.

Mike was loaded into an ambulance and taken to the commercial airport where he was transferred to a Medevac Airplane with other wounded Patients from the Military Hospital.

Once he was secured, an American Army Nurse asks, "How do you feel Soldier?"

"A little weak, but otherwise Ok," replied Mike in a weak unsteady voice.

"That's good to hear," said the Nurse, "if you feel uncomfortable with pain, just call out and I'll give you something. We should be taking off in a few minutes, so just hang in there."

"Where am' I going?" Mike asked in a weak stammer almost at a whisper.

"You're going to a NATO Hospital in Ramstein Germany," replied the Nurse with a smile, "it'll be a good four hour flight, so try to get some sleep—oh, before I forget, Happy New Year."

Mike just looks at her smiling back, thinking, "Great—starting the New Year in a Hospital bed with tubes stuck in me and wires glued on—just ducky."

On New Year's Eve, Henry and Maria received word that Mike's remains had arrived, and they could see him next week after the Holiday.

The day after New Year's Day, Henry and Maria went to the Morgue at Fort Belvoir to see Mike.

As they walked to where Mike is being held, Henry was a bit weak kneed with a deadpan expression and Maria with a handkerchief was slowly wiping her red tear-stained face.

Entering the room where the bodies are kept, Henry requested to see Mike's remains.

After signing a ledger, Henry and Maria were led by a Mortician through a set of double doors and into a very chilly room with rows of square stainless steel doors.

The Mortician opened one of the square stainless steel doors and rolled a sheet covered body lying on a stainless steel table out of the locker.

The Mortician prepared them for what was to come, as he grabbed the end of the sheet covering the head, “Prepare yourselves—this may not be a pleasant sight.”

Maria closes her eyes and grabs Henry’s arm for support as the Mortician slowly draws the sheet back uncovering the face of the Corpse.

Henry just stares unblinking; Maria slowly opens her eyes, and when she sees the Corpse’s face she develops a glazed expression.

Maria looks at the Mortician and bluntly tells him, “That’s not Mike—where’s my Son?”

“Where’s our Son, Captain—what did you do with him?” Barked Henry in a demanding tone looking irate.

“Are you sure this isn’t your Son?” Asked the Mortician.

“Yes—I’m sure,” Henry bluntly replied; “Don’t you think we don’t know what our Son looks like—and that’s not him,” pointing at the Corpse in an irate stabbing motion.

“Are you absolutely sure that this isn’t your Son,” the Mortician firmly reiterated, “sometimes the shock of seeing a deceased love-one, people try to not believe it’s the love-one they’re looking at.”

“This man isn’t our Son, I tell you,” insisted Henry, “this man has dark brown hair. Our Son has orange-red hair and a red complexion, so, what have you done with him—where is he?”

“I don’t know,” replied the Mortician shrugging his shoulders, “he was the one we received from India and the paperwork listed him as Captain Michael Troff.”

“Well, you just find him,” barked Henry looking bilious.

“Yes Sir,” replied the Mortician in a weak voice.

Then Maria softly said to Henry, “Dear—Mike’s still alive—he’s still in India.” Henry looks at her, smiles and nods.

The next day, on his way to the Pentagon, Henry called General Snyder on his cell phone and informed him, he’ll be a couple of hours late, because he has to make a stop at Fort Belvoir.

A short time later, Henry entered Lieutenant Colonel Clark’s office at the 83rd EXR Battalion.

Colonel Clark met Henry at the door with a friendly greeting, “Come in General, this is a pleasant surprise and what can I do for you?”

“You won’t think it so pleasant after what I have to tell you,” replied Henry bluntly, as they walk to Colonel Clark’s desk.

“How so, and please have a seat,” returned Colonel Clark offering the chair in front of his desk to Henry, as he walks around his desk and seats himself.

After Henry has seated himself, and in a firm tone he calmly tells Clark what happened at the Morgue. “Colonel, will you kindly tell me where my Son’s remains are, because those in the Morgue are not his.”

Colonel Clark blinking is very surprised, “I don’t know—he should be there—I was informed that, Mike’s remains was being shipped directly from the Military Hospital, where he died in New Delhi, to Fort Belvoir.”

“Well, the remains we saw were not Mike’s,” retorted Henry gruffly, “So, I suggest that you do a trace and find out what went wrong.”

“Yes General,” said Colonel Clark in a calm voice.

Henry exhales and in a calm soft tone asked, “Are you sure it was Mike that died and not this other guy we saw—remember—we were told twice before he was dead and later found that to be not true.”

Colonel Clark staring at Henry with fixed eyes slowly mouths, “No, I’m not totally sure,” and then blinking, he firmly said, “the report, from UN Coalition Command in New Delhi, said Mike was wounded by a Sniper as he was returning from assisting another downed Pilot. He was Medevac’d to the Military Hospital and died the next day from that wound and those were the remains that were returned.”

“Well Colonel, either they got it wrong about Mike dying or the body’s got swapped,” remarked Henry, “all I know is—the remains in the Morgue are not Mike’s. So General—you’ve got a bit of legwork to do, and I strongly suggest that you make it a top priority. Either Mike is still alive or his remains are at some other Morgue.”

“Yes Sir,” said Colonel Clark in a solid voice, and after a brief pause the ends of his mouth curled up in a sarcastic grin and he remarked, “That Son of yours is like a Phoenix—bursting into flames and burning to ashes at the end of its life, and then later reborn from the ashes anew. First, Mike’s declared dead—like the Phoenix burning to ashes, and then he’s alive—like the Phoenix returning from the ashes.”

“Phoenix Burn—huh,” quip’s Henry thinking of the new campaign code name. “Well, I hope Mike’s alive like the Phoenix arising from its ashes.”

“Ye ah h,” drawled Colonel Clark, “So do I.”

“Well, I’ve got to run,” announced Henry looking at his watch, “you get right on that trace and keep me posted.”

“Yes Sir, I sure will, and right away,” replied Colonel Clark as they both got up.

Colonel Clark accompanied Henry to the door where they shook hands, after which Colonel Clark opens the door and Henry walks out.

The next morning, Colonel Clark visits the Morgue to see for himself that the remains are not that of Captain Mike Troff.

When the sheet was pulled back to uncover the head, Colonel Clark stood gazing bug-eyed at this corpse which defiantly wasn't Mike.

Coming out of the initial shock, Colonel Clark earnestly chirped, "That's not Troff!"

"That's what the General and his Wife said," piped the Mortician.

"Yeah, well, they're right," announced Colonel Clark, "I wanta' see the Death Certificate and transfer papers."

"They're in my office—please follow me Sir."

And the Mortician led Colonel Clark to his office where he produced both documents, and sure enough, Mike's name appeared on both.

Then Colonel Clark requested to see the Data Link and the Dog Tags.

When the Dog Tags were produced, they were Mike's and so was the Data Link.

This confused Colonel Clark, because this proves Mike is indeed deceased, but where is his body and who is that lying in the Morgue?

Then Colonel Clark asks the Mortician, "Do you have fingerprints of the Corpse?"

"Yes—it SOP, I'll get them," replied the Mortician nodding, and then he brought them up on his computer.

Colonel Clark views them and commands, "Do a search on a cross match and see who these belong too.

I'll wager these don't belong to Captain Troff."

The Mortician nods and initiates a search; within minutes a match is found and the identity of the Corpse in the Morgue is displayed.

The monitor displays the mug shot of the man lying in the Morgue as that of a Twenty-four year old Captain Howard Benson of Kensington Connecticut; he was assigned to UN Coalition EXR Battalion at Chandigarh.

Colonel Clark earnestly declares, "Well—now we know who's lying in the Morgue. Now where's Captain Troff's body?"

The Mortician shrugs and mouths, "Who knows—he can be anywhere."

"Well my first guess is to start at the Military Hospital in New Delhi," suggested Colonel Clark, "since that's where the mix-up originally occurred and I suggest you get right on it, and when you find out, you let me

know. I'll do some investigating on my own."

Then Colonel Clark picks up Mike's Dog Tags and Data Link informing the Mortician, "I'll take these since they don't belong to the man in the Morgue and Captain Troff is assigned to my unit."

Colonel Clark puts the Dog Tags and the Data Link into his pocket and walks out of the office saying, "You now got a lot of work to do--Good day Captain."

CHAPTER 11 -- Mixed Up, Mix Up.

When Colonel Clark got back to his office at the 83rd EXR Battalion, he tossed Mike's Dog Tags and Data Link on his desk.

Sitting down in his chair, Colonel Clark opens his desk drawer and removes Mike's 201 File, that he's been keeping, and lays it on his desktop alongside the Dog Tags, Data Link and DD201 Data Disk that he received from General Griggs.

Leaning back in his chair, Colonel Clark gazes intently at the items on the top of his desk and asks himself, "Well Mike—are you really dead this time or is this another false alarm? The evidence is quite convincing, but what happened to your body? It looks as if you and another guy had died at the same Hospital about the same time, and the wrong body got shipped here, so where's your body—where did you get shipped to?"

Leaning forward, Colonel Clark puts his hand on the 201 file and remarks, "I guess it's time to put you to rest," and turns to his computer terminal and starts typing, bringing up Mike's computer records; after entering some comments about the evidence and what he believes, Colonel Clark reclassifies the file as deceased and closes the file and exits.

Then Colonel Clark picks up the phone and call's General Henry Troff at the Pentagon; "Hello—this is Brigadier General Henry Troff speaking," said General Troff after picking up the phone.

"Good afternoon General Troff—this is Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark and I'm calling in regards to your request of keeping you informed as to the status of your Son, Mike."

"Have you located his remains?" Henry bluntly asked.

"No not at the present, but the Mortician is on it," replied Colonel Clark, "what I wanted to tell you is, I have Mike's Dog Tags and Data Link, so it appears he's actually dead this time and I just finished classifying him as deceased in the DOD (Department Of Defense) personal database."

There was a hushed silence from Henry's end, so Colonel Clark responded, "General—are you still there?"

"Yes Colonel—I'm sorry, but the news was painful, I was hoping with the wrong body in the Morgue, that Mike could still be alive," said a weak dispirited voice from Henry's end.

"I was also hoping the same thing, but when I was given his Dog Tags and Data Link I knew this time he's gone—I'll send you his Dog Tags and Data Link."

said. "Thank you Colonel—I really appreciate that," Henry earnestly

remains were shipped I'll let you know," Colonel Clark solemnly told Henry.

"Thank you and I'll inform my Wife tonight—She'll probably take it quite hard," said Henry, and then he notices a flashing light on another line and announces, "I gotta' cut this short—I've got another call waiting—I'll be waiting to hear from you—by now," and Henry terminates Clark's call and pushes the button with the flashing light and connects to the other line.

Colonel Clark hangs up, puts the 201 file and Data Disk back into his desk drawer and the Dog Tags and Data Link, he slid into his to top desk drawer until he can box them up to send to General Troff.

Two weeks into the new year, Mike is in a semi-private room again and is quite nervous about the Nurses addressing him as Sir; after all, he told them when he arrived that he was a Corporal and not a Captain, and for a while he was addressed as Corporal Troff, but now, for some unknown reason they're calling him Sir again.

When his lunch tray was removed a Nurse handed him a set of Dog Tags and a Data Link with, "I believe these belong to you—now you're well enough to wear them—we were holding them until you were off the monitoring equipment and IV's."

"Thank you," replied Mike sound grateful, taking the items from her.

"You're very welcome Captain Benson", replied the Nurse with a bright smile.

"What did you call me?" Mike asks with surprise, "My name is Mike Troff, like I've been called the past few days. I'm not some Captain Benson—whoever he is—I'm Corporal Mike Troff."

"But that's what's stamped on your Dog Tags and in your Data Link," the Nurse firmly declared.

Mike looks at the Dog Tags, and sure enough, Howard Benson along with his Id number and blood type is clearly stamped on the metal tags; Mike shakes his head and firmly tells her, "These are not mine," as he hands them back, "what did you do with mine and where's my DD201 Data Disk? My duffle bag and my gear are still in India, so how do I get them sent here?"

She looks at him in disbelief, and in a forceful voice refuses to receive them back, "Sorry Sir—can't do that—until you can prove otherwise you're to wear them as required by Military Regs. Your DD201 Data Disk is being

sent from the UN Coalition base in New Delhi, it should be here in a few days—they didn't mention anything about your Duffle bag and your gear."

"But, but, I'm not Benson," cried Mike trying to sound sincere; she just shook her head flatly telling him, "Sorry—can't—the Doctor will be in later—if you need anything just push your call button," with that she turned and walked out of Mike's room, leaving him watching her leave in stunned silence.

Holding the Dog Tags and Data Link in his hands, Mike doesn't know what to do; the only thing he knows for sure is, these are not his, and now wonders, "where are my Dog Tags and Data Link."

The more he ponders the more worried and upset he gets, because he can't get discharged in September with these Dog Tags and Data Link.

At Three o'clock the Doctor walks in and brings up, what supposed to be, Mike's medical records; after reviewing them, the Doctor turns and greets Mike, "Captain Benson, how are you doing today?"

"I'm not Captain Benson," Mike firmly declared, "I'm Corporal Mike Troff."

"You're not!" Exclaimed the Doctor looking surprise and very confused, so he goes to the computer and looks to see who's records are being displayed and they're those of Captain Howard Benson.

Pointing to the monitor with his hand, the Doctor solemnly declares, "The medical records I have here are that of Captain Howard Benson."

"Yeah, well, those are not my records," Mike firmly declared, and then he asked, "Is there a description of the Patient in the Medical records?"

The Doctor shakes his head with, "I'm afraid not."

"Ok then, bring up the Medical Records for Michael Anthony Troff, serial number US09999989253 and see what you get," requested Mike; the Doctor did as requested and Mike's medical records appeared, but in the status box was the word, 'DECEASED'.

The Doctor stared bug-eyed and after getting over a moment of shock, he announced, "I can't update these—these records are locked."

"Locked—but why?" Mike bluntly asked.

"Because, the Patient of these records is deceased," replied The Doctor looking aghast.

"I'm dead!" Exclaimed Mike blinking; the Doctor nods and corrects, "Michael Troff is dead, not you."

"I'm not Captain Benson," Mike very firmly declares again, and then says, "I'll bet it's Captain Benson who's deceased, not me—you've got the two of us mixed up."

Then Mike groans feeling hopeless, “Now what I’m going to do?”

The Doctor shrugs his shoulders and adds, “Well—I certainly can’t update these locked records without going through a whole lot of red tape, so you’ll just have to be Captain Benson.”

Mike shakes his head and stubbornly responds, “Not—I’m not going to pretend I’m this Benson guy, so you’ll just have to navigate through the red tape and get my Medical Records unlocked and ‘Deceased’ change to ‘Alive’ or whatever, because I’m not pretending to be Benson.”

Then with the Doctor looking grave, Mike reached over and opened the top drawer of his bedside stand, reached in and got the Dog Tags, the Data Link and handed them to the Doctor flatly telling him, “Here—these aren’t mine, so have them sent to wherever Captain Benson’s remains are—they’re his.”

The Doctor looks at them and hands them back to Mike firmly telling him, “I can’t do that—that’s illegal.”

Looking irate Mike takes the Dog Tags, the Data Link and puts them back into the drawer and slides it shut.

Then the Doctor brought Captain Benson’s records back up and updated it to Mike’s current medical condition.

When He had finished, the Doctor examined Mike’s wound and with a smile he informed Mike that he’s almost healed and next Monday he can start therapy to strengthen the arm and shoulder, and on Thursday the two stitches can be removed.

Mike thought, here we go again more pain and misery.

For the rest of that day Mike agonized over the fact that his records, at least his Medical Records, are locked and not updateable, but is his DD201 file also locked as well?

He’ll find out later tonight when everything quiets down.

Mike awoke at Two o’clock and listened for any activity from outside of his room.

With no sounds coming from outside of his room, Mike reaches for the computer terminal that the Doctor used to update Captain Benson’s medical records.

After swinging it around so he can use it, Mike looks at the logon screen; Mike thinks what could be the logon Id and password.

Remembering how easy it was to get on Government systems in the past, Mike thinks for a few minutes, wasting valuable time.

Then Mike gets an inspiration and whispers, “I can’t believe they would be so stupid to do this,” and enters, ‘Michael Anthony Troff’ as the

logon Id and his serial number as the password and pushes the enter key.

A few seconds later, Mike's DD201 records are displayed along with a menu at the top, but to Mike's disappointment, 'DECEASED' was in the status box and his file was locked.

Logging off, Mike swings the terminal back to where he found it and lays back down, feeling very depressed.

After agonizing over his fate, Mike gets another crazy idea and reaches over and opens the top drawer of his bedside stand and removes Benson's Dog Tags and Data Link.

Looking at them, he says to himself, "If I can't change the data in my records, then I'll make it so they can't update Captain Benson's records with my data."

Listening to make sure no one is coming, Mike reaches over and swings the computer terminal back to where he can use it.

With the logon screen waiting for an entry, Mike looks at the Dog Tags and sees Benson's full name and serial number.

Mike is grinning as he types the information on the screen; a few seconds later, Benson's DD201 records are displayed and his status box indicates, 'ACTIVE'.

Mike whispers, "Now Captain, let's see if I can change your status to 'DECEASED' and see what happens."

Mike erases the 'ACTIVE' word and retypes 'DECEASED' and hits the enter key, then a dialog box popped up asking for confirmation, Mike selected 'YES' and when the box disappeared, Mike couldn't do anything more, the records became locked, so Mike simply logged off.

Then Mike wondered what about the Data Link, so he inserted it into the slot on the side of the terminal, after a minute or so, a dialog box popped up asking for an Id and Password.

Mike enters Benson's full name and serial number and when he pushed enter the contents of the Data Link was displayed along with a detailed menu.

Initially the status box indicated, 'ACTIVE', but as Mike looked at it, it suddenly changed to 'DECEASED' and the Data Link was locked for updating.

When that happened, Mike exclaimed in a hushed voice, "Ah' ha' kinda' figured that would happen—the status trickles down, so by updating any set of records, it will update all the rest of em'."

After Mike logged off, he swung the terminal back to its original position, and then he lies down and closes his eyes; thinking tomorrow is going to be very interesting when the Doctor and Nurses try to update Captain Benson's medical records.

The next morning the Nurse assigned to Mike's care walks in with a cheery greeting, "Good morning Captain Benson—how do we feel today?"

As she walks over to the computer terminal, "Mike grumpily replies, "I'm not Captain Benson and I feel fine."

"Sure you are Sir," said the Nurse sarcastically as she enters Benson's name and serial number, but when the Medical Record came up, the status now displayed 'DECEASED' and the records were locked; she stared at it in disbelief and commented, "This can't be right—now what am' I going to do?"

"What can't be right?" Mike nonchalantly asked.

"I'll be back in a minute," said the Nurse in a concerned and worried tone, and briskly walked out of the room.

Several minutes later, the Nurse along with another Officer, a Captain Mansfield, tried to use the terminal without success, the Medical Record remained locked and no matter what he did the record remained locked with a status of 'DECEASED'.

Then in desperation he turns to Mike and requests, "May I have your Data Link Captain?"

But when Mike reached into the bedside stand to get it, Captain Mansfield bluntly asked, "Why aren't you wearing your Dog Tags and Data Link?"

"Because, like I've been trying to tell everyone for the last month," Mike gruffly explains, and then to get the point across he shouts, "I'M NOT CAPTAIN BENSON AND THESE AREN'T MINE—I'M CORPORAL MIKE TROFF," handing the Data Link to him.

Captain Mansfield and the Nurse glare at Mike as the Captain receives the Data Link.

Then Captain Mansfield inserts the Data Link into the slot on the terminal and enters Captain Benson's full name and serial number.

When the DD201 data window opens the status displays 'DECEASED' and the file is locked.

Captain Mansfield comments, "Well—it doesn't look as if this is going to work either, I guess we'll have to use his DD201 Data Disk, that should get us in, because that's a primary file."

Handing the Dog Tags and Data Link back to Mike he harshly warned, “I suggest you wear these—to not do so will get you into serious trouble, Captain.”

“Good,” barked Mike, “court-martial me—I welcome it, then the truth will come out and we can end this stupidly” and he puts the Dog Tags and Data Link back into the bedside stand.

Captain Mansfield scowling turns, and with the Nurse walks out of the room.

The next day, Captain Mansfield re-enters Mike’s room and in his hand was a five-inch square metal case.

Captain Mansfield said with a sarcastic grin, “Well, Captain Benson, this is your DD201 Data Disk we just received from India and should get us back into your records.”

Mike just looked at him with a deadpan expression, as Captain Mansfield removed the disk, inserted it in the tray on the side of the terminal and closed it.

But when Captain Mansfield entered Captain Benson’s full name and serial number all he got was, ‘INVALID USER ID OR SERIAL NUMBER’, in big red text; he retyped it and got the same message.

Looking at the terminal monitor slack-jawed, Captain Mansfield mumbled, “It should’ve worked—maybe this disk is defective or its someone else’s.”

Than Captain Mansfield looks closely at the thin metal case and sees its stenciled with, ‘DUPLICATE DD201’ and no other markings; “Of course,” Captain Mansfield calmly deducing, “this isn’t the original—it’s a duplicate—that’s why it doesn’t work.”

“Just wait a minute,” said Mike and he reaches into his bedside stand and removes a small notepad and pencil; after writing his full name and serial number on the page, he tears the page from the notepad and hands it to the Captain with, “Try this and see what you get.”

After looking at Mike skeptically, Captain Mansfield takes the page and enters the information, and to his amazement the screen refreshed with Mike’s DD201 file, the status was ‘ACTIVE’ and the record wasn’t locked.

Captain Mansfield mutters, “But how?”

“Because Sir—that’s my DD201—I’m Michael Troff not Howard Benson,” Mike firmly replied, “now will you believe me?”

Captain Mansfield just looks at him with a surprised expression, exclaiming, “I guess you are Corporal Troff—huh!”

“Yeah,” retorted Mike, and then he asked, as he handed Benson’s

Dog Tags and Data Link to Captain Mansfield, “Will you please take these, and how do I get another set for me?”

“You need to contact S1 and tell them you need to replace your lost Dog Tags and Data Link,” explained Captain Mansfield taking Captain Benson’s Dog Tags and Data Link, “and if I were you—I’d do it as soon as possible.”

“I will—this very afternoon,” Mike assured him with a nod.

After Captain Mansfield walked out, Mike got on the phone and contacted S1 and requested a new set of Dog Tags and a new Data Link.

After spending the better part of two hours trying to explain how the Dog Tags and Data Link were lost, and trying to obtain replacements, he was finally told he needed to come to S1 to obtain them; after hanging up the phone, Mike looking downcast rolled his eyes and laid back into his pillow.

At ten-o’clock Thursday morning, the Doctor with a Nurse walked into Mike’s room carrying a sealed blue plastic tray, and with a cheery greeting, he asked, “How are we today Corporal Troff? I think it’s time to take those stitches out—don’t you think?”

His cheery words weren’t so cheery, they filled Mike with dread at the prospect of having to endure another round of pain, as he slowly nods, but at least, they are now finally addressing him properly.

The Doctor carefully removes the dressing from Mike’s shoulder and examines the stitched wound, which was healing quite nicely.

Mike balefully eyed the plastic tray as the plastic film seal was removed exposing the instruments inside.

Next came those false words as the doctor picks up the tweezers and snipers and approaches the first stitch, “Now just relax, this won’t hurt-a-bit—it’ll be over in a few minutes, and then you can get some rest.”

“Yeah, sure—where have I heard that before?” Mike says to himself as he closes his eyes and prepares for that painful first tug.

Five painful minutes later, Mike with a red sweaty face, and the Doctor having finished, tells the Nurse to redress the shoulder.

As she wraps Mike’s shoulder wound, the Doctor updates Mike’s Medical Record on his DD201 Data Disk, because his other records were still locked.

Then as the Doctor got ready to leave, he informed Mike that he’ll be moved to the Rehab Unit on Friday to start his rehabilitation on Monday to get that shoulder strong and working again.

At One o'clock, Mike requested to be taken to S1 to try and get replacement Dog Tags and a new Data Link.

Sitting in a wheelchair wearing a hospital scrub uniform, his arm in a sling and holding his DD201 Data Disk in its metal container with his other hand, he is wheeled out to a waiting van and driven over to NATO Military Headquarters.

In S1, Mike told the Sergeant sitting at a desk that he needs new Dog Tags and a New Data link, because his are missing.

The Sergeant looks at him with a skepticism and sharply asked, "Just how did your Dog Tags and Data link get lost—you know, you're supposed to wear em' night and day?"

Mike shrugged his good shoulder with, "Don't know Serge. All I know is, I had em' on when I got shot, but when I awoke later in the Hospital they were gone."

"And just where did you get shot?"

"India," Mike shot back.

"India," repeated the Sergeant with a quizzical expression; Mike nods.

"Ok Solder—Name, rank and serial number," barked the Sergeant.

Mike gave him the requested information, but when it was entered the file was locked with a status of, 'DECEASED'!

The Sergeant stared at the monitor, and then thinking this guy is trying to pull something sternly demanded, "Your real name, rank and serial number and no more funny business."

Rather than to try and explain, Mike simply handed the Sergeant his DD201 Data Disk with a simple reply, "Here try this."

"What's this?" Asked the Sergeant taking the Data Disk.

"This is my DD201 Data Disk from my last unit," explained Mike, "hope this helps, and please don't screw it up—that's my only one."

When the Sergeant inserted the Data Disk into his work terminal and found these files were active, he used the phone and called his Section Officer.

Twenty minutes later, an Air Force Captain walked up, and when he saw the discrepancy, he figured the Data Disk is an illegal copy and demanded Mike to show him proof.

Mike, temporary at a loss as what to do, thought of something that will convince them of his identity.

After not coming up with a response for a minute or two, the Captain was about to call Base Security when Mike calmly suggested, "How about checking my fingerprints with those on record in the locked file, if you

can still access them.”

So, after the Captain got administrative rights, he was able to get the menus to work and brought up the profile page.

With the fingerprints displayed, the Captain clicked on a button labeled, ‘VERIFY’ and said, “Ok Sergeant, let’s check him.”

The Sergeant nods and looks at Mike sitting in the wheelchair and asks, “Can you stand?” Mike nods and gets up.

Then pointing to the counter on one side of the room, the Sergeant orders, “Over there Solder.”

Mike walks over to where he’s pointing, and there on the counter top was an Id station; he placed his good hand on the hand and finger scanner, and after the bright blue bar of light had traveled the length of his hand and fingers the Captain announced, “It’s a match—he’s in fact Captain Mike Troff,” to everyone’s surprise.

Then Mike shook his head exclaiming, “That’s not correct—I’m a Corporal like it’s on my Data Disk—I never went to OCS!”

“Ok—let’s check his prints against his Data Disk,” declared the Captain.

So, they ran the scan a second time against what’s on the Data Disk and it also came back as a match.

After a bit of head scratching, the Captain assumed it was due to corrupt data, and that was the reason for the incorrect rank and status; he therefore assumed that a lot of other information could also be false.

So then using his authority as Administrator, he erased the entire file and reconstituted it with the Data Disk.

After that was done, the Captain authorized the Sergeant to make a new Data Link and a document authorizing the Dog Tags.

Mike was then told, he would have to go to another building to have the Dog Tags made.

Now with his new Data Link hanging around his neck and holding the document, he was told the DD201 Data Disk will be returned once he leaves for his new assignment; Mike is wheeled back out to the van.

Once inside the van, Mike is taken to the building listed on the document and is wheeled inside, forty-five minutes later, with his new Dog Tags, Mike is on his way back to the Base Hospital.

Just before noon on Friday, Mike is taken to another floor of the hospital and wheeled into an empty four-bed ward.

This room had a single bathroom, but each bed had its own small TV that was mounted on a movable arm with headphones, for his own private

enjoyment.

Each bed also had its own wall locker that was more like a closet with lots of large drawers than like a wall locker.

When the Nurse came to get Mike to take him to the dining hall, he was still in his hospital gown and she said, “If you want to eat—I suggest you change into your Fatigue uniform.”

“What Fatigue uniform—I don’t have one,” replied Mike with a shrug.

“What do you mean?” The Nurse asked, “Where’s your uniforms and other stuff?”

“My stuff never arrived from my unit in India.”

“You don’t have any clothes—no uniforms!” The Nurse exclaimed; Mike shook his head and softly said, “Nope.”

“This will never do,” the Nurse declared, “I’ll go and see if something can be done—you can’t go to therapy in a hospital gown,” and she briskly walked out of the room.

An hour later, and the Nurse still hasn’t returned to take Mike to the dining hall, and he’s getting mighty hungry.

Another fifteen minutes pass and still no one has come, and by now, Mike is thinking the dining hall must be getting close to closing.

After another ten minutes has passed, Mike is about ready to go and find something to eat when in walks the Nurse with a tray full of food and with her is a Lieutenant.

When the Nurse placed the tray on the bed tray table she said apologizing, “Sorry for taking so long, but I had to make a special order for you—I’ll give you a set of hospital scrubs to wear for dinner and the Lieutenant has something he wants to discuss with you.”

Mike looks at the Lieutenant as he begins, “The Nurse informs me that you have no uniforms—is that correct?”

“Yes Sir—my unit was supposed to ship my belongings to the hospital in India where I was taken after being shot. I was informed that I will be assigned to a new unit when I’m released” Mike earnestly explained.

“I see,” said the Lieutenant looking impassive, “and you haven’t received anything as yet—is that correct?” Mike nods.

“I’ll see if I can do some searching and see if I can track where your gear wound up,” the Lieutenant announced raising a forefinger, “it’ll probably take some time, so, in the meantime you’ll have to wear hospital scrubs to the therapy sessions,” giving Mike a forced sarcastic grin.

The following Monday, Mike began his therapy, and for the rest of January and all of February, Mike took therapy and his shoulder and arm were getting stronger and stronger, but still no word as to where his uniforms are.

Then on the first day of March, a Wednesday, his therapy was completed the Lieutenant enters the room and walks over to Mike's bed and informs him, "Your gear was shipped from your last unit, which by the way listed you as MIA, to NATO Command Quartermaster, and according to them, they never received anything. On a side note, I learned you had been assigned to an Indian Special Ops Army unit as a special operative and this was done on orders from the Pentagon—they now list you as Deceased. I informed them that you are alive, and are currently going through therapy in a NATO Hospital in Ramstein Germany. Apparently, your gear is lost, so I went ahead and had you reauthorized to be issued new uniforms. Tomorrow you'll be taken to the Quartermaster Supply Building to get issued the new uniforms. Here's the forms you'll need, so don't lose them," he hands the documents to Mike.

Later that day Mike was informed that he was leaving and going back to the States; he was being discharged from the Hospital and was being reassigned to a new Unit.

Several days later, Mike was taken to the Quartermaster Supply Building and was issued new uniforms.

CHAPTER 12 -- Returning from the War.

On the first Friday morning in March, the Nurse handed Mike his orders of redeployment to Fort Rucker along with an airline ticket to Dothan Alabama with a stopover at Ronald Reagan Airport and a white envelope, then she informs him, “On Monday you will be released—you’ve completed your therapy. At that time you’ll be given your Hospital Discharge papers and instructions on how to continue with strengthening and care of that shoulder for the next two months, so if I were you, I’d start packing your things and do any necessary laundry.”

So, for the rest of the day, Mike started packing and on Saturday he washed his dirty uniforms; by Sunday evening he was ready to leave.

Early Monday morning the Nurse walked in and handed Mike his Hospital Discharge documents and several pages of instructions on how to care for his shoulder, and then she asked, “Do you have any questions?”

“Yeah—where do I go to sign out and catch a ride to the airport?”

“The Administration Desk on the main floor,” the Nurse replied, “you can request a ride to the air terminal there.”

“Thanks,” Mike politely told her.

After the Nurse had walked out, Mike looked around one last time, to be sure he’d hadn’t forgotten anything, and then grabbed the only thing he owned, the new duffle bag stuffed with new uniforms and walked out of the room for the last time.

On the main floor, Mike followed the signs to the Administration Desk and asked the lady behind the counter that he’s here to sign out and hands her his Hospital Discharge paper.

Upon receiving them, she goes to a nearby terminal and enters Mike’s information, and then she requests Mike’s Data Link which he has around his neck behind his class ‘A’ uniform shirt with black necktie.

Mike looks at her with a sheepish expression and mildly informs her, pointing to his tie, “It’s under this—do you really need it?”

“Yes—sorry,” she told him looking sincere, “the Nurse who discharged you should’ve told you.”

So unwillingly, Mike undone his necktie, unbuttoned the neck collar and removed the chain with the Data Link, he then removed the Data Link from the chain and handed it to her.

After receiving it, she inserts into her terminal, and then she asks for Mike’s Data Disk.

Removing the thin metal box containing the disk, from its pocket on the outside of his duffle bag, Mike hands it to her as well.

When the Lady had finished, she handed both items back to Mike, after returning the Data Link to its chain and putting it back inside his shirt, he puts the Data Disk box back into the pocket on the side of his duffle bag.

When Mike had finished retying his necktie, the Lady solemnly said, “I’m so sorry about that, but I had no choice—it’s required procedure.”

“That’s Ok—don’t feel bad,” said Mike warmly with a nod; she smiled back and asked, “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes, as a matter-of-fact there is,” replied Mike, “I need a lift to the airport,” she nods and picks up the phone. A few minutes later she hangs up and informs Mike, “A Military car will be by shortly—you can wait over there,” pointing to a lounge.

Mike walks over to the lounge and settles down to wait, and while he’s waiting, Mike opens the envelope and inside he finds a new Military Id and several hundred dollars in one hundred dollar bills and twenty-dollar bills.

Mike quickly inserts the envelope into his inside uniform coat pocket, and then in walks an Airman First Class and up to the Administration Desk; he speaks to the Lady and she points to Mike.

The Airman comes over to Mike and firmly asks, “You Corporal Mike Troff?”

Mike looks down at his clearly visible nametag and sarcastically replies, “That’s what my name tag reads—and yes, I’m Corporal Mike Troff.”

The Airman looking miffed grunted, “Well, don’t sit there—let’s go if ya’ don’t want to miss your flight.”

Mike gives him a bilious expression, gets up and follows the Airman outside to the waiting car.

After arriving at the commercial airport terminal, the same one Mike’s Brother Jeff flew out of to go home for Christmas two years ago; Mike enters the terminal and heads to the ticket counter to check in.

After going through a rigorous security check, after all, there’s a war going on and the Islamic alliance has agents all throughout the world, Mike walks up to the check in counter and get his duffle bag checked in.

After learning his flight won’t be boarding for another four hours, Mike decides to check this place out, hoping to locate a restaurant or a vending area. Mike discovered an area like a mall with lots of small shops, including a restaurant, so he enters and waits to be seated.

After waiting for several minutes, a nice Lady escorts him to a small two-place table off to one side and hands him a menu informing him, “Your Waitress will be with you shortly.”

Several minutes later, the Waitress arrives with a glass and a large glass pitcher filled with ice water; she places the glass down in front of Mike and fills it from the pitcher.

When she had finished, she takes out her order pad, and with pencil in hand she inquires, “Have you decided yet?”

Mike replied, “Yeah—I’ll have the Hot Turkey Sandwich.”

“What will you have to drink?” The Waitress asked.

“How about a hot cup of tea,” Mike replies with a grin, “it’s been years since I had one—could you include a bit of Honey.” She nods and walks away leaving Mike to fantasize on the Hot Turkey Sandwich, for it’s been years since he’s had one of those as well.

About twenty minutes later, his order arrived; a huge hot platter with two large German slices of brown whole wheat bread with three large slices of white Turkey meat covered with golden Turkey gravy.

Next to the slices of bread was a huge scoop of mashed potatoes covered with the same gravy all steaming hot.

Then the Waitress placed a cup and saucer next to the plate, and from a ceramic teapot she filled the cup with steaming tea, and then she laid several sealed packets of honey on the table next to the saucer and finally said with a friendly smile, “Please enjoy your meal sir, and if there’s anything you need please let me know.”

Mike smiles back nodding, and then she walks over to another customer.

For the next thirty minutes, Mike was in heaven; this was the most delicious meal he’s had in ages.

Later, after paying for the meal, Mike sees he’s still has three hours to kill before his plane starts loading, so he starts exploring some of the shops.

In one shop which was quite large, Mike discovered wallets; his was left in his Helicopter when he got out to assist the down Pilot and was subsequently shot by the sniper.

Mike had stashed it in a small hidden compartment under his seat; nobody wouldn’t know to look there unless that person was a maintenance tech.

So, Mike needs a new one and he bought it; he also bought two pair of jeans, two shirts, some white socks and a pair of athletic boots (High top

sneakers).

Finally after buying a travel bag, Mike heads back to the lounge area looking for a restroom, finding one, Mike gets the wallet and puts it into his pocket and goes into a stall to have a nature call.

While still in the stall, Mike gets the wallet out of his pocket, takes the envelop from his coat pocket and puts the money and Military Id into the wallet.

After finishing, Mike flushes, exits the stall, grabs his shopping and travel bags and walks over to the lounge.

In the lounge, Mike transfers the clothes and the shoes from the shopping bag into his travel bag, and then after disposing of the empty shopping bag he walks over to the ticket counter and checks them in.

After walking back to the lounge, Mike looks at the clock and sees he's still has almost two hours wait, so he walks over to the windows facing the runways.

Looking out of the window, Mike sees huge Military Aircraft parked on the tarmac, next to several huge hangers, and wonders what kind of planes these are.

An Air Force Captain steps up next to Mike and casually asks, "What ya' think of the old B52s?"

"They're the biggest airplanes I've ever seen---Sir," returned an amazed Mike turning his head to look where the words came from.

"Yeah—that they are," replied the Captain, "and they're bigger than the B80, and I flew em' both. Did you know those planes are over a hundred years old and they're still flying—a hardy old bunch of girls—they don't know when to retire."

"So—why are you still flying em' if they're so old and out dated?" Asked Mike with a quizzical expression.

"Ha, ha, ha—they aren't that out dated," replied the Captain chuckling, "they've been updated with all of the latest instrumentation, beside, they're the only plane in our inventory that can carry our MOAB's, and they can haul one of those mothers."

Mike just looked at him with that same quizzical expression.

"So, Corporal, where are you headed?"

"Back to the States--Fort Rucker, Sir," replied Mike.

"I see—you been in Germany a while?" The Captain asked.

"Naaa, just got out of the Hospital," said Mike, "got myself shot in India—that's where I was the last two years."

"One of our frontline heroes," quipped the Captain grinning.

Mike looks at him expressionless.

Then they watch an aircraft tug come out of one of the huge hanger buildings pulling two humongous bombs on trailers.

Mike stared in disbelief, because he has never seen such humongous bombs.

Mike turns and choking sputters, “Sir—those wouldn’t be Nukes?”

“Nope—those are MOAB’s—the closest thing we have next to one,” replied the Captain, “the blast radius is about a mile and the shock wave is about two to three miles, it even has a mushroom cloud would you believe.”

Mike gulps looking aghast, and then he remarks, “A few of those should bring a quick end to this war—huh!”

The Captain giggling looks at him and shakes his head, “Haven’t yet. We’ve been dropping those things all over the middle-east and there isn’t much left. It only drives them under ground. What people that survive are flocking to Europe and north into the Caucuses and Russia.”

Mike looks at him blinking, and then he sees a vehicle drive up and a group of men jump out and walk over to where several men are carefully loading the humongous bombs into the belly of two B52s.

Then Mike thinks he recognizes one of the men in the blue flight suits, and looking ecstatic, Mike lively chirps, “That guy looks just like my Brother Jeff—but, he’s supposed to be flying B80s not B52s.”

The Captain looks surprised and asked, “Your Brother wouldn’t be Captain Jeff Troff?”

Mike stares blinking and nods, and then he asks, “You know Jeff?”

“Yeah—sure do,” replied the Captain, “He’s my roommate.”

“Roommate!” Exclaimed Mike looking agog, “What’s your name?”

“I’m Gene Hoelzer,” replied the Captain, “what’s yours?”

“I’m Mike—Mike Troff.”

“Nice to meet you Mike,” Captain Hoelzer calmly said offering his hand, “I’ll tell Jeff that I ran into you here, when I get a chance to see him, and tell him you’re on your way back to the US.”

“Awesome—I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear that,” said Mike in a cheery tone shaking the Captain’s hand, “so, he’s a Captain now—the last time I saw him he was only a 1st Lieutenant—how about that.”

Captain Hoelzer smiles, and then Mike looks at the clock and sees it’s about time for his plane to start boarding, so he tells Captain Hoelzer, “My plane is about to start boarding—you have a good day and tell Jeff I said hi.”

“I will,” announced Captain Hoelzer as Mike walks away to the boarding gate.

When Mike approached the boarding ramp to the Airplane, there already was a line of people and a few Soldiers and Airmen waiting to board.

When Mike's turn came, he handed his boarding pass to the Stewardess; she takes it and informs Mike that his seat is an aisle seat in the economy section and returns his boarding pass.

Mike gave her a nod and proceeds into the Airplane.

Once inside, Mike was directed by a Stewardess to his section and seat number.

Mike locates his seat with the other two seats already filled with Officers; the closest to Mike's seat is an Army Captain and the other an Air Force First Lieutenant.

Mike takes a deep breath thinking, "Swell—this is going to be a long interesting flight," while taking his coat off and putting it along with his cap in the overhead compartment, then he sits down and buckles his seatbelt.

As Mike sits there he glances over to his two traveling companions and give them a friendly smile, they smiled back with a short quick dip-of-the-chin.

No more had they reached their cruising altitude when the two Officers started visiting and soon they were talking combat flying; Mike glanced up and rolled his eyes thinking, "Gees—I bet they're Pilots no less—this is just ducky."

About two hours later and well out over the Atlantic, Mike getting a little bored listening to their war stories figures he'll take a nap, hoping when he wakes up they will be in the States and nearing his first destination.

Mike was just about to tilt his seat back when the Captain turned and offered his hand introducing himself, "I'm Captain Keith Deniger and that's," pointing to the other officer, "Captain Rich Jorgenson. We're both heading back from India to take advance flight training—and you are?"

"I'm Corporal Mike Troff and I'm also returning from India—by way of Germany where I spent the last two and a half months in the Hospital—I'm not going to be taking advanced flight, though," Mike sarcastically adds giggling while shaking their hands; they both look at him scowling, the sarcastic remark didn't go over very well.

When Mike saw that his little remark wasn't well received, he apologized, "Sorry Sir—didn't mean any disrespect, but after seeing all of the bad flying over there—especially by our EXR Pilots—well—that's partly how I got shot, because of a poorly trained Pilot who didn't fly around a PL9 cloud," both Pilots looked perplexed.

"I guess I don't quite understand how poor Piloting got you wounded?" Captain Deniger portentously asked.

"Like I just told you," Mike heatedly replied, "When some poorly trained EXR Pilot didn't know how to maneuver around a PL9 cloud—flew through the damn thing and went down—so I went and tried to rescue him and got myself shot."

"Thank you for your sacrifice in trying to help a downed Pilot," said an appreciative Captain Deniger in a somber voice.

"You're welcome Sir," Mike politely replied, and then adds with a weak smile, "I'm sure glad you guys are getting advance flight training—that's going to save a whole lot of lives in the future, and besides, you deserve every advantaged you can get."

"Thank you and we agree," said Captain Deniger with a somber smile, "but, what puzzles me is—how do you know what a PL9 is, and how do you know that it was poor flying—maybe he just couldn't avoid it."

Mike gave him a solid gaze and said shaking his head, "Everybody knows what a PL9 is, and that stupid Pilot could've easily maneuvered around it, but instead flew right into it like he was in a trance."

"What makes you think he could've maneuvered around it?" Argued Captain Deniger, "Maybe he couldn't—how would you know if he could or couldn't—you're no Pilot."

"Because the guy was flying an EXR2 and going slow enough," said Mike in rebuttal, "he had plenty of maneuvering room to avoid the dangerous cloud, but he chose to fly through the damn thing, and you're right, I'm no Pilot so I have no right to judge."

"You seem to know quite a lot about Helicopters, especially the EXR2," remarked Captain Deniger looking quizzical.

"Among other things, I happen to have an EXR2 Maintenance MOS," said Mike with a slight grin, and then Mike remarked, "So, you guys are Pilots—huh?"

They both nod with Captain Deniger offering, "I fly a EXR2 Helicopter and Captain Jorgenson here is a F30 Pilot, so where are you headed?"

"Fort Rucker," replied Mike, "this will be my last assignment—only have another six months left to serve before I get my discharge—so, how long do you guys have?"

Captain Deniger smiles and shakes his head and calmly informing, "For us it isn't that easy—you see, we don't get a predetermined date when we get out—there's more to it," Mike looks at him with a confused expression.

Then Captain Deniger explains further, “You see, Officers don’t enlist, at least some of them don’t, we get what’s referred to as a commission and it’s for life, unless of course it’s withdrawn. There’s only two ways to get out and they are, to submit a written letter of resignation or to retire at seventy.”

“Or three, to die,” Mike adds with a sarcastic grin.

“Sorry, that doesn’t get you out, only off the active duty roster,” Captain Deniger responds slowly shaking his head, “death in office only gets you a military funeral with all the honors.”

Mike looking shocked thinks, “Boy—I’m sure glad I didn’t go to OCS.”

Then Mike asked, “If you two are Fighter Pilots, then you have call signs--my I ask what they are?”

There was a slight hesitation, and with Mike patiently looking on, Captain Deniger looks over to Captain Jorgenson with a quizzical expression to which Captain Jorgenson shrugs his shoulders.

Turning back to Mike Captain Deniger responds, “Normally we don’t disclose our call signs to non-Pilots, but for you my call sign is Griffin.”

“And mine is Sandman,” piped Captain Jorgenson; upon hearing this, Mike suddenly became slack-jawed.

Here sat two of the Pilots, Mike had encountered in the skies over India; he even taught Captain Deniger advanced flight.

Now here they sat, Griffin and Sandman, right next to him; now Mike desperately wanted to tell them his call, but he couldn’t for a very good reason.

So with a big smile, Mike offered his hand as a substitute for not revealing his call, “I’m very proud to have met you Sir—this really means a lot to me to shake your hand Griffin, and your hand Sandman,” and they firmly shake with the two Officers smiling.

Then the seatbelt light came on with a dinging bell; a minute or so later the Pilots voice came out of the PA announcing, “We’ll be arriving at Ronald Reagan International Airport in a few minutes—I hope you all had a pleasant flight.”

So Mike and the two Officers buckled up and got ready for the landing.

Twenty-five minutes later, Mike walks down the arrival ramp and heads for the ticket window to find out how long it will be before his flight to Dothan Alabama takes off; after checking in, Mike learns he has five hours before his flight starts boarding.

With five hours to kill, Mike looks for a USO lounge to cleanup, grab a snack, and maybe some TV to see what's on the news—he's mostly interested in learning how the war is going, especially in India.

Finally locating the USO lounge, Mike enters and looks for a restroom to take care of nature's business and to freshen up a bit.

Five minutes later, Mike walks out of the restroom and into a small vending room where he finds a couple of cold food machines filled with sandwiches, burgers, deserts, a pop machine and a hot coffee machine with hot chocolate.

There are two microwaves on a counter with several drawers below; there are also two round tall tables at which to stand and eat.

Mike selects two cheeseburgers from the machine and pops them into one of the microwaves, and while they're being heated, he gets a hot cup of chocolate from the coffee machine.

For the next several minutes, Mike stands at one of the tables and enjoys the cheeseburgers and hot chocolate.

Finally, after disposing of the empty cup and wrappers, Mike leaves the vending room and sits down on a couch in front of a large screen TV.

For the next several hours, Mike watches the sitcoms on the TV until the news came on.

The news began with images and videos from the war in the Middle East; it showed combat footage of a big campaign pushing deep into Jordan and Arabia.

Another segment showed images and videos of a NATO push across the Sinai towards Egypt.

Mike is a bit anxious to know what's happening in India and softly whispers, "What about India—what's happening over there?"

About the time, Mike was about ready to burst, the news anchor said, "Now for an update from New Delhi with Correspondent Don Morgan."

The scene changes to a standing man holding a microphone and he begins to speak, "Since the beginning of Operation Phoenix Burn—which should've been called Pegasus Rush, that the UN Coalition Forces have taken Rawalpindi in North Pakistan and are pushing on to Islamabad. In the center of Pakistan, I just learned Lahore has also fallen and there is heavy fighting at both Falisalabad and Karachi."

When Mike heard the words Pegasus Rush, his heart skipped a beat or two, and then the Correspondent explains his reason for calling the operation a different name, "The reason I think the operation should be called

Pegasus Rush is because of a very brave and skillful EXR Fighter Pilot whose call sign is Pegasus. I'm told he was a Quad Ace, —if there is such a level, --which I guess there must be. He lost his life on the ground while assisting a fellow Pilot who was downed near Kathlaur by the Ravi River. According to US Army sources at the UN Coalition Military Base in Nagpur, Pegasus was attached to a Special Ops Indian Army unit under the Command of Colonel Waraich and was assigned to the 660th EXR Tactical Response Company, which is part of the new 83rd EXR Battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Clark located at Fort Belvoir. I also learned he might be eligible for the Medal of Honor. That's all I have at this time—this is Don Morgan of the World News Network, and back to you Jim.”

With flushed face, Mike sat sweating in horror after hearing this.

Mike shockingly thinks, “Medal of Honor—Dead—Quad Ace—660th EXR Tactical Response Company—83rd EXR Battalion at Fort Belvoir! That's just a short distance from here, and Larry Clark is my CO!”

Mike sits there in a shocked stupor and not believing that it was him, that they were talking about.

Shaking his head, Mike said to himself, “It can't be me—it must be that other guy who died—they've got us mixed up. I didn't do anything to earn the Medal of Honor, and Clark is now my CO—this is totally crazy—my CO is--was Captain Demaray, but he did mention Colonel Waraich--I'm so totally confused...”

Then out of sheer frustration and forgetting where he is at, blurts loudly, “I'M NOT DEAD!”

Everyone sitting in the room looks at Mike; Mike realizes what he did and put his hand to his mouth, and then says, “Sorry—I didn't mean me—I meant the guy in the news—sorry,” he now has a very red face and is feeling embarrassed.

Mike slides down in the couch trying to disappear and quietly watches TV until it's almost time for his flight to start boarding.

Then he gets up and quickly walks out of the lounge, glad to be out of there, and heads for the boarding lounge to wait for the final minutes to pass.

After waiting the allotted time, Mike gets up and walks to the boarding ramp, hands his pass to the stewardess, and after it was approved he is allowed to continue.

Once in the Airplane, Mike looked for his seat and to his delight, he got the window seat; so now he can watch them take off, land, along with

enjoying seeing the cloud tops, and if he's really lucky, see some terrain below.

Forty minutes or so later, they're at cruising altitude, headed for Dothan Alabama and Fort Rucker, Mike's old maintenance school.

CHAPTER 13 -- Fort Rucker Redux.

About forty minutes or so later, Mike's plane was nearing Dothan Municipal Airport and ten minutes after that, was in the airport traffic area and getting ready for an approach to the runway.

It was nearly six thirty, when the plane landed and taxied up to the terminal building.

Fifteen minutes later, with the Sun just having set on this chilly March day, Mike exited the Airplane and stepped down the portable stairs, that was positioned next to the door.

Mike walked to the terminal, went inside and headed to the baggage claim area where he waited for his bags to arrive.

Soon baggage started to arrive through a portal covered by strips of material and down a conveyer to the waiting owners.

As soon as Mike's duffle bag and civilian bag arrive, he grabs them, heads to the front of the terminal and out the main doors.

Once outside, Mike hails a nearby Taxi; the Taxi pulls up and the driver gets out to stow Mike's baggage into the trunk.

As the Taxi Driver returns to the driver's seat, Mike gets in on the passenger side and tells the Driver he needs to go to Fort Rucker.

As the Taxi Driver drives out of the airport and starts for Fort Rucker he asks, "Where about in Rucker are we going? It's a big place ya' know."

"The 120th Headquarters Company—if you know where that is," Mike tells him.

"Yep, I know where that's at," replied the Taxi Driver, and then he asked, "You be goin' to the Helicopter School?"

"Naaa—just returned from overseas and have six months left to serve, and then I'll be getting out and heading back to California and family," replied Mike with a sound of joyful anticipation in his voice.

"Ya' seen any action?" the Taxi Driver asked, taking his eyes from the road and glancing over to Mike; Mike nods.

"Was it really bad like we see on the TV news?" Asked the Taxi Driver probing.

"It was bad," Mike returned remembering Sheila and getting shot twice; a tear formed in his eye and shaking his head rebuffed, "I don't want to talk about it—so, just drop it—Ok?"

"Ya' sure, anything you say," said the Taxi Driver.

So for the next several minutes they quietly drive to Fort Rucker.

Twenty minutes later, the Taxi pulls up in front of the 120th Headquarters building and stops.

Mike and the Taxi Driver get out, the Taxi Driver opens the trunk and extracts Mike's bags and sets them on the pavement next to Mike and tells him how much is owed for the ride.

Mike gives him the money and as he picks up his bags, the Taxi Driver goes around and gets into his Taxi and drives away.

Standing on the pavement, Mike looks across the street and sees the huge hangars and remembers when he was here last.

Turning his head, Mike looks at the huge four story concrete building in front of him and next to a large blacktop parking lot and assembly area.

Mike steps up onto the sidewalk and walks up to his huge four story building, which has a sign above its main entrance which read, '120th HEADQUARTERS SUPPORT COMPANY'.

As Mike walks up to the big double doors, he's hoping the layout of this place is the same as the other building he was in; the last time he was here.

Mike enters the building through those two sets of big double doors and stands in a long wide hallway lit by overhead florescent lights, and yes, this building's layout is the same.

A group of four men came walking down the long hall, talking amongst each other, and then they went into one of the many rooms along the hallway.

Across from where Mike entered the building two men came out of another set of large double doors, which Mike knew to be the Mess Hall.

Mike also knew the Orderly Room was two doors to his right, so he heads in that direction.

Carrying his bags, Mike enters the Orderly Room and walks up to the first desk where a Buck Sergeant was typing on a computer terminal.

Since it's after hours, Mike knew this guy is on CQ duty.

After setting his bags down, Mike removes his DD201 Data Disk and his orders and steps up to the desk.

When the Buck Sergeant sees Mike, he inquires, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," replied Mike in a calm firm voice, "I've just arrived and checking in."

"Ok—but you know it's after hours and everyone has left," explained the Buck Sergeant, "I can't assign you to a Platoon—you'll have to wait until morning. I'll get you a bunk in one of the empty rooms on the 1st

floor.”

“Ok—do you need these?” Mike asked offering the DD201 Data Disk and his orders.

“No, save em’ for tomorrow,” replied the Buck Sergeant, “you’ll need em’ then, but you need to sign in here,” shoving a ring binder with a sign in sheet in Mike’s direction.

Mike signs in, and then the Buck Sergeant slides a plastic card to him explaining, “Here’s a guest meal card—you’ll need it to eat in the Mess Hall in the morning—return it when you get assigned your own card.”

Then he looks at the clock and announces, “The Mess Hall just closed, but you can find something to eat in the snack room in the basement. Now I’ll get someone in supply to get you some bedding.”

The Buck Sergeant picks up the phone and begins talking, a couple of minutes later, he hangs up and directs, “Follow me, I’ll take you to the supply room to get your bedding, and then show you to your room,” he gets up and as he does so, Mike returns the Data Disk to the pocket on his duffle bag; grabbing both bags, Mike follows the Buck Sergeant.

The Buck Sergeant leads Mike down the central staircase to the basement, which is filled with loud cacophonous mixture of speech, music and emanating from the laundry room, machine noises.

After arriving at the supply room, it’s located in the same room as the other building that Mike was in, the last time he was at Fort Rucker.

The bedding was waiting in a neatly stacked pile on the top of the counter; after signing for it, Mike slung the duffle bag over his shoulder, grabbed the pile of bedding and while carefully cradling the bedding in one arm, he grabs his other bag with his other hand and follows the Buck Sergeant.

After climbing two flights of stairs to the first floor, the Buck Sergeant leads Mike down the hall to where the NCO rooms are located, opens the door to one and motions for Mike to enter.

Mike finds two empty bunks, two large empty closets, a nightstand next to each bunk and a table with two chairs next to a window with blinds drawn open.

The Buck Sergeant instructs, “Take your pick of the bunks, reveille is at 0500, Mess Hall opens at 0600 and first formation is at 0800—you needn’t worry about the formation, because you’re not officially assigned to the Company yet—don’t forget to turn in the bedding in the morning and be sure the room is as you found it before you report to the orderly room—any questions?” Mike shakes his head with, “Nope—I’m fine and thanks—say

what's your name."

"It's Scott Bogan," replied the Buck Sergeant pointing to his nametag, "and have a pleasant night."

Mike nods and Sergeant Bogan walks out of the room closing the door behind him.

Mike spends the next thirty minutes making his bed and getting a few items from his duffle bag to use in the latrine later.

Dressed in his new civilian clothes, Mike goes down to the basement to locate the vending room to grab something to eat since he missed dinner in the mess hall; he locates the vending room in about the same location as the other barracks he was in when he came here to school.

After eating a cheeseburger, a tuna sandwich and grabbing a cold bottle of pop, Mike leaves the vending room and heads to the TV room to catch up on the latest news.

Walking into the TV room, Mike finds the place is quite crowded and finds an empty seat on a couch with two others; no one pays any attention to this stranger in their midst.

As Mike watches, he finds that the war is progressing favorably for the UN Coalition in India and the NATO Forces in the Middle East.

Then the news turns once again to roomers as to the whereabouts of Pegasus.

An individual in the news discussion group announced that the official word from the Pentagon is that Pegasus has been killed and his body was shipped to Washington and was interred in Arlington with family members present, and that his family has requested his identity along with theirs remain secret.

Another member of the news discussion group piped, "That explanation sounds all to convenient. If he was such a great flier—how could this be true—after all—he was so great that he was referred to as an Air Ninja by some of the Pilots he flew with—I don't know about you, but this whole thing smells of a cover-up."

"What could they be possibly covering up?" Asked another member of the news discussion group.

"I don't know," replied the person who's claiming it's a cover-up, "they won't even tell us his name—saying it's to protect his family's privacy."

"That's a perfectly good reason to me," spouted yet another member of the news discussion group—the rest look at her.

The person who believes it's a cover-up shot back, "Well—you would. Pegasus is a National and World Hero and the people deserve to know who he is and what actually became of him, because I for one don't believe he's dead—I'm here to tell you, he's still out there."

Upon hearing all of this news media gossip, Mike started getting a bit nervous and starts to sweat a bit.

Mike was about to get up and leave, when the man sitting next to him turned his head and whispered, "Whata' you think? Is he or isn't he dead?"

Mike caught off guard whispers back, "Naaa—one normally doesn't die from a shoulder wound, unless it was really bad and I don't think his was that bad."

"Yeah—what makes you think that?" He asked in a whisper.

"Because, if it was that bad, he'd be dead by the time he got to the Hospital," whispers Mike explaining.

"So you're saying he was actually shot?"

"Yeah—but he didn't die—they got him mixed up with another guy who did die," Mike earnestly whispers his reply.

"Say—how come you know so much about what happened when no one else has said anything about him getting shot in the shoulder—they just said he got shot?"

Mike looks at him, his face turning an off shade of red knowing his big mouth has gotten him into trouble again and now he has to come up with a good explanation, "I don't—it just makes sense to me that's all," Mike whispered.

The guy looks at Mike for a minute or so, as Mike sits there nervously sweating, and then with a nod, the guy whispers, "I guess it kinda' makes sense to me too."

Then Mike softly says getting up, "I gotta' go—lots to do before I turn in—see ya' sometime."

The guy nods and Mike walks out of the room and heads for the stairway to the floor where his room is located.

The next morning reveille sounded, wakening Mike at six, he thought that since he wasn't officially a member of this unit yet, he'd sleep in a bit, so Mike rolled over and went back to sleep.

It was nearly eight when Mike finally got up, as he wasn't going to push his luck.

Mike unmade his bed and piled the sheets on the floor, folded the blanket and rolled the mattress up military style.

After putting his Class 'A' uniform on, Mike grabs the sheets and the blanket and heads down to the basement and the Quartermaster Supply room to turn them in, because he'll get another set a little later once he gets officially assigned.

After turning everything in and signing the return document, Mike feeling famished heads for the vending room to grab a cold sandwich, because he missed breakfast in the mess hall.

Later, after having eaten a couple of cold sandwiches, and drank a cup of hot chocolate, Mike heads back upstairs to his room.

After straightening the place up a bit, Mike grabs his two bags, gives the room a quick glance to be sure everything is as when he arrived, walks out and closes the door behind him.

Mike walks into the orderly room and up to a desk with a Spec 5 typing on a computer terminal and stands there for a while with the Clerk typing away and ignoring him, so Mike loudly clears his throat, "Har-rumph," trying to get his attention.

The Clerk looks up at Mike and asks, "May I help you?"

Mike hands his orders to the Clerk with, "I got in late last night and the CQ told me to report this morning after 0800," and he also hands the Guest Mess Card to the Clerk with, "he told me to return this as well."

The Clerk takes both, and then types on the terminal, then the Clerk requests, "I need your DD201 Data Disk."

Mike gives the Clerk the data disk and the Clerk takes it and inserts it into his terminal.

After some more typing, the Clerk asks for Mike's Data Link; once again Mike undoes his tie and shirt collar button and removes the Data Link and hands it to the Clerk.

After updating everything, the Clerk types again and this time a nearby printer began printing; when it finished, the Clerk got up, went over and retrieved the printed card stock and returned to his chair.

After removing several credit card size cards from the card-stock, the Clerk had Mike sign one of them which was his new Mess Card and the other two were for his wall lockers.

Then while Mike inserted the Mess Card into his wallet, the Clerk removed his Data Link and DD201 Data Disk from the terminal, along with several sheets of paper.

Handing the items to Mike the Clerk instructs, "Here's your Data Link and your DD201 Data Disk along with several check off sheets for places you'll need to visit."

As Mike put his Data Link back on its chain, re-buttoned his shirt collar and retied his tie, the Clerk announced, “You’ve been assigned to the First Platoon—your Platoon Sergeant is Staff Sergeant Gressett,” which raised Mike’s eyebrows.

“Your Platoon Leader is First Lieutenant Kiffmeyer, the First Sergeant is First Sergeant Bowman and CO is Major Belhumer—remember these people, you’ll be asked at inspection time.”

Mike nods thinking, “Yeah—I know—I’m no enlistee—I’ve been in for almost four years now—duh.”

“I’ll have Sergeant Gressett show you to your quarters and fill you in on additional details—you can wait over there,” the Clerk told Mike pointing to several chairs next to the wall by the door; Mike looks over his shoulders, nods and goes over and sits down to wait.

For the next twenty minutes, Mike sat there waiting, then into the room came Staff Sergeant Greg Gressett and walks up to the Clerk and inquires, “You have something for me?”

“Yeah—you have a new man,” replied the Clerk pointing to Mike.

Greg turns and when he sees who the new man is his eyes pop; Mike gets up and calmly greets him, “Hi Greg—nice to see you again—so, now you’re my Platoon Sergeant—huh.”

Still a bit stunned, Greg just nods, and then finally he comes around and says, “Yeah. You’re in the First Platoon. C’mon follow me and I’ll show you where we’re at,” so, Greg led the way with Mike following.

On the way, Greg asked, “What happened after you were Medevac’d from Ladapur, we all thought you might’ve died—you never came back—they wouldn’t tell us anything.”

“After spending a month in the Hospital, I was transferred to another unit,” Mike explains as they start climbing the stairs; reaching the first floor, Greg announces, “Here we are First floor,” and start walking West down the corridor that runs East and West.

When they reached a set of large gray double doors with a blue sign that read, **‘FIRST PLATOON’**, in bold black letters, Staff Sergeant Gressett quipped, “Here we are—home sweet home—I’m assigning you to the Third Squad—this way,” and Greg leads the way down the center aisle to the back of the barracks.

Pausing at an entrance between two large wall lockers with just enough room between to walk through, Greg says, “The two rooms for the Squad Leaders are down there,” pointing to a short hallway with two doors

at the end of the barracks, “of course you already know that—my room is the First door on the left in the main hallway—my names on the door.”

Greg enters the cubical and Mike follows.

Once in the cubical, the dialog becomes business with Greg telling Mike the rules, “Ok, now for the rules, first, your Squad Leader is Sergeant Bogan—his word is law and so is mine. Second, lights out at 2200 with bed check at 2300, don’t get caught outa’ bed unless you have an overnight pass or excused by me or your Squad Leader, to break that rule gets you extra duty or barracks restriction. Third, Reveille is at 0530, Mess Hall opens at 0600 and first formation is at 0800, second formation is at 1300, if you’re here, the last formation of the day is at 1700. You may wear civvies only when your off duty, on weekends and Holidays otherwise type of uniform is dictated by the type of duty. Normal duty uniform is Army Green work Fatigues—any questions?”

“Yeah,” Mike sharply piped, “besides details what purpose does this Platoon and the Company for that matter fulfill?”

“We provide maintenance and logistical support to the training center, which also includes providing instructors when needed, provided we have someone who processes the necessity skills required. There may also be cleaning and trash removal details, KP at any of the schools Mess Halls, Guard Duty and most importantly parade duty to honor those who are awarded metals—any more questions?”

Mike shakes his head, then Staff Sergeant Gressett barked, “Follow me and we’ll get you some bedding—by the way, linen exchange is every Tuesday—your area is inspected every morning by our Platoon Leader First Lieutenant Kiffmeyer, First Sergeant Bowman and myself. More than five gigs results in extra duty or barracks restriction, so, keep your gear and area straight—additional inspections will be announced.”

Greg led Mike out of the Cubicle and out of the Platoon barracks and down the stairs to the basement where the Quartermaster Supply room is located.

After getting his bedding, Mike headed back to his barracks alone; Staff Sergeant Gressett had other matters to take care of.

After changing into his Army green fatigues, Mike begins to make his bed, and while he’s making his bed, he couldn’t believe how much Greg had changed and this unit is almost as bad as basic training, but with only six months left to serve, Mike felt he could get through this.

After making his bed, Mike began to setup his wall locker and empty his civilian bag into his civilian wall locker with the few civilian things he

had gotten in the air terminal in Ramstein Germany.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Buck Sergeant Bogan entered the Cubical and when he sees Mike busy working on his wall lockers he grunted, "You!"

Mike looks up and sees the CQ Sergeant from last evening standing there and gets up offering his hand with, "Yeah—it's me alright—surprise—huh!"

"Should've known," grunted the Sergeant, "the note Sergeant Gressett left said I had a new man in my Squad. Names Sergeant Scott Bogan—I'm your Squad Leader," taking Mike's out held hand.

"Yeah I know, you introduced yourself last night—I'm..."

"Yeah—I already know," Sergeant Bogan sarcastically interrupting, "Mike Troff," while shaking hands.

"How does one get a ride—I've got a list of places I need to visit tomorrow," Mike amicability inquired.

"I'll mention it to Sergeant Gressett to see if something can be arranged," replied Sergeant Bogan; then Sergeant Bogan leaves and Mike goes back to working on his wall lockers.

At four thirty, three PFC's entered the cubical and when they see Mike they abruptly halt and stare.

Mike turned from the wall locker and offered his hand with a warm, "Hi—I'm Mike Troff and you all are?"

The one who looked to be the oldest stepped forward and took Mike's hand and cordially introduced himself, "I'm Larry Nasby," and shakes Mike's hands.

Then the next PFC took Mike's hand and while shaking introduced himself, "I'm Kevin Murray."

As Mike shook his hand he noticed a distinct odor of motor fuel as well as some grease spots on all three men's uniforms.

As the last PFC reached for Mike's hand he introduced himself, "And it's Bruce Kelling here—nice to meet you."

Noticing how young both Murray and Kelling look, Mike inquires, "Did you two kids enlist—you look to young to be drafted—are there any more like you in the Platoon?"

Both Murray and Kelling looking insulted were about to rebuff when Nasby piped, "Nope—they're the only ones—our Cubs, ha, ha, ha..."

Then both Murray and Kelling look at Nasby with bilious expressions; Kelling feeling insulted retorted, "I'm nineteen and no Kid or Cub."

“So am I,” added Murray bluntly.

“You two are still teenagers and the Platoon Cubs,” Nasby pointedly declared.

“There were two Cubs in my last Platoon,” piped Mike, “they were the best shots in the Company.”

“Yeah—where was that?” Inquired Kelling looking quizzical.

“India,” returned Mike, then looking somber, he added, “They’re both dead—they were part of a mission to recover a stolen Helicopter and it went sour.”

Both Murray and Kelling looking dour with Murray declaring, “We aren’t going to get killed—are we, Nasby?”

“No--,” answered Nasby sharply.

Then Mike changed the subject, “I can’t help but noticed that you three reek of gas and oil—you guys work on cars?”

“Yeah,” replied Nasby, ‘We’re auto-mechanics—we work in the Motor Pool.”

“Is everyone in the Squad auto-mechanics?” Asked Mike.

“No—just us three,” replied Murray with a grin, “but, there’s more of us in the Platoon.”

“So, if only you three are the only mechanics in the Squad—what do the other Squad members do?” Asked Mike.

“Well--,” Nasby began, “Corporal Cragun and PFC Chesney are clerks in S1 Personal—you might see them when you register in Personal tomorrow. Sergeant Bogan works in S6 IT and Communications—he’s an IT Tech. How about you—what’s your specialty?”

“Well--,” Mike began, “I originally was a EXR Helicopter Airframe and Power plant Tech, but of lately I guess I’m infantry.”

As the three PFC’s stare bug-eyed, in walks Corporal Cragun and remarks after overhearing Mike announce his job specialties, “Well, we know why you’re here Corporal Troff. By the way I’m Lynn Cragun,” offering his hand; Mike takes his hand and as they shake, Mike introduces himself, “It’s Mike Troff, and I haven’t been told as to what my duties will be outside of KP, Guard duty, cleanup details and parade duty.”

“Depending on what’s in your DD201, you probably will be repairing the training Helicopters or teaching in one of the classrooms,” explained Cragun nodding; Mike just looks at him slack-jawed.

Then suddenly a loud bell and Cragun looking at his watch, declared, “It’s 1700, last formation of the day—grab your caps and let’s fall out.”

Standing in formation, Mike was assigned to the third position next to Corporal Cragun.

After everyone was dismissed for the day, the men hurried to the building to be the first in line to the Mess Hall, but Corporal Cragun and PFC's Nasby, Murray and Kelling weren't in a rush.

Mike was about to join the rushing throng when Corporal Cragun grabbed Mike by the arm and advised, "Believe me you don't wanta' eat in the Mess Hall—they're serving corn-beef and cabbage and it's bad—barf food. I'll show you where the PX Cafeteria is and where the food is always great," so with Corporal Cragun in the lead, Mike and the other three PFC's headed towards the PX Cafeteria.

As it turns out, Mike and his classmates went to this same PX Cafeteria when he was here three years ago.

After getting their fill of cheeseburgers, fries, apple pie and soft drinks, the four men stepped outside as the Sun was about to set.

Standing together, Nasby asked, "Well—whata' you want to do now?"

"How about some target practice," offered Kelling; Mike just looked on as the other three men agreed.

Then they started walking towards an indoor skeet range where they shoot laser pistols at virtual targets, and as they were walking, Corporal Cragun inquired of Mike, "What did you qualified as at the range?"

"Expert," replied Mike with a deadpan expression; they all look at him bug-eyed.

"But—how!" Exclaimed Corporal Cragun, "We all qualified as Sharpshooters—that was a really hard test."

"That's why I'm Infantry now," retorted Mike shrugging his shoulders; they just looked at him straight-faced.

Reaching the indoor range, PFC Nasby holds the door open as the others enter.

Inside, Mike has a blast shooting the laser pistol and hits all of the targets except just two, which Nasby and Kelling purposely caused him to miss when they gave him a nudge just as he pulled the trigger.

After spending all evening in the indoor range, it was dark with the stars shining brightly when they exit; the walk back to their building under the streetlights was a bit cold.

Mike was glad to be back inside, because he was now shivering badly with only his uniform shirt to keep him warm.

When they reached their cubical, the lights were out, because it was after 2200 and lights out, so they had to undress in the dark.

Mike crawled into his bunk feeling great after getting new friends, one's that won't be getting killed any time soon, and falls off to sleep after having a great day.

CHAPTER 14 -- Mess Hall of Heroes.

The next morning the lights came on at 0530 along with an echoing bell ringing up and down the hallway.

Mike covered his head with his pillow to help drowned out the loud ringing noise.

When the loud bell stopped ringing, Mike uncovered his head and crawled out of bed, but his head was still ringing; he couldn't hear what PFC Nasby was saying to him, he just shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and pointed to his ear.

Mike went to his wall locker and got his shaving bag, soap-bar, clean shorts, washcloth, towel and walked out of the cubical and headed to the latrine to shower and shave.

When Mike got back refreshed, with a clear head with no ringing; he put on his Army green fatigue uniform, because he was going to be processing today.

Then the Squad Leader, Buck Sergeant Bogan, enters the cubical and tells Mike, "Each week we do one of four areas—this week we have the stairwell from our landing down to the next floor, and don't forget your area—they will be inspected sometime this morning by Sergeant Gressett, first Sergeant Bowman and Lieutenant Kiffmeyer; Mike nods thinking, "Yeah, yeah—SOP as in the other units I've been in."

After Sergeant Bogan had left, Corporal Cragun remarked, "The stairwell can wait—I'm hungry and it's 0600 and the mess hall is open—you comin'?"

"Yeah," replied Mike with a nod, and along with PFC's Nasby, Murray and Kelling they all headed for the mess hall.

When they arrived, there was a line inching towards the mess door and Mike and his four Squad members got in behind the last man in the line, then PFC Chesney joins them, getting in line behind Kelling.

After about five minutes of inching forwards, the Squad finally enters the mess hall and the first thing Mike notices are the portraits lining the upper part of the dining room walls near the ceiling; some were surrounded with a black borders.

What Mike noticed next, was the hushed sounds; everyone was whispering or talking very low, which is very unusual, because in all the mess halls that Mike has been in so far, they were very noisy and loud.

Then, Mike noticed at the opposite ends of the room, there were very large portraits of a silhouetted subject also with a black border, and one had an image of a large Tiger; Mike choked thinking of Sheila.

Looking and feeling somber, Mike asks in a low dispirited voice, “What’s with this place?”

“This place is the Mess Hall of Heroes,” Corporal Cragun softly replied in a solemn tone.

They finally reach the serving line and Mike gets his favorite stack of pancakes with butter and syrup, several small link-sausages and a cold glass of milk.

Corporal Cragun chose a table for four, because there aren’t any larger tables available, so the other three men sat down at another table a couple of tables distant.

When Mike sat down, he had his back to the portrait with the Tiger, because he still wasn’t over his feelings of loss from the death of Sheila and was still grieving.

With a very heavy heart, Mike starts eating and to conceal his grief from the others he inquires nonchalantly, “So, who are all these guy’s in the portraits and why does some have black borders and others don’t, and what’s with the two silhouettes?”

“They’re our nations heroes from all the service branches and the black borders indicates they’re dead—killed in action, as for the two silhouettes—one represents the Soldier with his Tiger and the other is Pegasus. No one knows who they are or what they look like—both dead and both a mystery,” replied Corporal Cragun pointing at both portraits.

Mike looked at him with a deadpan expression.

Then as Mike continued to eat, he looked at each portrait; when Mike saw Mark Doubleday’s portrait with a black border, he chokes and now he has teary eyes, and when he comes to Glen Justin’s portrait he smiles, because his portrait doesn’t have a black border.

Mike spirits rise again when he sees the portraits of Joel Reese and Jeremy Schuster all without black borders.

Pointing at Glen’s portrait, Mike asked, “So, what did that guy do to earn a spot in here?”

Corporal Cragun turns and looks to where Mike is pointing and replies, “Captain Justin is a Triple Ace—one of the Air Force’s Top Guns.”

“What about that guy—he doesn’t look like a Pilot,” inquired Mike with a quizzical expression while pointing at Jeremy Schuster.

“Nope,” chirped Corporal Cragun, “Sergeant Schuster single-handedly held off a whole Platoon of Infantry from taking a vital bridge until

reinforcements arrived—he was wounded, but survived—he’s been nominated for the Medal-of-Honor, and has already received a Purple Heart and a Silver Star—he’s a real hero.”

Mike smiled with pride and thought, “Said he was going to join—guess he did and look at what he did—awesome!”

Then Mike feeling sad, points to Mark and remarks, “He’s dead— isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” said Corporal Cragun, “Captain Doubleday was a Triple Ace like the other Air Force Pilot.”

“So, being a Triple Ace automatically gets your portrait in here,” inquired Mike looking a bit confused.

“Nope, all of those guys went above and beyond of what is expected, to either save their comrades or went up single-handedly against overwhelming odds, like what Sergeant Schuster did, explained Corporal Cragun, “now, Captain Doubleday saved his entire Squadron and destroyed a nuclear missile site, by intercepting a nuclear tipped missile targeting the entire Squadron and had it lock-on him. Captain Doubleday then leads the missile back to its launch site where it detonated, killing himself and destroying the entire launch site.”

Choking with pride, Mike points to Joel and asks, “How about him—I suppose he’s an Ace too?”

“Yeah,” replied Corporal Cragun, “He’s Major Reese and another Triple Ace—a Marine Top Gun.”

“I’m curious—you know those guys?” Asked Corporal Cragun, as Mike finishes his sausages and pancakes.

Mike nods chewing, swallowing the last mouthful of pancake, and then he replies as he reaches for his glass of milk, “Went to high school with em’ all except Jeremy Schuster, met him playing war games with the Army three and half years ago—hope he ain’t hurt to bad.”

“War games—huh,” grunted Corporal Cragun, “you wanta’ tell us about em’?”

“Yeah, tell us what was it like?” Asked PFC Murray looking wistful.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Mike bluntly said, “it’s too much like what we’re now doing and I don’t wanta’ go there, Ok.”

Then Mike begins to giggle and says, “Mark—Mark Doubleday was the school bully—picked on just about everyone, but mostly the Pilots—those he took the most pleasure in making their lives miserable.”

“Wait—you’re a Pilot—you can fly?” Asked PFC Kelling looking wide-eyed.

"I transferred in during my senior year," explained Mike, "I ran into Doubleday as he was picking on Glen Justin, so I intervened and defeated Doubleday.

Needless to say, I now was on Doubleday's shit list and Glen became my friend along with his friends, all Pilots—they belonged to a flying club out at the local Airport."

"So—let me get this straight--Captain Doubleday was a high school bully, because he didn't like Pilots—is that right?" Asked Corporal Cragun looking bewildered; Mike nods.

"So, if he didn't like Pilots, then why in hell did he join the Air Force?" Asked Corporal Cragun looking perplexed; Mike smiles and explains, "At the end of our senior year he was taken up in an Airplane and was allowed to fly some, after that experience he totally changed. He no longer bullied anyone, especially the Pilots, and in the last days of school we became friends. After graduation all my friends, including Mark, joined the Military, except me—I didn't want anything to do with the Military, because I had other plans, that is, until I got drafted."

Mike finishes his Milk and takes a swig from his glass of water.

Then PFC Nasby pipes up, "Say—there's another Marine Hero Pilot in here and he has the same last name as you, maybe your related, his name is Captain Brian Troff and he's a Quad Ace," pointing to Brian's portrait with the black border.

When Mike heard his Brother being mentioned he was surprised and turned to look at where Nasby was pointing, and when he saw his Brother's portrait surrounded by that black border, Mike felt very grave; looking at his hand, he now knew which member of his family had died.

With watery eyes and trying hard not to cry, Mike blubbers, "Yeah—he's my oldest Brother—how, how did he die?"

"He was shot down by a Jordanian HX2 Helicopter," explained Corporal Cragun, "He and his Squadron defeated a whole Squadron of them, before one got him from below—his wingman got the bastard. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star along with several other medals including a Purple Heart."

Mike was choking with pride upon hearing those words, and nods, and then he gets up and bluntly exclaimed, "I gotta' get out of here!"

Mike picks up his tray and heads for the disposal window.

After disposing of his tray and breakfast dish, Mike quickly walks out of the Mess Hall and heads back upstairs to his cubical, wiping his eye on his sleeve.

Mike languished as he did his morning details, and when it was finally time for the 0800 formation, he stood there feeling very somber.

When everyone was dismissed and the Buses were parked nearby, most of the company boarded them to go to their duty stations.

Those who didn't have current assignments formed up in two Platoons, and the Platoon that Mike was in, was commanded by none other than Staff Sergeant Gressett.

Then a van pulled up and stopped, Sergeant Gressett commanded, "All those who are processing in or out, fall out and get your check off sheet, DD201 Disk and get in the Van—it'll take you to where you need to go—Ok, only those processing—FALL OUT!"

Mike breaks ranks, along with several others, and hurries to the building and up to his barrack's cubical; returning a few minutes later, he gets into the Van and buckles his seatbelt.

The first stop was the infirmary, and when Mike saw where they're stopping he said to himself, "Oh swell—all I need is some more pain and agony—the way I feel right now it won't make any difference."

Mike got in line in front of reception desk and when his turn came he handed the Nurse his check off sheet along with his DD201 disk.

After inserting the disk, the Nurse reviews the information on her terminal screen, and then tells Mike to take a seat in the waiting area until he's called, so Mike walks over and sits down still languishing from what he learned at breakfast.

Thirty minutes later, Mike's name is called by a Nurse standing next to a set of large automatic doors.

When Mike walks up to her the smiling Nurse introduces herself, "I'm Specialist Amy Arnett and I'll be your Nurse today. Your Doctor is Major Giese, and we're down this hallway," she leads Mike down a narrow hallway with many open doors with a row of colored lights nearby; some doors are closed and several of the colored lights are lit.

Then they arrive at an open door where Nurse Arnett announces while indicating with an open hand, "We'll be using this room," so Mike enters the room and sits down in a cushioned chair next to a desk.

Nurse Arnett goes over to the desk, sits down and brings up Mike's records on the terminal screen; after reviewing the information she reads some instructions, and then she gets up and walks over to where there is a bench with a flip top seat.

Nurse Arnett lifts the lid and extracts a folded exam gown, closes the lid and instructs, “Strip down to your socks, including tee-shirt and shorts, then put this gown on—it fastens in the back. If you need any help just ask,” handing the gown to Mike.

Mike goes and sits on the flip-top seat while the Nurse Arnett pulls a curtain around him forming a small private cubical in which to strip down; her final instructions are, “When you’re finished you can come back out here where I’ll weigh and take your vitals.

When Mike finished undressing, he walks back wearing only an exam gown and his socks, and then Nurse Arnett weighs him, measures his height, takes his blood pressure and pulse.

After entering all the information into the terminal, Nurse Arnett got up and said, as she walked to the door, “Relax a bit and the Doctor will be in--in a few minutes,” and then she walks out closing door behind her.

For the next twenty minutes, Mike sat shivering in the cold exam room wearing only the exam gown.

Finally, Major Giese enters the room with a friendly greeting, “Good morning Corporal Troff, and how are you today? I’m Doctor Giese and I’ll be conducting the examination,” offering his hand; Mike shakes his hand and replies in a quavering voice, because he’s shivering, “I’m fine, but it’s cold in here, Sir.”

“I’ll try to complete the examination as quickly as possible, so you can put your clothes on,” said Major Giese with a big grin, and then pointing to the exam table, “Hop up on the exam table if you please.”

Mike gets up on the table and sits with his legs hanging over the end, and then Major Giese starts to examine Mike.

Using an Otoscope and Ophthalmoscope, Major Giese examines Mike’s ears and eyes looking for disease or injury.

Using a Stethoscope, Major Giese has Mike inhale with heavy breaths and exhale while he listens to Mike’s lungs, then he listens to Mike’s heart for any abnormal rhythms; noticing during the exam the wound in Mike’s left shoulder, Major Giese inquires, “What have we here?”

“A souvenir from the war,” Mike sarcastically tells him, “there’s also one in my left thigh.”

Major Giese examines Mike’s left thigh wound.

After closely examining the two wounds, Major Giese goes over to the terminal and reviews the information and x-rays in Mike’s medical records, then he inquires, “When and where did you receive these two wounds—they appear to be gunshot wounds.”

“Like duh,” Mike quietly says to himself, and then he responds to the Major’s question, “In India—the one in my thigh I received about a year and half ago at Ladapur, and the one in my shoulder about four months ago at Kathlaur.”

“I see,” said Major Giese looking perplexed after finding no mention of any commendations for two Purple Hearts for wounds received in action, and remarked incredulously, “are you sure you received these wounds in combat, because I see no mention of any commendations for combat related injuries—or any action for that matter?”

“Yes Sir, I’m absolutely sure that I was in combat when I got both wounds,” Mike firmly replied, “you can ask my Platoon Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Greg Gressett—he was in command of my group at Ladapur.”

“I certainly will,” retorted Major Giese, “because if what you say is true—there’s really something very strange with your DD201 file. You should be receiving two Purple Hearts,” Mike looks at him with an incredulous expression.

After entering the exam information, Major Giese turns and tells Mike, “Looks like you only need one vaccination for the flu, and then you can get dressed and be on your way.”

Major Giese gets up and informs Mike, “You stay there and I’ll send the Nurse in to administer the shot. On the way out be sure to stop by the desk to get your Data Link updated, obtain your DD201 Disk and the check off sheet—have a good day,” and walks out of the room leaving Mike sitting on the exam table.

Five cold shivering minutes later, in walks Nurse Arnett carrying a tray with several packets of alcohol wipes and a small plastic capped syringe partially filled; she sets the tray on the desk and picks up an alcohol wipe packet and tears it open, removing the wipe.

Wiping Mike’s upper arm Nurse Arnett says cheerfully, “This’ll only take two seconds, and then we can get you dressed and outa’ here.”

Taking the small plastic capped syringe, Nurse Arnett removes the plastic cap exposing a short small needle.

Mike looks away and two seconds later Nurse Arnett announces with a cheerful smile, “All done—now you can get dressed.”

Now Mike didn’t feel a thing, gets down and goes over and pulls the curtain around him, and then proceeds to get dressed.

Six minutes later, fully dressed in his green uniform, Nurse Arnett and Mike leave the exam room and walk back to the front desk, where he gets his Data Link updated, receives his DD201 Data Disk and the check off

sheet; Mike then heads back out to the waiting Van having finished here.

Getting in the Van, Mike sits down and buckles up and waits until everyone has returned; ten minutes later, the last man to process through the infirmary gets in and takes the remaining seat, and then they're off, heading to the next stop which is the main Headquarters Building.

Pulling into the parking lot, the Van pulls into a stall and parks; after turning the engine off the Driver announced, "Here ya' be—Fort Rucker Headquarters—everyone out."

Mike takes his turn on getting off the Van and heads into the big red brick building.

Upon entering through a set of large steel double doors, Mike finds himself in a wide long hallway with people hurrying up and down the hallway.

Directly in front of him, Mike sees a large glass enclosed directory, so he looks at his check off sheet and it indicates the place to visit is G1, Personal, so he walks up to the directory and sees that Personnel is on the first floor.

Mike then looks for a flight of stairs and after walking down the hallway, he locates a wide staircase that's has room for two people to pass.

Upon reaching the first level/floor, Mike locates another directory and finds that Personnel is the third open door on his left, so he heads in that direction.

After entering Personnel, Mike steps up to a desk with a Spec 5 staring at a computer monitor; after standing there for a minute or so and with no acknowledgment, Mike clears his throat, "Ahem!"

She looks up from the monitor and bluntly asks, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah," Mike replies with a nod, "I'm here for processing according to my check off sheet."

"Please—your sheet and DD201 Data Disk," requested the Spec 5 with an out held hand; Mike hands both of the requested items to her.

Then she looked at the sheet and inserted the Data Disk into her computer; after a minute or so she asks to confirm his identity, "You're Michael Anthony Troff?" Mike nods with, "Yeah."

"Ok, Corporal Troff—please have a seat over there and someone will see you shortly," she told Mike pointing to a row of eight chairs next to the wall with pictures of the Army chain of command, ending with a very large portrait of the President.

Mike goes over and takes a seat with three other men, who were also waiting to be seen.

As the other men are called one by one, Mike waits, and waits, and waits, wondering if he'll be seen today or he'll have to return tomorrow.

Finally at a quarter to eleven, Corporal Cragun walks up and says, "Mike—I guess I'll be the one to process you—will you please come with me."

As Mike gets up he's quite surprised until he remembers Cragun telling him he works in G1.

Leading Mike to a cubical work area in amongst many others, Corporal Cragun offers Mike a chair next to his desk; as Mike seats himself, Corporal Cragun slides into his swivel office chair and begins accessing Mike's records while commenting, "I hope she has uploaded your DD201 file to the main data base—let's see if you're there."

Mike sits there with pursed lips hoping his records weren't screwed up again.

Then a smile comes to Corporal Cragun's face with the comment, "Ah' here you are—you're in the main data base—now to see what's in here."

As Mike sits there looking stolid, Corporal Cragun is making an array of different faces depending on what he's seeing.

Then he begins to comment about various pieces of information he sees in Mike's records, "I see you were drafted for four years of duty and you only have a few months left to serve—have you given any thought of reenlisting, the Army can offer you a large chunk of cash plus a promotion to the rank of Buck Sergeant."

"No way—I already was a Buck Sergeant and it was taken away," retorted Mike with abhorrence.

"Ah' yes—here it is, you were busted under an article fifteen about two years ago in India for flying a military Helicopter—wow, so you can fly—huh?"

"Yeah—I got a civilian Pilots license before I got drafted," explained Mike nonchalantly, "it's no biggie."

Then Corporal Cragun eyes open when he reads the next couple of pages, "I see you've been through Helicopter Maintenance training right here at Rucker and Advanced Infantry training at Fort Hunter."

"At Camp Roberts to be exact," retorted Mike with a straight face; Corporal Cragun looks at Mike with a peeved expression drawling, "R r right. I see you've been currently working in the Infantry MOS, so that's listed as your current MOS."

Mike just sits there with pursed lips looking stolid as Corporal Cragun continues to review his file, then looking bewildered, he comments, “According to these records you weren’t paid for nineteen months—that’s over thirty thousand dollars—wow,” looking aghast, Corporal Cragun asks, “is that correct?”

“Yeah,” Mike replied nonchalantly, “when I was with the Indian Special Ops unit I was supplied with everything I needed by the UN Forces and the Indian Army—I didn’t need any money, besides there wasn’t any place to spend it.”

“Makes sense,” quipped Corporal Cragun nodding, “I’ll add G8, Finance, to your check off list, so you can see the Paymaster—what else do we have here.”

Corporal Cragun continues the review, and considering what he has already discovered, he now gives the file careful scrutiny, and goes back to the page that describes Mike’s time in the Army and discovers Mike hasn’t been on leave for the last two years and used only two weeks of the four in the first year.

Then Corporal Cragun looking perplexed asked, “How come you didn’t take any leave time?”

“I took two weeks for the Christmas Holidays when I was taking training here,” explained Mike looking wooden, “when I was in Turkey and India I wasn’t allowed to take a leave—nobody was. I was restricted to Post for the Christmas Holidays in the following year by the article fifteen, and the next Christmas Holiday I celebrated at the Special Ops Base, as for this past Christmas—I was in the Hospital recovering from a bullet hole in my shoulder.”

“You were wounded in combat?”

“Yeah—at Kathlaur, India,” replied Mike with a slight nod.

Then Corporal Cragun looks for an entry in the DD201 file and comes up with nothing, to which he comments, “I don’t find any mention of a mission to Kathlaur or any mention of you being wounded—this is all very perplexing—your file also seems to be rather small—most files by the time someone gets to your time in the service is twice to three times as thick—hmmm—there’s something very strange about your DD201 file.”

Mike just sat there looking blithe and shrugged his shoulders.

Then Corporal Cragun said, “I’m going to attach a flag along with a note stating this file doesn’t seem to be complete and a complete review is needed,” and after doing so, he goes back to the page where Mike’s length of service is recorded and sees that Mike’s do to be discharged in September,

about six months from now.

The file seems to be complete in this respect, so Corporal Cragun subtracts the leave time due Mike, from the date he's due to be discharged and comes up with an early discharge date at the end of June, so he inquires of Mike if he would like to take a payout, of his leave time, or take the early discharge date in lieu of the cash.

Mike quickly announces that he wants the early discharge, so Corporal Cragun enters Mike's decision and notes the change, and then he informs Mike, "It's done—you won't be getting any pay for leave time due, you're now going to be discharged on the twenty-sixth of June, that leaves you with three months to serve."

Mike glowing says, "Thanks—this makes my day—wow—three more months and then I can go home a free man—awesome!"

"Don't forget—you also still have a very large check coming for back pay," Corporal Cragun reminding, "I guess that about does it—any questions?"

Mike shakes his head, and then they both get up; Corporal Cragun hands Mike the updated check off sheet that now includes an additional stop at G8, and then as they walk out of the cubical, Corporal Cragun reminds Mike, "In three months when you clear post, you'll need to stop by and close your DD201—Ok?" Mike nods, and then he walks out of G1 and heads for G8.

It was nearly noon when Mike walked out of G8, with a very large payroll check and heads back to the van, which he hopes is still waiting.

CHAPTER 15 -- Detail Duty.

After eating lunch in that depressing mess hall, Mike goes down to the supply room to complete the processing; he gets issued the rest of his missing gear and a M20 along with field gear.

Now Mike thought this was rather stupid, because he was going to be discharged in about ninety days.

Later that afternoon, Mike asked his Platoon Sergeant, if he could go to the bank and deposit that large payroll check; Staff Sergeant Gressett was very surprised by the size of the check and wondered if he had reenlisted, and granted him time off, so Mike walks over to the bank.

After opening a checking account, Mike heads back feeling relieved; he'll withdraw the money when he leaves; that is, what's remaining, because he has plans for a large portion of it.

The next morning, Mike was at the firing range calibrating his M20; that afternoon, Mike was part of a work detail removing brush from a practice-landing site that's going to be used by the flight school, the first of many work details.

That afternoon when Mike fell out from the 1700 formation, he was sore and tired.

Corporal Cragun feeling a bit sorry for him said, "You have a Helicopter repair MOS, maybe I can get you on the maintenance crew over at the school."

"Thanks Cragun, but I don't mind—really," Mike earnestly said, "as you know I only have three months, and then I'm out."

"Ok, if that's what you want," said Corporal Cragun with a nod and they head for that depressing mess hall with the rest of the Platoon.

At the 0800 formation on Thursday, it was announced that there was going to be an inspection on Saturday morning in Class 'A' uniform, and an awards ceremony with full dress parade next Wednesday.

Once again, Mike was part of the work Platoon and was marched over to the training airfield by Staff Sergeant Gressett; there, each Squad was assigned to a hangar.

Mike's Squad was charged to sweep, scrub and wax the hangar floor.

When Mike entered the hangar, it was empty, so the Squad started to wipe everything down; when that was done, they started to sweep the hangar floor.

At ten o'clock, the Squad went outside to take a break; their Squad Leader, a Buck Sergeant, told them to stay near the hangar and not to go wandering amongst the Helicopters.

Mike and the rest of the Squad walked over to a grassy area next to the west side of the hangar and sat down to rest.

As Mike sat there, he remembered the time he sat near a perimeter security fence watching student pilots practice hover flying and laughing his butt off until a flight instructor happened by, and then that crazy flight down that river in the dark.

Mike looked around to see if he could see the hover practice area with the traffic cones.

Then he sees a training Helicopter hover taxi down the taxiway, so Mike watches to see where it's going, figuring it's headed to the hover practice area; sure enough, the Helicopter crosses the runway and heads over to a grassy field a short distance away.

Mike gets up to get a better view, and then sees the rectangle pattern of traffic cones; the Helicopter flies to the center and halts hovering in front of a large bright orange traffic cone.

Mike smiling turns to look at one of the men in his Squad, when his eye catches something that causes Mike to hold his breath; for there, sitting off to one side next to several other EXR2 Helicopters was a dark bluish gray EXR3 Helicopter with a light blue gray belly.

Mike looked at the vertical stabilizer and spots the black horse with wings, and whispers, "Pegasus—my Helicopter, but how? When? Why?"

Then he remembers putting his wallet in that secret compartment under the seat, and a bead of sweat rolls off his forehead.

Now Mike is worried, because in his wallet is his Military Id with his picture; now he's really starting to worry and wonders how soon will it be, before they come for him.

Then Mike speculates, maybe no one has found it yet; after all, it's well hidden.

Only a maintenance tech would have any chance of finding it, and then only if the tech were to disassemble the Helicopter.

Now Mike is feeling a little better, but he knows it'll only be a matter of time before some tech will stumble across it, so, Mike decides he must find a way to retrieve his hidden wallet before its found.

The next day, the work Platoon cleaned the classrooms in one the many training buildings; each Squad cleaned a classroom and that evening they worked on their gear, wall lockers and Cubicles to get them ready for

the inspection the next day.

That night, before a very sore and tired Mike turned in, he crossed out another day on the calendar he had in his civilian wall locker, commenting, “Week one done, eleven more to go until I become a civilian again,” a huge gratifying smile enveloped his face.

Mike closed both of his wall lockers and crawled into bed, and within five minutes Mike was in dreamland.

The next morning the lights came on at 0500 along with that loud bell.

A bit groggy and sore from all the work the previous three days, Mike grabbed his shaving bag, towel, washcloth, slid into his shower sandals and heads for the latrine.

Returning from the latrine feeling refreshed, Mike returned his shaving bag to his civilian wall locker, puts his dirty underwear in his laundry bag, and then he got dressed and made his bed.

Corporal Cragun remarked, “I’m hungry and it’s 0600--the mess hall is open—you comin’?”

“Yeah,” replied Mike with a nod: then Corporal Cragun looks to PFC’s Nasby, Murray and Kelling and asks, “You guys ready to go to breakfast? Troff and I are going now.”

They all nod and the entire Squad heads for the mess hall.

After returning from the mess hall, Mike carefully lays out his Class ‘A’ uniform on his bed, and then, he and the Squad takes care of their morning chore.

When Mike returns, Staff Sergeant Gressett was in the cubical with Buck Sergeant Bogan checking each Squad to see about any last minute details, and was looking at Mike’s coat.

Mike walks over to his bed where Sergeants Gressett and Bogan are standing and inquires, “Is there anything wrong?”

“Your uniform isn’t to Army Regs, Troff,” Sergeant Gressett bluntly growled looking at Mike with a fixed expression; Sergeant Bogan is also looking at Mike with the same expression.

Slack-jawed, Mike responds, “I don’t understand—what part of the uniform isn’t to Regs—that’s what I got issued.”

“You don’t have all of your ribbons displayed—you’re missing three that I know of, maybe more,” explained Sergeant Gressett in a harsh tone.

“What three ribbons?” Asked Mike looking aghast.

“A Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and Joint Service Commendation Medal,” replied Sergeant Gressett.

"I didn't get any orders authorizing those medals," gasped Mike looking dumbfounded.

"Yes you did," rebuffed Sergeant Gressett, "I have a copy of those orders."

"You do!" Exclaimed Mike looking bug-eyed; Sergeant Gressett nods, grabs his wallet and removes the folded document and hands it to Mike, "As you can clearly see, you're listed below me."

"But, but, I don't understand," Mike stutters after unfolding and reading the document, "I didn't do anything to earn a Bronze Star, and I never heard of or received these orders."

"You didn't!" Exclaimed Sergeant Gressett with a quizzical expression, "I was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for that little job we did at Ladapur—I also received the Joint Service Commendation Medal for being in the India. You were awarded the Bronze Star for what you did on that roof—you save a lot of our guys from getting killed and allowed our guys to retake Ladapur, and you received the Purple Heart for the leg wound—and you didn't get these orders and were never formally presented these medals?"

"No," said Mike shaking his head, and handing the orders back to Sergeant Gressett.

"Wow!" Exclaimed Sergeant Gressett, and then he firmly declares, "I'm going to check your DD201 file—there's something fishy going on here and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

Sergeant Gressett looks at his watch and tells Mike, "You got fifteen minutes to change into your class A's—formation in fifteen minutes," and then he tells the rest of the Squad, "That goes for the rest of you too."

"But you said my uniform isn't regulation—what should I do?" Asked Mike sounding worried.

"Wear that one," replied Sergeant Gressett pointing to the uniform lying on the bed, "if your DD201 doesn't show you received the orders you're covered, but if it does, then you'll be gigged for an improper uniform—any questions?"

"No Sergeant," said Mike looking doleful thinking this is another one of those DD201 screw-ups.

"Ok then—get ready to fall out for inspection in fifteen minutes," Sergeant Gressett barked, turned and walked out of the Cubical with Sergeant Bogan following.

Twenty minutes later, Mike and his entire Platoon was standing at attention as the inspection commenced.

When Mike and his Squad returned to their cubicle after the inspection, Mike was deeply concerned about the mystery orders he never received, and wondered if in fact it was entered in his DD201, and he wasn't informed.

As Mike started to change into his civvies for the weekend, because he's off duty now until Monday, Corporal Cragun raving, "Wow--, according to Sergeant Gressett you have a Bronze Medal and Purple Heart."

"As far as I'm aware—I hadn't received any medals especially those two," Mike rebuffed looking a bit flush with embarrassment.

"Well--, according to Sergeant Cragun he has orders with your name on it that says in fact you did, they just haven't caught up with you yet. Looks like we have a Hero in our Squad."

"Yeah Mike, you're a Hero," gushed PFC Nasby grinning while offering his hand.

"Yeah, a real Hero," said PFC Chesney offering his hand for a shake too.

"Yeah—can't wait to tell the guys in the motor pool I have a real life Hero in my Squad," bragged PFC Murray.

"Hold on here," Mike hastily declared looking quite red with embarrassment, "I haven't been officially presented with any medals or orders—besides, I didn't do anything heroic—I only carried out my mission as was ordered too—any one of you would've done the same."

"Don't worry, you'll get em'," affirms Corporal Cragun; Mike looks at him afflicted.

After everyone has changed into their civvies, they head to the mess hall for lunch, because it was now after twelve and they were off duty until Monday.

Monday morning, Mike was on another one of those work details; this time he and his Squad were pushing lawnmowers in a line, side-by-side, down the parade field; getting it ready for the parade on Wednesday.

Sergeant Gressett was in the orderly room with a copy of Mike's DD201 file displayed on a monitor, because he was looking to see if Mike had received the same orders he had.

Coming up with nothing, Sergeant Gressett looking perplexed, remarks, "He's right—he didn't received or been presented the medals on my orders, and yet his name is on my orders—what gives? Something is very fishy here."

Then First Sergeant Bowman walks by on his way to see Major Belhumer; Sergeant Gressett raises his hand and hails, "Sergeant Bowman, you

got a minute—I need to show you something.”

Sergeant Bowman halts and nods, and then he walks over to where Sergeant Gressett is sitting looking at the monitor.

When Sergeant Bowman gets there he asks, “What is it Sergeant?” Sergeant Gressett points to the monitor and says, “There’s something very fishy with that 201 file. There’s supposed to be a document of orders authorizing several medals to this man and it’s missing, also, there’s no record of any formal presentation of a Bronze Star for gallantry and there should be.”

“Are you sure he’s supposed to have those documents?” argued Sergeant Bowman, “You know—the Bronze Star is pretty high on the list. Who’s 201 are we looking at?”

“Corporal Troff’s, and I can prove that he was awarded those medals,” declared Sergeant Gressett, and he got his copy of the orders and showed it to First Sergeant Bowman.

Sergeant Bowman looks at the orders and after a minute or so he remarks, “The listing of Corporal Troff might be an error—he might’ve been intended for another set of orders and got on here by mistake, that’s why these orders aren’t in his DD201.”

Shaking his head, Sergeant Gressett argues, “No—I don’t think that’s what happened. I know for a fact he should be receiving the Purple Heart and the Joint Service Commendation Medals, because I was with him when he was wounded and we both were part of a Joint Military Force—I don’t know if he earned the Bronze Star, but what he did that day sure makes him eligible. If being listed on my orders for the Purple Heart and Joint Service Commendation Medal is correct, then the Bronze Star must also be correct, and if that’s true, then why isn’t it in his DD201?”

Sergeant Bowman looks at Sergeant Gressett with befuddlement and shrugs his shoulders, and then handing the orders back to Sergeant Gressett, he says, “I’ll tell you what—I’ll mentioned it to the Major—I need to see him on other matters when you pulled me over here and which I should be getting on with—anything else Sergeant?” Sergeant Gressett shakes his head with, “Nope.”

“Ok then, carry on Sergeant,” says Sergeant Bowman in an authoritative voice and walks over to Major Belhumer’s door.

The next day, Tuesday, at the 0800 formation, Mike was ordered to the orderly room.

After the formation, Mike walked to the orderly room wondering what he did, because when he was ordered to the orderly room in the past, it was never a good thing.

Mike enters the orderly room and walks up to the Company Clerk's desk and announces, "At formation this morning I was ordered to see you."

The Clerk looks up from his monitor and responds, "Yeah, you're being transferred."

"Again! To where? What did I do to deserve this?" Mike shockingly asked, looking devastated.

"Yeah, and this time to the Third Platoon," replied the Clerk with a wooden expression.

"Why? Did I do something wrong?" Mike asked with a quizzical expression.

"No—nothing I'm aware of, and the reason is because the Third Platoon is short a man after Spec Four Ferguson was discharged," explained the Clerk.

"Huh! Now First Platoon is short," Mike declared looking stunned.

"The Third Platoon is a Helicopter maintenance Platoon, and according to your DD201 you have a Helicopter maintenance MOS that you received here at the training center—isn't that correct?" The Clerk pointed out matter-of-factly; Mike nods.

"Ok, your new Platoon Leader is Warrant Officer David Ayshford, your new Platoon Sergeant is Staff Sergeant Carl Baker and you should already know the CO and First Sergeant," the Clerk familiarizing him, and then asks, "You have any questions?" Mike shakes his head.

"You can wait over there," the Clerk tells him, pointing to the row of chairs, "Sergeant Baker will be here in a few minutes."

It was a short wait, because ten minutes later a short husky Staff Sergeant enters the orderly room and sees Mike sitting in a chair; he walks up to Mike and asks? "Are you the one with a EXR2 Maintenance MOS from the First Platoon?"

Mike nods and gets up responding, "Yeah Serge—I'm Corporal Mike Troff."

"Ok then, I'll show you to your new quarters," announced Sergeant Baker, and then led the way out of the orderly room with Mike in tow.

Mike followed Sergeant Baker to the third floor where the Third Platoon was located; this platoon was just above the First Platoon, so it will be an easy move.

When Mike and Sergeant Baker entered the Third Platoon barracks, Sergeant Baker announced as he led Mike to the large cubical on the left, "Your replacing Specialist Fishburn who was in the Second Squad," Mike following him into the cubical.

Now there were only two empty bunks and both were at the back of the cubical which Sergeant Backer nods too, remarking, “As you can see, you don’t have much of a choice for a bunk selection, so use the rest of the day to get moved. Your Squad Leader is Spec Five Craine, as for everything else, well, you already know the drill so, --I’ll see you at the 1300 formation,” and he walks out.

When Mike entered his old cubical, Staff Sergeant Gressett was showing a PFC his new quarters.

When Sergeant Gressett sees Mike enter he explains to the PFC, “This is Corporal Mike Troff and he’s been transferred to the Third Platoon—you’re replacing him. As soon as Corporal Troff gets his things moved you can have his bunk—if you like, or you can have that one,” pointing to the lone empty bunk at the back of the cubical.

“Yeah—I’ll break my bed down first so, you can use it if you want,” declared Mike pointing to his old bunk.

“Come with me,” commands Sergeant Gressett to the PFC, “We’ll get you some bedding, and when you get back, Mike will have gotten his bunk torn down and moved.”

So Mike begins tearing his bunk down, folding the blanket, sheets and pillowcase like the way he received them from the supply room.

As Mike was emptying his wall lockers, he got to know the PFC who was replacing him; it turns out he has an Office/Accounting MOS and will be working in G8, Finance.

By noon, Mike had finished moving his stuff to his new quarters, but hadn’t finished setting up his wall lockers.

At noon, Mike went to that depressing mess hall and found Corporal Cragun sitting by himself, so Mike with his tray walked over and politely asked, “If none of these are reserved—may I sit down?”

“Nope—I’m by myself, and you’re welcome to sit,” replied Corporal Cragun with a smile; Mike sets his tray on the table and seats himself across from Corporal Cragun.

Then as Mike started to eat, Corporal Cragun nonchalantly asks, “How you like your new home?”

Mike chewing, off handily nods, and then his brow rises, swallows and declares, “It was you who had me transferred—didn’t you?”

“Yeah, --when the request for a Helicopter Maintenance Tech came through, I immediately thought of you—so yeah, I put you down as the replacement,” replied Corporal Cragun.

"Thanks a lot," Mike sarcastically returned in a condescending tone.

"I'm sorry," said Corporal Cragun apologetically, "I thought you would be happy to be doing something other than continuous details."

"I'm really sorry for flying off the handle, but ever since I've been in the Army, I've been screwed over," Mike explains apologizing, "Thank you."

"You're very welcome," said Corporal Cragun in a friendly voice, and then his tone changes to one of caution, "Just to let you know—G1 is suspicious of your 201 and quite frankly so am I. Your 201 appears to be purged. I wouldn't be at all surprised if G2 (Intelligence & Security) doesn't get involved—you wouldn't have any idea—would you?"

"Naaa—don't have a clue," replied Mike biting his lip; remembering when his Doctor in India discovered his file was locked with the status of 'DECEASED'.

Then later, he hacked the other 201 file and locked it with the status of 'DECEASED', trying to convince everyone that he wasn't Captain Benson.

When his duplicate DD201 file arrived from India, Mike was finally able to convince them he wasn't Captain Benson, and they rebuilt him a new file using the duplicate DD201; apparently, the duplicate DD201 wasn't complete.

Looking at the clock, Mike sees that it's twelve-thirty and remarks, "The mess hall is filling up—I think we should get back to our Platoons, so to make room for someone else," Corporal Cragun nods and they both get up and head for the disposal window.

When Mike entered his cubical, a Spec5 was talking to a couple of Spec4's and a PFC, and they were looking at Mike's made up bunk.

Mike walks over to his wall lockers excusing himself in the process.

The Spec5 barbed, with the other three men by him looking on, "Who are you?"

"Mike Troff," Mike cheerfully replied offering his hand in a friendly way.

"Mike Troff, huh," the Spec5 huffishly retorted, "you Ferguson's replacement?"

"Yup, --that's me," Mike calmly replied, "I'm Ferguson's replacement."

"But—but—you're a Corporal," stuttered the Spec5 looking surprised and confused, "I was told you're a Helicopter Tech."

“I’m,” Mike said smiling, “went to school here two years ago.”

“Then why are you a Corporal and not a Spec4?” Asked a confused Spec5.

“Because I also have an Infantry MOS,” Mike calmly replied, and further explains, “I just returned from combat duty in India.”

The Spec5 nods and so does the other three men with him, and then he introduces himself and the other three men, “Alright then, —I’m Paul Craine Squad Leader, and these are Spec4 Matt Culberton, Spec4 Keith Dowdell and PFC Don Grenell,” they all shake Mike’s hand, and then Spec5 Craine adds, “Since you’re a Corporal, you out rank the other Spec4’s, so I’m putting you next to me in the Squad formation and you’ll be next in the chain of command after me.”

“Ok, —next after you—got it,” Mike noting, and then he asked, “So, where do we work?”

“In a large hangar shop with eight repair bays near the flight training center,” replied Specialist Craine.

“Sounds like the shop I worked in, in Turkey,” Mike remarks.

“There isn’t too much work,” sighs Specialist Craine, “we don’t rush otherwise if we’re caught sitting around they put us on work details, so we take our time and look busy.”

Mike looks shocked, because this sounds just opposite of what was in Turkey. Being curious, Mike inquires, “So, what kind of repair jobs do you get?”

“Mostly preventive maintenance as required by Army Regs,” explained Specialist Craine, “and since student pilots are flying these birds—you’ll get a few damage birds, do to stupidly and miscalculation.”

Then Specialist Four Culberton pipes up, “Tell him about Pegasus’s EXR3 that’s waiting for a Tech with training on a EXR3 to do a complete PM.”

Slack-jawed, Mike holds his breath and looks bug eyed.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about repairin’ EXR3’s—would you?” Asked Specialist Craine with a quizzical expression.

“The EXR3 isn’t that much different than a EXR2,” explained Mike looking angelic, “mechanically they’re the same bird, it’s the avionics and computers that makes them more advanced.”

“I guess we found our Tech to work on the EXR3’s,” announced Specialist Craine with a big grin, “I’ll inform Sergeant Baker and Mister Ayshford this afternoon when I return to the shop,” then the bell rang, announcing the 1300 formation.

After being dismissed from the formation, Mike returned to his cubical and finished setting up his wall lockers.

The next day, after the 0800 formation, Mike was on the Bus with the rest of his Squad heading to the Helicopter repair shop.

The shop was in a huge hangar, similar to the one in Turkey.

Staff Sergeant Baker assigned Mike to repair bay number four on the left side of the large overhead hangar door.

Spec4 Culbertson was in the bay across from Mike.

For the next two hours, Mike was given an orientation of the shop and how it was run and what was expected of him.

After getting a security locker assigned, Mike returned to his repair bay to find Sergeant Baker, Spec5 Craine and Chief Warrant Officer Ayshford standing in a circle talking.

When they saw Mike enter the bay, Mr. Ayshford inferring said, “I was informed that you’re familiar with the EXR3—is that true?”

“Yeah, --I’m familiar with EXR3,” Mike affirming.

“Where did you get your training?” Inquired Chief Warrant Officer Ayshford.

“OJT (On the Job Training) in India,” Mike replied.

“I thought you went to school here,” said Chief Warrant Officer Ayshford looking perplexed.

“I did—for the EXR2, but the EXR3 is identical mechanically,”

Mike replied. “What makes it different is the avionics, weapon system and flight computer and we don’t work on those.”

“Ok, --since you’re familiar with EXR3, you’ll be our EXR3 Tech, and we just happen to have a EXR3 for you to service,” announced Chief Warrant Officer Ayshford.

“Yes Sir,” Mike returned, and then he asked, “Why are we working on this Helicopter and when did it arrive?”

“The Helicopter is scheduled to be transferred to a new unit at Fort Belvoir and they don’t have a maintenance unit put together as yet. We received it about two weeks ago from India,” replied Chief Warrant Officer Ayshford, “Any more questions or concerns?”

“Nope,” said Mike shaking his head, then Chief Warrant Officer Ayshford and Sergeant Baker walks out of the repair bay and heads to the office in the front.

Spec5 Craine advises Mike, “She’s all yours—take your time unless you want to be doing work details—she’s the last bird we have at the moment, so take your time,” Mike nods and Spec5 Craine smiles and walks out

of Mike's repair bay.

Five minutes later, a loud horn sounds lunchtime and Mike heads for the front of the shop.

When Mike returned, after lunch, his EXR3 Helicopter that he flew in India was in his repair bay for him to service, just like what he did in the tent in India; the service order was on a clipboard on his workbench.

Mike reviewed the service order to see what was needed and learned all he needed to do was bring the Helicopter up to current standards and noted them in its new logbook, since the logbook he had been using is still probably in his repair tent in India.

The very first thing Mike wanted to do was to retrieve his old wallet, if no one had found it and it's still there, tucked away in its secret compartment under the seat.

After looking around to be sure no one is looking in his direction, Mike opens the cockpit door, leans in, reaches under the seat and fingers the secret compartment to feel for the wallet; a smile come to Mike's face when he feels the leather wallet as it's is still where he put it.

Using a couple of fingers, Mike works the wallet out and it falls into his hands and with a big smile he quickly puts it into his pocket; he'll examine it later tonight when he's alone.

For the rest of the day, Mike examined his old trusty mount and noted any discrepancies and listed them on the service order; tomorrow, he'll repair those discrepancies and perform a long overdue PM.

CHAPTER 16 -- Flight Exams & Checks.

That afternoon when Mike got back to his quarters, he took the old wallet out of his pocket and put it into his civilian wall locker, and then he headed to the mess hall.

When Mike returned, he got both wallets and transferred his, meal card and cash from his new wallet to his old wallet; leaving the new Id card with the word, 'REPLACEMENT', printed across the bottom in his new wallet.

Mike also removed his old meal card from his last unit in India from his old wallet and inserted it in the new one.

Then he put the new wallet into his civilian wall locker as a spare.

Mike spots his FAA Pilot License and smiles thinking in about three months he'll be able to fly again and not having to worry about breaking any Army rules.

Then Mike fingers the compartment where he keeps the Airman Medical and removes it, only to discover it has expired over a year ago and proclaims, "I need to get this renewed—I'll see if there's a civilian Doctor in Dothan before I try a Army Doctor," he looks at his watch and sees it's too late to make any calls tonight and grunts, "I'll make some call's tomorrow during lunch break."

The next morning when Mike returned to his repair bay, his EXR3 Helicopter, which he repainted blue-gray, was waiting for him to start repairing the minor deficiencies he found yesterday.

So, Mike started working on his dear old trusted mount and lost track of time until Spec5 Craine stopped on the way to the break table and chirped, "Troff—you going to take a break or not?"

Mike pops his head out from the access hole underneath the Helicopter and looking at Spec5 Craine replies, "Yeah—give me a minute and I'll be right with you."

Mike lays his tools on his workbench and wipes his hands on a towel, and then he and Spec5 Craine walk over to the brake area, after grabbing a soda he joins the rest of the Squad at the break table.

The first thing Spec5 Craine said, after he sat down was, "Troff, hope you can paint."

Mike looks at him with a fixed expression, and then Spec5 Craine told him, "That EXR3 isn't to Army Regs and needs to be repainted."

"Repainted!" Exclaimed Mike looking aghast; Spec5 Craine nods.

"I think before you have me repaint that thing you better make sure, because you're messing with Pegasus's aircraft and when they find out at Belvoir what you've done—well, all I can say is, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," said Mike pontificating.

The other men sitting around the table nod, and then Staff Sergeant Baker sits down at the head of the table with a cup of hot coffee and inquires upon hearing the last of Mike's words, "Now whom are we talking about—and why wouldn't you want to be in his shoes?"

The men at the table all point to Spec5 Craine and Spec4 Dowdell pipes with, "Craine wants Troff to repaint Pegasus's Helicopter regular Army colors."

Sergeant Baker looking bug-eyed at Spec5 Craine, barked, "You said what?"

Spec5 Craine blinks and stammers, "I told Troff he may have to repaint the EXR3 to have it conform to Army Regs."

"Not only is that paint scheme camouflage, but it's also distinctive—how do you think Pegasus was able to rack up so many kills?" Affirms Mike.

"He's right," Sergeant Baker declares, "I wouldn't be surprised if all of the EXR Helicopters will be painted those colors—so we won't be repainting Pegasus's Helicopter—you all got that?"

The men at the table all nod except Spec5 Craine, he looks sullen; Mike is grinning.

Seeing Spect5 Craine wasn't responding in the appropriate manner, Sergeant Baker looking at him barks, "You got that Craine?" Spec5 Craine nods.

Then Warrant Officer Ayshford stops by and inquires of Mike, "Corporal Troff, I understand you're the one doing maintenance on Pegasus's EXR3—can you tell me how long it will be before you're finished?"

"About two to three weeks Sir," replied Mike looking impassive.

"Two to three weeks!" Exclaimed Warrant Officer Ayshford looking bug-eyed, "Why so long? I thought the Helicopter only needed a PM."

"That's right Sir, but its past due on several major part replacements, including the compressor shaft bearings in both engines—just to name a few," explains Mike with a somber expression; Warrant Officer Ayshford looking grave nods with, "Ok—I'll inform Washington and appraise them of what I learned," and then he turns and walks away.

As soon as Warrant Officer Ayshford was out of hearing range Sergeant Baker tells Mike, “Corporal Troff, get the lead out—this isn’t just any aircraft you’re working on—you hear?”

“Yes Serge,” said Mike nodding looking impassive.

Then the fifteen-minute break was over and was time to return to their workstations.

As Mike begins repairing the several minor deficiencies, he silently mumbles, “Yeah—take your time, he says—don’t be sitting around or they’ll put ya’ on work details, he says—we don’t have a whole lot of work, he says—huh! This is just another repeat of what I went through in Turkey, except, I’ve got a Staff Sergeant and Warrant Officer breathing down my neck instead of a Spec five.”

Mike’s day wasn’t getting any better, because when he got back to the barracks at noon, he called the Health Clinic in Dothan to make an appointment with a FAA certified Doctor to get his Airman Medical Certificate renewed, only to learn that the only FAA certified Doctor won’t be able to see him until the middle of October; long after Mike had departed.

The only alternative was to use an Army Doctor which Mike didn’t particularly want to do, but if he wants to fly, he has no choice.

So, Mike informs his Squad Leader, Spec5 Craine, that his left shoulder is hurting again and needs to go to the Infirmary to have it checked out.

Spec5 Craine eyes him skeptically, but finally gives in and excuses Mike; when Spec5 Craine informed Sergeant Baker, he wasn’t too pleased, in fact, he was downright outraged and bellowed at Spec5 Craine, causing him to flinch at each word, “Don’t you ever excuse anyone without clearing it with me first—you got that Specialist!” Spec5 Craine nods fervently with, “Yes Serge.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Corporal Troff’s shoulder—he’s gold bricking, and I wanta’ see him as soon as he gets back—you hear. We’ll just see about his little make-believe shoulder pain,” Spec5 Craine nods.

Mike walks up to the main desk in the Infirmary/Clinic and requests a FAA flight medical; the Spec5 Nurse looks at this Corporal skeptically and tells Mike, “Army Pilots don’t require an FAA authorized certificate, they’re certified by the Department of Defense and follow those regulations, besides, you’re not an Officer, and as you’re well aware only Officers can operate an aircraft.”

“Yeah, I’m well aware of that,” Mike retorted, “I have a Civilian FAA Pilots License and I need to renew my FAA Medical Certificate so I can fly.”

The Nurse looks at Mike and huffishly said, “Then go and setup an appointment with a Civilian Doctor.”

“Believe me I tried, but the only civilian FAA Certified Doctor can’t see me until October,” responded Mike, “I really didn’t want to use a Military Doctor, but if I wanta’ fly again I’ve got no choice, and I don’t wanta’ wait until October—so please, can’t you get me an appointment to see a Doctor.”

The Nurse looks at Mike’s pleading eyes and breaks down and says, “Well, let me see what I can do—I can’t guarantee anything.”

“Thank you, I sure appreciate it,” Mike politely responds; the Nurse checks the computer monitor and informs him, “There’s an opening two weeks from today.”

“Thank you very much,” said a gracious Mike, and then looking sheepish he asked, “Could you do one more favor for me?”

“And what would that be?” Asked the Nurse with a scowling expression.

“Would you send a request through channels to my unit, so I can be excused—I don’t think using my shoulder wound as an excuse is going to work a second time,” replied Mike; the Nurse nods and remarks looking quizzical, “You were wounded?”

“Yeah—I think I should be getting back,” Mike said pointing to the door.

“Yeah, we’re finished,” the Nurse announced; Mike nods and walks out of the Infirmary.

When Mike got back to the maintenance hangar, he stopped at Spec5 Craine’s repair bay to let him know he’s back; Spec5 Craine told Mike to report to Sergeant Baker in the front office, and then he tells Mike, “Sergeant Baker wasn’t none too happy about you going to the Infirmary. If I were you, I’d be real humble, if ya’ know what I mean.”

Mike nods and feeling uneasy heads to the front office.

When Mike enters the front office, Staff Sergeant Baker sees him and he comes over and gruffly tells Mike, “Follow me Corporal,” motioning with his finger and leads Mike to a room; after they enter, Sergeant Baker closes the door.

Then Sergeant Baker approaches Mike with a scowl and in a hard warning voice said, “Don’t ever try that stunt again—do you hear?”

Mike just nods looking grim.

Then Sergeant Baker issues a dire warning, “If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I have you busted down so far that you’ll be saluting Privates—you got that?”

Mike again nods and then meekly explains, “I have a shoulder wound, and its been causing me some problems the last several days, and with the work on the Helicopter involving some reaching and lifting, I thought it was prudent to seek medical advice, and I did go through my chain of command to be excused this morning—I’m sorry if I did something wrong.”

Staff Sergeant Baker looks at Mike very skeptically and grunts, “What shoulder wound—where did you get a shoulder wound?”

“I received a shoulder wound in India just before I was assigned here,” replied Mike in a sincere voice, “If you don’t believe me look at my DD201 medical file.”

“I’ll do just that—right after I get through with you,” barked Sergeant Barker.

“May I be excused—I’ve got a Helicopter that needs lots of work,” Mike faintly asked; Sergeant Baker looks at him for a minute or so and finally nods with, “Yeah, I’m done with ya’—you can get back to you job.”

Mike quickly departs before the Sergeant decides to punish him for something else.

For the next two weeks Mike worked on his old mount and was well into replacing the required parts, then on Wednesday morning at the 0800 formation, he was ordered to the orderly room.

In the orderly room, Mike was handed several pages and was told to report to the Infirmary for a physical exam; Mike knew what the exam was for and requested a ride over to the post medical center.

Mike walks up to the reception desk and hands the pages to that same Spec5 Nurse he’d talked to two weeks ago.

Looking at Mike the Nurse takes the papers and remarks, “You again.”

Mike smiles with, “Yeah, it’s me again.”

The Nurse checks Mike into the appointment register, and then handing the papers back tells him, “You’re checked in and you’ll be called in a few minutes—you can have a seat over there,” pointing to a waiting area with four rows of chairs with most of them filled with waiting patients; Mike goes over and takes a seat in the second row between a Spec4 and a PFC.

For the next ten minutes, Mike sat quietly waiting for his turn; then as the minutes rolled by and the other waiting patients were called one-by-one, Mike began to wonder if he was forgotten.

About the time Mike was ready to go and inquire at the desk, a Nurse in blue scrub suit came out of the back hallway and called, “Corporal Michael Troff.”

Mike gets up and walks over to her, and then she introduces herself, “I’m Specialist Five Nurse Jessica Bestrom, and how are you today.”

“I’m just fine,” replied Mike.

“I see you’re applying for a FAA flight medical,” remarked Nurse Bestrom, “We’ll go down this hallway,” and she leads Mike down a narrow hall with lots of doors with a row of colored lights next to each.

When they arrive at the fourth door on the left, she turns on a blue and green light, and then motions with her hand for Mike to enter with, “We’ll use this room—the FAA Doctor, Captain Beyer, will be in shortly.”

When Mike and Nurse Bestrom were in the room she closes the door and orders, “Please remove your shirt and boots and step up onto the scale.”

After Mike removed his shirt and boots, he steps onto the scale, and then she weights and measures his height.

Then she tells him, “Please have a seat on that couch next to the desk,” as she walks over to the desk with a computer terminal where she enters the information; next she takes his blood pressure and looks in both of his ears, then she enters the information into the computer terminal and finally, she reviews Mike vaccination record and sees he’s up to date.

After getting up, Nurse Bestrom announces, “Doctor Beyer will be in, in a few minutes,” and she walks out of the room closing the door behind her.

For the next ten minutes, Mike patiently waits until finally, a knock on the door and in steps a tall Captain with dark brown hair, mustache, wire-rim glasses and wearing a white lab coat.

As Captain Beyer approaches Mike, he offers his hand with, “Hi, I’m Doctor Beyer and I’ll be conducting the exam,” Mike gets up and they shake hands.

As Mike sits back down, Doctor Beyer goes and seats himself at the desk, looks at Mike’s file on the computer and affirms, “So you are seeking to renew your FAA Medical Certificate—you know that can better be done by a civilian Doctor—we normally conduct flight exams for Army Pilots.”

“Yes Sir,” said Mike, “I tried to set up an appointment in Dothan, but the FAA Certified Doctor couldn’t see me until October, so I had no

choice but to use an Army Doctor if I wanted to fly now.”

“I see you want a Twelve Month renewal—you know a Private Pilot can have a Twenty-four Month Medical Certificate,” advises Doctor Beyer.

“I know,” Mike returned, “but, I’ve got a Commercial Pilot License.”

“You do!” Exclaimed Doctor Beyer, “You plannin’ on doin’ some flying for hire?”

“Nope—not until I return home,” Mike replied with a radiant smile, “I’ve got a small business with a friend back home in California, and can’t wait to get back there.”

“Out of curiosity, what kinds aircraft are you certified in?” Inquired Captain Beyer; Mike began naming all of the Helicopters he’s flown, and then in an under breath he adds EXR2 and EXR3.

Captain Beyer looking bug-eyed declares, “Those all are Helicopters!” Mike mouths, “Yeah--duh.”

“Why aren’t you flying Army Helicopters?” Asked Doctor Beyer.

“Well, I tried,” retorted Mike, “they didn’t want me—said I didn’t have any college.”

Doctor Beyer looked at Mike slack-jawed.

After a minute or so, Doctor Beyer turned to the computer monitor and made some entries and selections, then the printer came to life and spit out a sheet of paper; Doctor Beyer grabs the ejected sheet and signs the bottom and hands it to Mike informing him, “Here, you need an eye exam and hearing test—if you pass those tests you’ll be issued your FAA Medical Certificate.”

Mike takes the sheet as the Doctor signs off the computer terminal, and then Mike inquires, “When and where do I get my Medical Certificate?”

“If you pass those exams,” says Doctor Beyer pointing to the paper Mike is holding, “your Medical Certificate will be waiting at the front desk where you checked in, tomorrow after 0900.”

Mike nods thinking, “This is going to be tricky—hope my belligerent Platoon Sergeant lets me off so I can pick it up.”

Then Mike tells Doctor Beyer, “I don’t think my Platoon Sergeant will let me off twice,” wincing he adds, “Could you have it sent to my unit.”

Doctor Beyer looks at Mike straight-faced, sits back down and brings up Mike’s DD201 file and selects several menu options and closes the file and gets backup with, “Ok—done. Your Medical Certificate will be sent to your unit in a couple of days—anything else?”

Mike shakes his head, and then Doctor Beyer announces, “I guess we’re done—you can put your shirt and shoes on, and when you leave—stop by the desk to check out—stay out of the trees,” offering his hand with a smile; Mike takes his hand and they shake and he walks out of the room.

The next day, Mike was back in his repair bay working on the Helicopter, the following day Mike was told to report to the orderly room; Mike knew his Medical Certificate had arrived and when he reported at the desk, he was handed a government vanilla envelope with ‘CONFIDENTIAL’ stamped in big red letters on the front under his name.

When Mike opened it, he was right, for there was his new Medical Certificate.

For the next month and a half, Mike worked on the EXR3 getting it back to flight status, and as that day drew near, Mike wished he could be the Pilot who does the check flight.

With six weeks left in the Army, the day finally arrived for the EXR3 Helicopter to be check-flown, and because this Helicopter is a single seat Fighter, only the Pilot will be doing the flight check.

After Mike had signed off and updated the logbook the EXR3 was taken to the tarmac and another EXR2 Helicopter was moved into Mike’s repair bay.

This Helicopter, for Mike to work on, was a two-seat trainer from the flight school, and after looking at the repair order; all it required was a simple PM.

Mike never saw his EXR3 again; for once it took off on that check flight it never returned.

On Friday of the following week, Mike finished the PM on the EXR2 and signed off on the work order and updated the logbook; now since this was a two-seat trainer, Mike was looking forward to accompanying the Pilot on the upcoming check flight on Monday.

Bright and early Monday morning, Mike wearing a flight suit and holding a helmet was standing by the repaired EXR2 trainer waiting for the Pilot to arrive.

After ten minutes and still no Pilot, Mike began to worry if maybe the check flight was postponed for another day.

Then he sees a Pilot wearing a flight suit and helmet walking his way, so Mike puts his helmet on.

When the Pilot gets to where Mike is standing, Mike whips a salute and a greeting, “Good morning Sir.”

As the Pilot returns the salute, Mike's heart skips four beats when he sees, 'DEXTER', on the nametag on the Pilots suit and his rank of Major; for this is the same Pilot who he flew the 'Nap-Of-The-Earth' several years ago.

They climb into the Helicopter; the Pilot gets into the front seat which is the Pilots/Students seat and Mike gets into the Instructors seat in the rear.

Soon, they were flying over the countryside and heading towards the winding river that flowed through the forest to the large lake on the far end of the river.

The Pilot keyed the intercom and said, "Since we didn't introduce ourselves back at the airfield, I'm Major Dexter and you are?"

"I'm Corporal Troff and I know who you are from your nametag," replied Mike.

"You ready to check this bird out?" Asked the Major.

"Yeah—when we get to the lake—how about taking her up to six thousand and execute a couple of loops and some rolls—like to see if those new calibrations work," requested Mike; there wasn't a confirming reply, only silence.

"Well Sir—how about a little fun?" Requested Mike, and still no response, so he asked, "Sir—are you still with me?"

"Yeah, I'm still here, and what you want isn't authorized," rebuffed the Major in a huffy tone.

"Not authorized," Mike declared shocked.

"That's right Corporal Troff—not authorized," the Major reaffirming.

"Sir—simple loops and rolls are basic flight maneuvers that every Pilot learns in flight school, and they should be taught here," Mike proclaimed.

"Well, they're not taught here," rebuffed the Major.

To Mike's displeasure, it now seems that these flight maneuvers are still not being taught in basic flight school and he's getting rather upset, so Mike raises his voice and starts to pontificate, "I just came back from the war, and while I was in India fighting I saw a lot of our guys getting killed by enemy HX2 Helicopters, because they couldn't perform the simplest of basic flight maneuvers—the HX2 Pilots were out classing our Pilots."

Mike pauses for a minute or two to cool down, and then in a softer tone he adds, "I was shot by a sniper after I repaired a downed EXR2—the Pilot couldn't even maneuver around a PL9 burst—this was really

pathetic.”

“I’m really sorry you were wounded helping one of our Pilots,” said the Major in a solemn tone.

“I am too,” retorted Mike sounding upset, and then he sarcastically remarked, “I bet you can’t perform those maneuvers either—can you?”

“Well—neither can you, Corporal, so you have no room to be judgmental,” the Major rebuffed in a harsh tone.

“I wouldn’t be so sure—Sir,” barked Mike in rebuke.

“What! You can execute intricate flight maneuvers?” Declared the Major in a tone of disbelief.

“Yeah—and they’re not intricate flight maneuvers, they’re simple basic maneuvers that you should be teaching,” replied Mike, “if you want intricate—I’ll show you intricate. We’ll be coming to the lake in a couple of minutes and I’ll show you some basic rolls and loops.”

Then the lake came into view and they flew out over the lake, there Mike requested, “May I have the flight controls Sir.”

“I don’t know about this,” said the Major, hesitating, “I can get into trouble for letting you fly this Helicopter—we’ll be breaking FAA rules besides an Army Reg or two.”

“We won’t be breaking any FAA regulations—I’m a licensed Pilot with a current Medical,” declared Mike; again there was silence.

“Ok—I hope you don’t get us killed,” announced the Major his voice sounding worried.

“Thank you Sir,” said a grateful Mike as he took the flight controls.

Mike circled the lake gaining a little speed while climbing to a safe altitude.

When they reached six thousand feet, Mike took the EXR2 into an inside loop and when he exited at the bottom he did a smooth complete roll to the left.

Then Mike announced, “Every Pilot should be able to execute these maneuvers in a controlled fashion,” and proceeds to demonstrate by rolling the Helicopter ninety degrees and holds it there for ten long seconds.

From there he continues the roll to one hundred and eighty degrees at which point they’re flying upside down for another ten seconds; Mike continues on to two hundred seventy degrees for another ten seconds and finally returning to upright flight.

An amazed Major exclaimed, “Why aren’t you flying Army EXR2’s or teaching flight training instead of fixing them?”

“I tried, but was turned down,” replied Mike sounding upset.

Then there was a moment of silence on the intercom after which the Major came back and started to reminisce, “About two and half years ago I took a young PFC tech student on a flight down that river and afterwards he repeated the flight in a mind blowing fashion, and the maneuver he perform on this very lake still stands out in my mind as incredible,” then with a sigh the Major adds with a tone of sorrow, “I heard that Pilot was killed on the ground—what a waste—his call was Pegasus. At least I had an opportunity to fly with him if only for a short time.”

“Thank you Rock Hound for those kind words,” Mike solemnly said in a soft voice.

Now there was a long period of silence on the intercom as the Major regained control of the Helicopter and started back to the airfield.

Mike came on and said, “Guess the check flight is completed—I think she passed with flying colors, huh, --Rock Hound.”

Then the Major piped in, “How do you know my call sign—only Pilots use calls to address one another?”

“You told me over two years ago—remember?” Said Mike refreshing the Majors memory.

Then some more silence followed by a shaky voice asking, “Who are you?”

“I’m the one who flew the ‘Nap-Of-The-Earth’ down that river,” Mike slowly replied in a soft voice.

The Helicopter suddenly dipped and the Major coughed and stammered on the intercom, “You’re dead—everyone says you were killed!”

“Not me, it was the other guy who used my call that was killed,” rebuked a very concerned Mike, telling a little white lie for damage control.

“Some other guy used your call sign,” affirmed Major Dexter.

“Yeah,” said Mike nodding.

“You aren’t an Officer and wasn’t flying in India?” asked Major Dexter for affirmation.

“No—I’m a Corporal, and as you know enlisted men don’t have call signs. I was in the Infantry and attached to an Indian Special Ops Army unit behind enemy lines, and I wasn’t flying anything,” explains Mike with another tiny white lie along with some truthful statements.

“Well—that maybe so, but the fact is, you have flight skills that you should be teaching our Student Pilots,” said Major Dexter matter-of-factly.

“Sorry—I’m not interested,” Mike firmly refusing, “I like my maintenance job, besides, I only have about five weeks to my discharge.”

For the next several minutes there was silence on the intercom, and then Mike pipes up, “Thanks for letting me fly, Sir,” Major Dexter’s helmet dips in a short nod, and then the Helicopter banks to the right and prepares to land by Mike’s hanger.

CHAPTER 17 -- Phoenix Rise.

When the first of June arrived, summer had arrived in the south and the days were long and hot.

In the afternoon's, Mike would go for a walk to enjoy the scent of the Dogwoods and Magnolias or workout in the exercise room, because his left shoulder was slow to heal and still weak; Mike was worried that the Army may not discharge him early if his shoulder wasn't fully functional.

When Mike wasn't working out, he was at that airfield security fence quietly laughing at all the vulgar language the flight instructors were still issuing at the student Pilots.

Mike kept a sharp eye out for any Officers that might pass by, for unlike the last time, this time they might keep him in the Army and force him to teach students how to fly.

A week before Mike was to be discharged, he found himself on KP.

Very early on Monday morning, Mike was in the 512th Helicopter Training Support Company's mess hall; he was assigned to the dining room detail crew.

Now this mess hall had pictures just like in his mess hall, except, they were all Helicopter Pilots, and just like in his mess hall, a large portrait silhouette representing Pegasus hung in the Officers section; the large portrait silhouette representing the Soldier and Tiger was missing.

Now Mike had the Officers section to care for, which was half the size of the other NCO section; these duties entailed sweeping, mopping and buffing the floor, removal of the dirty trays from the Officers tables, since they don't bus their own, wiping down the messy tables and to keep the milk and coffee-tea dispensers filled.

Now taking care of the coffee-tea dispenser was easy, but the milk dispenser was another matter; it requires the removal and insertion of a three-gallon plastic drum that looks like an old fashion milk can.

Now with Mike's wounded shoulder, that's still a bit weak, posed a problem, since that can of milk weights twenty-six pounds; there were two of those drums in the machine.

The next problem was that Mike had to complete the replacement as quickly as possible, because the compartment where the drums were in was refrigerated, so he couldn't leave the door open very long.

Mike along with the rest of the KP detail had breakfast first, and afterwards he was in the Officers section busy busing the dirty trays to the disposal window and wiping the tables down after the Officers were finished eating, so the tables were ready for the next occupants.

When breakfast was finished, Mike placed the chairs on top of the tables with their legs pointing up, and then he swept, mopped and buffed the floor to a high shine.

After the ten o'clock break, Mike checked the milk dispenser and found the drums were still half full, so he asked the Mess Sergeant if he could replace those drums, the Mess Sergeant told him no; they can't be replaced until they were empty.

At lunchtime, three Officers were sitting at a long table near the two dispensers eating and talking.

"After spending two years in India trying to keep myself alive, it's sure nice being assigned to a stateside unit," one of the Officers remarked.

"So, what outfit are you assigned to, Sir," inquired the First Lieutenant sitting across from the Major.

"According to my orders, I've been reassigned to the 660th EXR Tactical Response Company at Fort Belvoir," replied the Major.

"Me two!" Exclaimed the First Lieutenant.

"I, as well," announced the third First Lieutenant; they all looked surprised.

"Well—whata' ya' know," remarked the Major, "looks like we'll be flying together, huh."

"Yeah—how about that," declared one of the First Lieutenants, "I'm, Todd Holz—call sign Yellow Jacket, and I just returned from India as well."

"Yeah—I think some of us flew together," affirms the Major, "I'm Larry Nickerson—call sign Acid Burn."

"Yeah same here," piped the other First Lieutenant, "I seem to recall you when we were being trained by Pegasus—remember? Too bad he got killed—he was one awesome Pilot. Oh, by the way my name is Keith Davison—call sign Sneaky Snake."

Both Lieutenant Holz and Major Nickerson nod, quietly sighing.

Then Lieutenant Davison gets up and goes over to the milk dispenser to refill his glass, but when he tries' to dispense some milk he only gets a few drops.

Noticing Mike wiping down a table, Lieutenant Davison walks over and informs him, "There's no milk—see to it Corporal."

“Yes Sir,” Mike crisply affirms, puts his rag in the small tub of soapy water, picks up the tub and walks over to the milk dispenser.

After setting the tub down, Mike opens the door and looks at the level gages and sees both milk drums are indicating empty, so he closes the door, picks up the tub and walks back to the kitchen area.

After obtaining two full milk drums and putting them on a small cart, Mike pushes the cart out to the milk dispenser.

After removing the two empty milk drums, which were easy, because the plastic milk drums are very light.

Mike grabs one of full milk drums and heaves the heavy drum up into the compartment; he gets a sharp pain in his left shoulder, Mike grabs his shoulder and bends down grimacing.

Now this hasn’t gone unnoticed by Lieutenant Holz, and when Mike straightens and finishes connecting the milk drum, Lieutenant Holz gets up with his empty glass and goes over to get some milk.

With his now sore left shoulder, Mike bends down at the knees, keeping his back straight and grabs the second milk drum, and when he straightens up his shoulder issues some more pain; Mike is now hurting and worries about finishing the job.

With a red sweaty face, Mike with a pained expression gives a heave to put the drum into the compartment, but he gets a very sharp pain and stumbles; Lieutenant Holz quickly grabs the drum and shoves it into the compartment, “I’ve got it—wow, you’re hurting—what’s the problem?”

“Sorry and thank you Sir,” Mike graciously said in a distressed tone, and then as he connects the last drum, he explains, “I guess I’m not quite totally healed yet—took a round in my left shoulder while I was in India at Kathlaur—I hope they let me out—due to get discharged next week.”

As Mike closes the door, Lieutenant Holz fills his glass advising, “You need to see a Doctor about that shoulder.”

When the Mess Sergeant was notified about the incident, he came hurrying over inquiring, “What’s going on here?”

Looking at Mike he barks, “Why are you standing around? There’s tables to clean,” pointing to a dirty table where two Officers had just got up and left.

Lieutenant Holz pipes up, “This man was wounded and his wound needs to be looked at—he shouldn’t be doing any heavy lifting.”

“I’m ok now,” Mike reassures, “I can finish the duty—honest.”

“If you’re sure?” Asked the Mess Sergeant; Mike nods.

“Ok—but I’m notifying your unit that you should be sent to the infirmary,” announced the Mess Sergeant; Mike nods again feeling hunted.

After Lieutenant Holz had sat down at his table, Lieutenant Davison grinning quips, “Cool move—you joinin’ the KP detail.”

“No o o o,” returned Lieutenant Holz, “if I wouldn’t of lent a hand, we’d had milk all over the place—the guy was wounded in India, says he took a round in the left shoulder at Kathlaur, appears his shoulder isn’t fully healed yet.”

“Yeah, well he shouldn’t be doing any heavy lifting,” declared Lieutenant Davison, and then he asked, “Where in India did you say he was shot?”

“Kathlaur,” replied Lieutenant Holz.

Looking confused, Major Nickerson asked, “Are you sure he told you Kathlaur?”

“Yeah sure—why?” Replied Lieutenant Holz.

“Because we didn’t have any ground troops deployed at Kathlaur,” asserted Major Nickerson, “that was a total air battle—we only had F30’s and EXR2’s deployed, nothing else, if we had anything on the ground it would’ve been a downed EXR2.”

Both Lieutenants looked at the Major perplexed.

Then Lieutenant Davison said, “Wasn’t that where Pegasus was killed.”

“Yeah,” responds Lieutenant Holz, “he was shot returning from repairing a downed EXR2 and died later at the Hospital.”

“Where was he shot?” Asked Lieutenant Davison probing.

“I believe it was his left shoulder,” replied Major Nickerson, “It can’t be him—he’s a Corporal and an Infantryman.”

“And another thing, why would an Infantryman be stationed here?” Lieutenant Davison bluntly asked.

“Well then, let’s ask him,” declared Lieutenant Holz, and then he called to Mike who was cleaning the next table over, “Corporal—a word if you please.”

Mike looks up and sees that the Lieutenant who helped him is motioning for him to come over, so Mike walks over and hesitantly says, “Yes Sir.”

“Corporal Troff, are you Infantry?” Asked Lieutenant Holz.

“Yes sir—I have an Infantry MOS,” replied Mike looking a quite confused and wondering why these Officers were asking.

“Besides doing KP, what kind of work do you perform here?” Queried Lieutenant Holz.

Looking at Lieutenant Holz, Mike is wondering why all of the strange questions, and then he replies, “I repair the EXR2 Helicopters used

in training—I also have a EXR Power-plant and Airframe MOS, is there anything more, Sir?”

“No—you may return to your duties,” said Lieutenant Holz dismissing him.

As Mike returned to his table, the three Officers looked at each other aghast, then Major Nickerson contends, “Pegasus is dead I tell you—this man is a Corporal—Pegasus is an Officer.”

“I don’t know Sir,” Lieutenant Holz questioning with a hint of doubt, “He’s got a shoulder wound just like Pegasus. He was wounded at Kathlaur just like Pegasus—unless he’s lying. He’s a EXR Tech just like Pegasus—as for the rank discrepancies I’m sure there must be some answer, but there are just too many coincidences to ignore the possibility that he’s Pegasus.”

After finishing with the table, Mike puts his dirty rag into the tub and picks up the tub and starts back to the kitchen.

Seeing Mike approach their table, Major Nickerson rebuffs, “We’ll see,” and as Mike passes by their table Major Nickerson loudly calls, “Hey Pegasus!”

Forgetting where he is, Mike unconsciously turns and responds, “Yeah...,” then knowing he’d made a very bad mistake, hurries away with a red face looking mortified.

The three Officers are now slack-jawed looking shocked.

Mike puts the tub down and hurries to the latrine where he enters a stall drops his pants and sits down looking very sick with worry, and knows he can’t return to the dining room until those three Officers leave.

Lieutenant Holz surmises, “Well—with that little demonstration we can assume he’s Pegasus and alive,” the other two nod, and then Lieutenant Davison gets up, grabs his tray and starts for the disposal window, Lieutenant Holz remarks, “Why are you busing your tray—that’s the job for the KP.”

Lieutenant Davison stops, looks at him and responds, “I’m not letting Pegasus bus my tray—I don’t care if he is on KP—I’m not letting an Ace Fighter Pilot and National Hero bus my trash.”

The other two Officers stare at him for a moment and they get up, grab their trays and all three head for the disposal window.

After waiting ten minutes in the latrine, Mike finally builds up enough courage to come out, and when he enters the dining room the three Officers are gone.

Mike asks the Mess Sergeant if could switch places with the guy doing pots and pans, the Mess Sergeant eyes Mike for a minute while he sweats and clutches his left shoulder as a signal that it's not well, which it isn't, as it's still causing Mike some discomfort.

Finally the Mess Sergeant shakes his head with, "Nope—he's too dirty for dining room duty, I'll switch you with someone in the NCO area in the dining room, so you don't have to lift anymore drums---take it or leave it—that's the best I can do."

"I'll take it," Mike responds; at least Mike won't have to be in the Officers part of the dining room.

And so, the Mess Sergeant and Mike walked over to the NCO section and informed one of the men working there, that he's to exchange positions with Mike, so as the man goes over to where Mike was working, the Mess Sergeant told the other two men that Mike wasn't to lift any of the heavy milk drums.

Then as the Mess Sergeant heads back to the kitchen, Mike assumes the duties in the NCO section.

Major Dexter walks into the Dayroom, goes to the magazine rack and as he rifles through the various selections, a group of five Officers sitting at a nearby table are in a hot discussion.

Second Lieutenant Delmont, looking at Major Nickerson, confirming what he just heard him tell them says, "You sure he's alive and is in the mess hall doing KP," Major Nickerson nods with, "Yup."

Lieutenant's Holz and Davison nod as well.

Lieutenant Delmont turns to Major Arant and bluntly asks, "Sir, do you really believe he's in the mess hall?"

"I don't know," Major Arant responding, "but I highly doubt he's a Corporal—only Officers are authorized to fly, besides, if you remember the report—it says Pegasus was a Captain at the time he was shot, so I highly doubt this Corporal is him. One other thing, and that is, there's no description of him, so nobody outside of some people in the Pentagon and the unit he was assigned to, knows what he looks like."

"I know exactly what he looks like, what his name is and further more--he's not dead" piped Major Dexter from the magazine rack with his back turned to them; all five of Officers gaze at him, some turning to face him.

Major Nickerson questions, "How do you happen to know all of this?"

Major Dexter turns to face them and replies, “Because gentlemen, I flew with him two and half years ago right here, and again three weeks ago—and I can positively tell you he wasn’t killed.”

“So you were one of his flight instructors,” said Major Nickerson making an assumption.

“Nope,” said Major Dexter shaking his head.

“No!” Exclaimed Major Nickerson, “Then what were the two of you doing—going on a joy ride?”

“Yeah—more or less,” replied Major Dexter smiling, and then he began pontificating, “About two and half years ago I happened to come across him on the outside of the perimeter fence laughing his butt off at a Flight Instructor working with a Student doing hover practice. It so happened the intercom was on between the Helicopter and Student Flight Ready Lounge and the instructor’s comments was coming out of the outside loudspeaker system, and the language—well, all I can say was—it was quite colorful. I didn’t know who he was, so when I confronted him I found out he was one of the Ground Support Tech Students. I figured to give this cocky Private a lesson in humility, so I had him follow me to one of the training Helicopters and ordered him to do a pre-flight on it, thinking he didn’t know how and I was prepared to give him the whole nine-yards, but he proceeded to do the pre-flight perfectly to my surprise. I should’ve known then, that this was no ordinary Tech Student, but a trained Pilot, but I was too consumed with trying to teach him manners that I lost sight of what was happening. Once we were inside of the Helicopter I had him perform the startup procedures, which he once again completed without error. When I had him lift the Helicopter to the hover-taxi position and taxi to the practice area, I began to realize he had flown before, and when he performed the rectangle hover pattern perfectly, I knew then, he was a Pilot. So, I figured he was a Private Civilian Helicopter Pilot and flew him out to the practice range in a EXR2 Trainer to have him execute some military maneuvers, which I figured he didn’t know. Boy was I wrong! After demonstrating how to fly the Nap-of-the-Earth I had him do it, figuring once again I’d have him. He performed one of the most amazing Nap-of-the-Earth flights that I’ve never witnessed and in the dark wearing night vision gear no less. The next several minutes proved even more impressive, as he performed a maneuver in that EXR2, that I or anyone in the Army has never seen—it was awesome—incredible. After we returned to the airfield hangar I learned he had a Call sign and it was Pegasus.”

“Ok, so who is he—what’s his name?” Asked Lieutenant Holz.

“His name—huh,” said Major Dexter in a cautionary tone, “I’m not sure I should be telling anyone.”

“Why?” Declared Lieutenant Delmont.

“Because Gentleman,” began Major Dexter, “The Army has tried to get him to go to OCS and get a commission, but he’s refused, and from what I’ve heard, he’s turned them down at least three times, so I think there’s someone or someone’s in the Pentagon keeping it Secret about who he is and the fact he’s been flying.”

“So if he hadn’t gone to OCS and isn’t a commissioned Officer, then what rank is this guy?” Major Nickerson bluntly asked.

“When I last saw him—he was a Corporal,” replied Major Dexter, “and that’s all I’m going to say—end of topic—good day Gentlemen,” and Major Dexter turns, puts the magazine he’s holding back into the rack and walks away.

Slack-jawed, the five Officers watched Major Dexter walk out of the Day Room.

At Dinner that afternoon, those five Officers and Major Dexter were in the mess hall together and scanned the Dining room for Mike; they spotted him in the NCO section cleaning tables.

When Mike began wiping down a table near the partition that separates the Officers section from the NCO section, the Officers noted Mike’s nametag.

“Troff,” remarked Major Nickerson, “at least we know his last name.”

When Mike had finished, he straightens up, and as he turns to go to another table he glances over to the Officer’s section and sees six Officers looking back at him.

Major Nickerson raises his hand in a friendly greeting, Mike held his breath recognizing the Officers and nods a reply and hurries to the next table.

On Monday June 24th, Mike was in the orderly room where he was informed that he will began clearing post for the final time starting on Wednesday, because on Thursday he’ll be discharged; Mike was ecstatic upon receiving the information.

Walking to his hangar, because he missed his ride, Mike comes upon a converted Van with a ‘For Sale’ sign in the in the window; at first he doesn’t give it any thought, but later that day, he thinks that might be a great way to head home, and won’t his Father be surprised, because now

he'll have one too.

After dinner, Mike changed into his civvies and walked back to where he'd seen that Van for sale and hoped it wasn't sold.

When Mike got to the location, to his delight, the Van was still there and the 'For Sale' sign was still on it; taking a closer look, Mike sees the price on the 'For Sale' sign is for \$22,300.00 and smiles, because he's currently got that, but not much more in the bank.

Seeing that the owner is a Major Jim Parker, Mike is a bit anxious about going into an Officer's barracks.

Mike says to himself, "Self, if you want the Van you'll have to brave it."

So, Mike takes a deep breath and walks to the building and locates the reception room and enters; a civilian man was manning a desk, so Mike walks up and announces with a smile, "Hi, I'm Mike Troff and I would like to see Major James Parker—it has to do with his Van he's got for sale."

"Just a moment—I'll see if the Major is in," the man replied with a deadpan expression.

He picks up the phone, pushes a button and then dials a number; after about a minute, he begins to speak, then he listens and nods.

After hanging up the phone, the man looks at Mike and says, "Major Parker will be down in a few minutes—you can wait over there," pointing to several chairs with end tables between them.

Mike feeling a bit uneasy goes over and makes himself comfortable on one of the chairs.

After waiting for several minutes a short man with coal black hair, dressed in jeans, blue denim shirt and cowboy boots walks into the room, glances over to where Mike is sitting and walks up; he offers his hand, and with a Texas drawl asks, "You all be the one wantin' to buy ma' Van?" Mike nods with, "Yes Sir."

"Ya' not needin' to be callin' me Sir," declared Major Parker, "when I be outa' uniform and not on duty—you all can just call me Jim—Ok?"

"But I'm a Corporal," affirmed Mike.

"Now what ya' gone and done that for," declared Major Parker sounding heedlessly indifferent, "now ya' done gone an spoiled ah' nice friendly chat—but ya' still call me Jim instead of Sir—ya' hear."

"Ok Jim," Mike replied smiling.

"Great—now follow me and I'll be showin' ya' ma' Van's insides," said Major Parker in a lighthearted country voice.

Mike follows Major Parker out to where the Van is parked, and as they walk, Mike is curious as to whether this guy is one of the Training Pilots, so he asks, “Say Jim are you one of the Flight Instructors?”

Shaking his head, Major Parker replies, “Naaa—I work in S6, that’s Communications.”

Then they arrive at the Van where Major Parker announces, “Here She be—and what ah’ beauty she be at that.”

Mike just nods, and then Major Parker opens the large side door exposing a gorgeous interior.

The floor was carpeted, four of the seats were the large plush Captain’s Chair variety, and in the back was a bench seat with a table in front.

Major Parker showed how the bench and table converted into a bed; there even was a cooler and a surround sound video system connected to a computer with Wi-Fi internet for viewing TV, and such.

Mike was all bug-eyed and couldn’t believe he’s only is asking \$22,300.00 for it; these Vans normally go for four times that amount.

Then Major Parker asked, “Well—whata’ ya’ think?”

“Awesome—I’ll take it,” gushed Mike with a huge grin, “but I’ll need to take possession by Friday of this week, because I get discharged on Thursday and I want to drive it home. I can have a Cashier’s Check for the amount Thursday afternoon—can you have the title ready by then?”

“Yep’,” replied Major Parker, “Friday morning we’ll go to DMV and get the title transferred and you can pay the tax hee, hee,” giggling.

After shaking hands, Mike heads back to his barracks and Major Parker to his.

Thursday was going to be Mike’s greatest day, because today, he’s getting out of the Army and he’ll be a Civilian again.

Mike received a check off sheet, just like when he arrived, for places to go and get processed out, including turning in his DD201 Data Disk, his Id card and that Data Link he was forced to wear while he was in the Army; he also turned in some of his extra uniforms, but he was allowed to keep some of his worn uniforms, one set of class A’s, his boots and Dog Tags.

By Three in the afternoon, that’s 1500 Military time, Mike was out of the Active Army, but learned to his dismay he was still bound for another four years as an inactive reservist.

Later, feeling and looking blissful, Mike walks into the Bank and gets the Cashier’s Check and the rest of his money in Travelers Checks along with some cash to get him by for a couple of weeks; Mike figured he’d be back in Victorville and home before the money ran out.

On Friday morning, Mike walks to the main Headquarters Building and enters the S6 office, where he requests to see Major Parker.

Several minutes later, Major Parker, now in uniform, comes over and Mike salutes him with, “Good morning Sir—I have the Cashier’s Check for the Van—can you get off so we can get the title transferred?”

Major Parker nods, returns the salute and replies, now sounding more military, “Yes Corporal—if you please follow me and we’ll take care of it,” so they then leave the office together.

Once outside, they both get into the Van and drive off Post and head for the DMV office in Dothan; once in the DMV Office the title was transferred to Mike, and then Mike gave Major Parker the Cashier’s Check; then Mike paid the tax to complete the transfer.

Mike, now with the title and keys, walks with Major Parker back to the Van and with Mike now driving and the Major Parker occupying the passenger seat, they head back to Fort Rucker.

After dropping the Major off at the Main Headquarters building, Mike heads back to his barracks to pack and sign out.

By the time he had finished packing and putting everything in his Van it was noon, and time to eat in the mess hall for the last time, because after he turns in his mess card he can’t eat there anymore.

After finishing his meal, Mike gives that depressing mess hall with all of the portraits, including his Brother’s, a last glimpse, and then picks up his tray and walks to the disposal window, then for the last time he walks out of the mess hall.

Returning to his cubical, Mike tears his bunk apart and heads for the Quartermaster Supply Room; after returning the bed linen, Mike heads back to the Orderly Room to sign out, because he’s finished.

After turning in his Mess Card, Mike signs out and heads back out to his Van feeling ecstatic, because he’s now out of the Army and a free man once again; gets into his Van and leaves Fort Rucker hoping to never to return.

In Dothan, Mike makes a quick stop at a mall to get a pillow, pillow-case, sheets and two blankets for the bed in his Van; his next stop is at a ‘Quick Trip’ to fill his gas tank and pick up some snacks, six pack of pop and a road atlas.

When he gets back to the Van Mike puts the pop in the cooler, and then he checks the road atlas and decides to see Nashville, so heads out of town and starts down US231 to Montgomery.

On Friday morning, the same day Mike left Fort Rucker, Lieutenant Colonel Clark decided to take Mike's DD201 file to G1 and have them archived as Deceased, so that afternoon he takes the file folder and the data disk to G1 and leaves it in the inbox with a note to list this Man as Deceased/Killed in Action.

The next Monday, as Mike is waking up in the back of his Van at a campsite outside of Nashville, Colonel Clark gets a phone call, "Colonel Clark, this is Archivist Lieutenant Marlene Devens in G1 and this is about the DD201 file you dropped in my inbox to be archived with a status of Deceased/Killed in Action."

"Yes Lieutenant," Colonel Clark responding, "is there a problem?"

"Yes Sir," replied Lieutenant Devens, "simply put Sir, I can't apply your requested status on the files of this individual."

"Why not?" Questioned Colonel Clark looking confused.

"Because Sir, I have two sets of files for this individual and they contain different information. The latest file indicates the individual is alive," proclaimed Lieutenant Devens.

"Huh—alive!" Exclaimed a shocked Colonel Clark in disbelief, "are you sure both files are for the same man?"

"Yes Sir, I'm positive," Lieutenant Devens responding firmly, "both men have the same personal information and I checked their bio-metrics and they're the same person."

There was a minute of silence as Colonel Clark sat there looking astounded.

"Colonel Clark are you still there?" Asked Lieutenant Devens wondering if the Colonel had hung up.

"Yeah, I'm still here," replied Colonel Clark, and then he asks, "Where is he currently stationed?"

"He was stationed at Fort Rucker as part of the 120th Headquarters Company, but that was a week ago—since then, Corporal Troff was discharged," informed Lieutenant Devens, and then she asks, "So, what do you want me to do, Sir?"

Now Colonel Clark was initially in a state of shock at what he learned, then a state of exhilaration knowing Mike is possibly alive.

With overflowing curiosity, Colonel Clark is now anxious to get his hands on both sets of files, so he tells her, "Don't do anything—I'll be over in about an thirty minutes to get both sets of files."

"Ok Sir, I'll see you in about thirty minutes—goodbye Sir," Lieutenant Devens replies, and they both hang up.

Now looking exuberant, by what he just learned, Colonel Clark gets up and heads for the door; an hour or so later, Colonel Clark is back with both of Mike's files, and he can't wait to see what the latest file contains.

For the rest of the day, Colonel Clark examines the files and is amazed at what he learns, and now begins to see what hardships Mike has been put through; Colonel Clark now sees how much a Hero Mike really is and hasn't been recognized with not a single citation including the one from India.

That afternoon, Colonel Clark begins to merged the two files into one and when he finished at around 1900 that evening he was tired and said to himself, just before he got up to leave, "Tomorrow, I'm going to have a talk with Major General Griggs, but first, I'm going to make a little stop tonight to see Brigadier General Henry Troff."

At eight o'clock that evening, Colonel Clark rang Brigadier General Henry Troff's doorbell.

Maria Troff answers the door and sees that it's Larry Clark, she promptly asks him to come in.

Once inside, Colonel Clark inquires, "Is the General still up—it's business again and I must apologize for the late call, but it's very important—in fact it's so important I haven't eaten yet."

"Now this wouldn't be about Mike? You found him—didn't you?" Maria anxiously asked.

"Yes and no," Colonel Clark vaguely replied, and then he added, "I'll explain everything when I see the General."

"Right this way Colonel Clark," said Maria as she led him to the den where Henry was reading the evening news.

When Maria enters the den she announces, "Dear, we have a guest—Colonel Clark has stopped by to see you."

Putting the paper down, Henry gets up to receive his guest, offering his hand he greets Colonel Clark, "Welcome, and what do I owe this pleasure too?"

Taking his hand and shaking, Colonel Clark explains, "I'm very sorry for this late intrusion, but what I have to tell you is too important to wait—it has to do with your Son, Mike."

"You located his remains," declared Henry, then extending his hand to an empty easy chair he offers, "Please have a seat."

"Thank you Sir," Colonel Clark politely replies and seats himself quite comfortably in one of the two easy chairs, and then firmly says as Henry seats himself in the other one and Maria on the sofa, "No Sir, I don't

know where Mike is and that's the problem and the reason I'm here."

"I don't understand—what's so important that it couldn't wait until morning," declared Henry.

Then a small smile grew on Clark's face, and he imparts the good news, "Mike's not dead—he's very much alive and is back from India."

Maria puts her hands to her face and starts sobbing with joy repeating, "My baby is alive---my baby is alive—I just knew he was alive."

Then Henry harshly asks, "If he's back from India, why hasn't he come by to see us?"

"Because Sir," Colonel Clark explaining, "He doesn't know you've moved—I believe he's on his way to California—he was discharged last week."

"Discharged!" Exclaimed Henry looking very confused, "How can he be discharged? I thought he has a Commission, and the way a Commission Officer leaves the service is to submit a letter of resignation—has he done that?"

"No," replied Colonel Clark shaking his head, "from going over his DD201 file, I don't believe he even knows he has a Commission. With all of the mix up over him being MIA, getting shot and being declared dead, there were two DD201 files and both contained different information. I had the original set here in Washington which listed him 'Deceased/ Killed in Action'. Another set, which I presume was generated in India when they couldn't access the originals, contains information that was obtained from his DD201 Data Disk and his Data Link. That set contained all of the most current information and then some, but didn't have a copy of his Commission and Flight Authorization. Anyway, last week he was discharged as an E4 Corporal using the information from the second DD201 file."

Maria gets up feeling overjoyed and asks Henry, "Since Colonel Clark hadn't had his dinner yet, I'll go and prepare something, is there anything you would like dear?"

"A slice of Pumpkin Pie with a small bit of vanilla Ice-Cream and a cup of Coffee would be nice Hon," replied Henry with a smile; Maria turns to Colonel Clark and inquires, "If you don't mind—I can warm up a couple slices of left-over Pizza from the other night and what would you like to drink?"

"That sounds good," replied Colonel Clark with a big smile, "Coffee would be fine, as well as a slice of Pumpkin Pie with a small amount of vanilla Ice-Cream," Maria nods and heads to the kitchen.

Then Henry asserting, "Well, we must locate my Son and apprise him of his Military status before he's listed as AWOL."

“Yeah, that’s the reason I’m here this late, because we must act quickly and I need your help to authorize a temporary leave of absence,” proclaimed Colonel Clark.

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Henry with a quick dip of his chin, “but, you’ve got to try an locate him.”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best,” replied Colonel Clark, “tomorrow I’ll check with all of the commercial transportation companies—my guess is that, he’s on a flight back to Victorville.”

Then Henry remarks, “He’s just like a Phoenix rising from its ashes.”

“Phoenix Rise,” announced Colonel Clark, “first he’s dead—Phoenix burning, then he’s alive—Phoenix rising.”

Henry smiles nodding saying, “Yeah, that’s our Mike—like a Phoenix.”

CHAPTER 18 -- Sightseeing and a Job.

On Monday morning, after seeing the sights of Nashville, over the weekend, Mike got up early, left his campground and had breakfast at a diner just off the Interstate; afterwards, when Mike got back into his van, he checked the road atlas and decided to head northwest to St. Louis.

As Mike motored northwest on Interstate twenty-four toward Paducah Kentucky, Colonel Clark started calling the various transportation facilities, but none of them had sold a ticket to a young man with red hair to Victorville California.

Colonel Clark sat back in his chair frustrated, looking despondent he remarks, “Well—he just couldn’t have vanished from the face of the Earth—Mike, where are you?”

About two hours or so later, after leaving Nashville, Mike arrives in Paducah Kentucky and stops for gas; after a nature call and buying some snacks and a bottle of pop, Mike continues northwest to St. Louis.

After another two and half hours or so, Mike arrives in St. Louis around noon and feels the need for another nature call, so he pulls into a gas station.

After visiting the Men’s room, Mike fills his gas tank; after paying for the gas and getting directions to the nearest campground, he heads in that direction.

After obtaining a camping spot and more information, Mike goes looking for a dinner for lunch; once his hunger has been taken care of, Mike goes sightseeing.

The next morning, Tuesday, was the first day of July; Mike learns about Lincoln’s home in Springfield, so rather than take Interstate 70 west, he decides to take Interstate 55 northeast to Springfield.

About an hour or so later, Mike arrives in Springfield Illinois and spends the rest of the forenoon sightseeing.

At one o’clock, after having lunch, Mike made a trip to the Men’s room, fills his tank with gas and heads north on Interstate 55 to Bloomington, because Interstate 72 west ends at the Illinois side of the Mississippi across from Hannibal Missouri.

At around two-thirty, Mike arrives in Bloomington and while refilling his tank, Mike learns that there’s a Wild Bill Hickok Memorial at Troy Grove, so instead of taking Interstate 74 northwest to Moline, Mike takes Interstate 39 north to La Salle; another side trip.

At three-thirty, Mike arrives in La Salle, stops at a Casey's convince store to top his tank off and get directions to the memorial.

Mike learns that the Memorial is seven miles north at Troy Grove which is off of Interstate 39 on US 52, so he heads to Troy Grove; fifteen minutes later, he's in Troy Grove and it's a very small town.

Mike locates the Memorial in a park, but all there is, is a big granite rock with a bronze placard and a short distance away a bust of James Butler Hickok.

After spending about thirty minutes, or rather wasting thirty minutes reading the placard and strolling in the park, Mike got back into his van.

On his way back to the Interstate, Mike passes a local café and decides to stop and grab a quick bite, so he goes around the block and returns.

After being seated, Mike is given the menu, it appears they make their own Pizza, so when the Waiter returns, Mike orders a small Pizza with some fries and a soda.

While the Waiter writes Mike's order, Mike inquires, "Is there a Motel nearby?"

"Nope," replied the Waiter shaking his head, "none here in Troy Grove. Your closest bet would be at Mendota or at Peru—depends on where you're headin'."

"I just got outa' the Army and headin' back home to California, so I guess I'm headin' west," Mike tells him.

"Well—in that case you'll be wanting to go to Peru and take Interstate 80," advised the Waiter, "but—may I inquire as to why you're up here and not using the airlines?"

"Thought about it, but decided to drive back and see what the country looks like east of the Rockies. As for why I'm here, is because I heard about the Hickok Memorial back at Bloomington and thought it be worth seeing, but it was kinda' a letdown—nothing much but a placard on a big rock and a bust. Although its located in a really nice park—kinda' liked that—nice and peaceful," Mike responding.

"If you're up for some exploring," began the Waiter with an air of adventure, "the house where Hickok grew up is still there, and it's just outside of town about a mile or so, on your way to I39—you may what to check it out—it'll be on the north side of the highway in a grove of trees—you'll hav'ta keep a sharp eye out else you'll miss it, also, if you've got time, there's a railroad museum with an old locomotive and some cars at Mendota, but that's in the wrong direction."

“Railroad museum—old locomotive--huh,” Mike repeated with a quizzical expression; the Waiter nods with, “Yup,” and finishes writing the order, turns and walks away.

A minute or so later, he returns with a tall cold glass of soda with ice.

Then as the Waiter places the cold drink on the table, Mike inquires, “Are there any campgrounds nearby?”

“The closest would be the Hickory Hollow at La Salle—on the US6—just follow the signs,” replied the Waiter; Mike nods and takes a sip of the soda as the Waiter walks away.

Ten minutes later the Waiter delivers the hot pizza and asks, “Is there anything else you would like?”

Mike shakes his head, and then the Waiter says with a smile, as he lays the bill on the table, “Enjoy your pizza and thank you,” and then he walks away.

At five o’clock, after having finished off the small pizza and having paid the bill, Mike is back in his van and decides to take a look at that museum and hopes that it isn’t going to be another waste of time, so with plenty of summer Sun left, Mike drives slowly back to I39, looking for Hickok’s old house.

Seeing a wooden sign on the edge of the Highway, Mike turns in and finds a very small old house tucked away in a grove of old trees.

Mike gets out and finds a sign in front that tells of the Hickok family, but he can’t get inside, because it’s locked up.

Shaking his head, thinking this was another waste of time, Mike gets in his van and heads to I39, thinking of whither to go north to Mendota or south to I80.

Mike arrives at the I39/US52 interchange and decides to give the railroad museum a try and heads north on Interstate 39 to Mendota.

Its nearly six o’clock when Mike exits the Interstate and heads east on Highway 34, and as he crosses over I39 on the overpass, he sees one of the motels and turns in, figuring to secure a room early.

As Mike checks in he asks the Clerk at the front desk, “Is the railroad museum still open?”

“No Sir,” the Clerk replied, “I believe it closed at four.”

“What time does it open on Wednesday?”

“It opens at nine,” replied the Clerk.

“Now what I’m going to do—it’s still daylight,” Mike thinking out loud in a soft voice.

"If you're interested in museums, you may want to check out the Old Octagon House and the Mendota Museum, they're on the west side of town on US34, but I think they're both closed—you can still see the Old Octagon House, but you won't be able to go inside until tomorrow," the Clerk offering in a helpful cheery voice, and then added, "I believe there's a baseball game this evening at the Mendota Lake Park—you can park at the Civic Center or if there's an open spot, at the ball field."

"Thanks," Mike said, and then asked, "How do I get to these places?"

"Here's a map of the city," offered the Clerk getting a map and placing it next to his room key, and then with a big smile, the Clerk adds a newspaper to the group saying, "You might find some more interesting sights and things to do in here,"

"Thank you," said a grateful Mike as he picks up the items.

"You're welcome," replied the Clerk with a big friendly smile, "and I hope you enjoy your stay." Mike nods, smiles blissfully and walks away to locate his room on the second floor.

Using the map, Mike found the Park and the Civic Center and no one is on either ball field, so Mike parks the van at the Civic Center across from the ball field, and then he decides to explore and heads for the lake.

Walking along the road that runs between the lake and the ball field, Mike looks for a way to cross a nasty creek that flows between the road and the lake; he spots a footbridge just across from where there's a driveway to the ball field.

Once across the bridge, Mike strolls along the quiet lakeshore enjoying the late afternoon coolness as the Sun ever so slowly heads for the western horizon; in another hour the Sun will be touching the horizon.

Mike sits down in a park bench to watch several swans gliding along the lake surface in smooth effortless grace, just like in a fairy-tale; Mike leans back and closes his eyes, his thoughts are about his new freedom and of his family and friends in Victorville.

Mike wonders about Pam, she must be through collage by now, is she still waiting for him to return; he can visualize her smiling face and soft lips touching his.

Then the sound of people cheering awakens Mike, he opens his eyes and it's dusk with only the very top of the big orange Sun showing above the horizon.

It's nearly nine o'clock, Mike gets up and heads for the footbridge; after crossing the footbridge, Mike heads for the bleachers at the ball field, as there are people already there and the players are already on the field.

Mike locates an empty seat and for the next several hours he watches the baseball game, and when it finally got dark, around ten o'clock, the game continued under bright lights until it was over around midnight.

Mike returns to his van and drives back to his motel.

The next morning, Mike takes a few minutes to read the paper he was given; out of curiosity, he turns to the jobs section and looks to see what kind of positions the local businesses are trying to fill.

He sees the local hospital is hiring for several positions, including Nurses, House Cleaning, two Maintenance Positions and Information Technology Position. The local canning/food processing factory is looking to fill several vacancies; as well as several food stores and the Platting Factory, which has been around almost forever.

Mike takes another look at the Information Technology Position, and then he sighs with a deep breath and tells himself, "Self, what are you doing? You're on your way home where you already have a job, a Girl, Friends and Family. But, that computer position looks really interesting—could use some extra cash to head home with—it's a long way to California, anyway, what's a couple of months delay in headin' home—I've basically got all the time in the world."

Then Mike thinks, "I don't have any College only High School. What chance do I have getting this job, but then, what do I have to lose? Nothing."

So, after having breakfast, Mike goes to checkout, after which he gets in his van and goes searching for the local library, if this town has one.

Driving up West Main Street, Mike finds the Library, parks in the parking lot and goes inside hoping they have computer workstations.

Mike stops at the Librarian's desk and inquires about using a workstation; the Librarian tells him that, to use the printer will cost ten Dollars and one Dollar per sheet, and he can't check out any books or materials without being a member; Mike agrees and pays the Ten Dollars.

Mike sits down at one of the four workstations and begins compiling a résumé.

Two hours later and with five two page copies of his résumé, Mike stops at the Librarian's desk and pays an additional ten Dollars for the paper; he then heads back to his van and after passing under several railroad

tracks, through a large underpass, he heads east on US34, back to where he came from, because that's where he initially drove passed the Hospital on the way into town.

As Mike approaches the Hospital he sees a Helicopter land and is curious, so he pulls into the emergency entrance parking lot, parks and watches.

Several medics in blue jumpsuits unload a patient on a stretcher and hurriedly wheels the stretcher into the emergency entrance of the Hospital; twenty minutes later, the two medics return from the Hospital with an empty stretcher, put it into the back of the Helicopter, get in and very shortly thereafter the Helicopter takes off.

Mike watches until the Helicopter had disappeared to the south, backs out of the parking spot and drives around to the front of the Hospital, parks and walks inside.

Heading for the administrative section, Mike locates the personal office and goes inside.

At the counter, Mike informs a young lady that he's responding to an ad in the paper for the Information Technology Position.

She politely asks, "Do you have a résumé?"

"Yeah," replied Mike and handed her one of his résumés of two pages.

She briefly reads the two pages with raised brow, and afterwards remarks, "According to what I see here you don't have any College or experience in that field—I really don't think you have any chance against the other applicants—sorry," handing his résumé back.

Biting his lip in disappointment, Mike received his résumé, and then thinking he'd like to take a Helicopter up for a short flight asks, "I just saw a Medevac Helicopter head south after just taking off from here," turning to point in the direction, "is there an airport nearby?"

"Not here—we don't have an airport at Mendota," replied the Lady, then adds, "but down at Peru, there's the Illinois Valley Regional Airport—that's where the medical Helicopter's hangar is."

"Thanks," Mike politely said, and then walks back out to his van thinking what a waste of time that was.

Driving out of the Hospital parking lot, Mike stops at the entrance to US34, he thinks, should I head down to Peru or visit the Railroad and the Mendota Museums, "After all—that's why I came all the way up here in the first place."

So, Mike turns east on US34 and heads back into town.

Mike spent the rest of the day in the two Museums, he enjoyed the Railroad Museum the best, especially the working model railroad scene depicting Mendota's rail yard back in the early part of the last century; the restored locomotive engine, tender, mail cars and caboose was awesome.

It was after four when Mike headed back to the I39 interchange where he stopped for gas and a quick snack at a McDonald's.

Then with plenty of Sun left, Mike headed to I39 and drove south to Peru.

It was well after five in the afternoon when he reached the I80 interchange and took I80 West.

At six-fifteen, Mike exit I80 onto Highway 251 North looking for a place to stay for the night; Mike pulled into a Quality Inn and got himself a room, then he headed out to do some sightseeing and to locate the airport; Mike found the road to the airport on the west side of Peru off of I80 and south on Plank Road.

As Mike drove, he sees an old Bell 47G spraying a cornfield, so Mike pulls over and parks on the side of the road to watch.

For the next hour or so, Mike watches the old Helicopter make pass after pass across the field, pulling straight up at each end and swing around and descend for a pass back down the field.

It was well after eight and that old Sun was once again about to slip below the horizon when Mike arrived at the airport.

With all of the businesses closed, Mike turned around and headed back to his Motel; tomorrow morning he'll be back.

The next morning at eight, Mike paid his Motel bill and eats breakfast at a dinner just up the street.

As Mike was eating, he was thinking if he can't find a job today, he'll head straight home, because his cash is starting to run low; after buying the van and with the cost of the Motels, gas and meals there isn't a whole lot left from his back and mustering out pay.

At nine-thirty, Mike pulls into the airport and pulls up next to a large building with a large parking lot; after parking his van, Mike enters the building and is in a large lounge with a counter to one side.

There are rows of chairs with round tables every so often with reading materials.

There are large windows on each side of the lounge; the windows on the right side are looking out to the parking lot and the other side to the tarmac and runways.

A large wooden partition, with cactus and a huge aquarium with large fish, divides the lounge into two parts.

A security scanner is located in the middle of the partition and offers the only access between the lounges; there is also a large glass door from that side of the lounge to the tarmac.

Mike walks up to the counter and the lady behind the counter is typing on a computer terminal; there's a middle-aged man talking to another older guy at the other end.

When the lady sees him she greets with a smile, "Can I help you?"

"I'm not sure," replied Mike, "I'm looking for part-time employment—do you know if any of the FBO's are looking for help—I just got out of the Army and driving home. It's costing a bit more than I figured and I'm running low on funds."

"I'm sorry," she replied, "I haven't heard of any of our FBO's needing any help. May I ask where your home is and why you didn't use commercial transportation?"

The middle-age man stopped talking and both men looked to the Lady and Mike.

"Victorville, California," Mike told her looking disheartened, "after spending nearly four years with two of em' fighting—I wanted to see this county—I've never been in the Midwest—never seen the Great Plains or the Great Lakes. If I can't find part time employment I'm going to hav'ta forgo the sightseeing and drive straight home."

"I'm so very sorry," she said sounding sympathetic, "I wish I could help you, but I know of nothing here at the airport—you should try the newspaper—there's several copies lying in the lounge," pointing to the lounge; Mike looks to where she's pointing and nods with, "thank you."

As Mike started to walk away, the middle-aged man approached and said, "I overheard you inquiring about work—I might be able to help."

Mike stops, turns to him and affirms, "Yeah, I'd be in need of part time work for the rest of the summer—what have you got?"

"Well," began the Middle-aged man, "I'm in need of a Ground-handler—it's unpopular irksome work, but it pays good if you're interested."

"Yeah—sounds Ok to me," replied Mike accepting his offer, because he already knows what a Ground-handler is, "as long as it's only for the rest of the summer, because I really need to get home and see my family and girl."

"Ok—then, the jobs yours," announced the Middle-aged man offering his hand; Mike takes his hand and they shake with Mike introducing himself, "I'm Mike Troff—happy to meet you sir."

“Please, don’t call me Sir, my name is Larry Brentworth owner and CEO of ‘Tri-County Ag’ Flight Service’, and if you got a few minutes I’ll show my FBO (Fixed Base of Operations).”

“Ok—got all day if you need it,” replied Mike in a cheery tone feeling blissful.

“Ok then, follow me and I’ll show you where my operation is located,” declared Larry and he started for the double glass doors leading to the parking lot.

As Mike followed Larry, he explained, “My operation is located in that building, along with another,” pointing to the large building next in line.

When they arrive at a blue door right in the middle of the building, Larry opens the door and offers with his hand for Mike to enter; Larry enters after Mike has stepped inside.

Mike is in a hallway with eight doors, four on each side and at the very end there’s a door; similar to where he worked in Victorville and Roseville. Mike smiles to himself thinking his new boss’s first name is the same as Clark’s.

When Larry arrives at the second door, he stops and announces, “This is my office, the door we just passed is a conference room and those two doors,” pointing to next two doors, “are the locker room, restrooms and our hangar. The door at the end of the hallway leads out to the tarmac. The doors on the other side of the hallway belong to the other operation—now follow me.”

Larry opens the door and steps inside; Mike follows and finds himself in an office with a large desk, bookshelf with books and ring-binders and on the desk is a computer and a telephone; a printer is located a short distance away on a small table with two drawers.

Opposite the desk is a door to another room.

A sofa with a low table in front is to the left of the door and to the right is a small desk and chair; on the desk is a computer and telephone, two chairs are positioned in front of Larry’s large desk.

After Larry closes the door, he walks over to his desk, and on the way he tells Mike, “Have a seat,” and seats himself behind his desk; Mike sits down on one of the chairs.

“Ok—where to begin,” remarked Larry, “like I explained I’m hiring you as a Ground-handler, so you’ll be required to wear a jumpsuit and because we crop dust, we deal with hazardous materials and you’ll be assisting

in the loading of those chemicals, as such you'll be required to wear a haz-mat suit, boots, gloves, mask and goggles. You'll also need to have training on the proper handling of those chemicals—any questions so far?"

"Yeah—how much does the job pay?"

"Ten Dollars an hour plus overtime, and you'll need to fill out a couple of forms for tax purposes," affirmed Larry as he reached into his left lower desk drawer and withdrew several forms and laid them on his desk, and then he gives them to Mike advising him, "take a few minutes and fill these out and be sure to date and sign them—you can fill them out at that desk," pointing to the small desk with the computer.

Mike takes the forms and goes over to the desk and sits down, and then he turns and asked, "I need a pen."

"You'll find a pen in the top drawer, and once you're finished I'll show you around," replied Larry.

As Mike fills out the paperwork, Larry goes about his business; he makes a phone call and arranges for a chemical truck to be on site where they'll be crop dusting on Monday.

When Mike had finished, he returned and laid the completed forms on Larry's desk and sat down in the chair.

Finishing the conversation on the phone, Larry hangs up and picks up the forms and begins to review what was entered; being satisfied, Larry smiles and remarks, "Looks Ok," and then gets up and goes over and puts the forms in a filing cabinet.

Then Larry declares, "Time to show you our operation—follow me," and starts walking to the door between the small desk with the computer and the sofa; Mike gets up and follows.

Larry opens the door and goes inside; turning on the overhead fluorescent lights which lit the room very brightly, Mike entered behind Larry and was in a fair size conference room.

A large rectangular table is in the center with nine chairs, a white writing board is mounted on the wall across from the door they just came through.

Larry describes the room, "This is our conference room—in here is where we discuss what we'll be doing and work through any problems we might encounter or are currently having—we meet in here every Monday morning—any questions?" Mike shakes his head with a soft firm, "Nope."

"Ok then," Quipped Larry, "let's continue," and he heads for another door to the right of the one they just entered.

After opening the door, Larry motions for Mike to exit and just before Larry leaves, he shuts the room lights off and then closes the door; they're now in the main hallway again.

Larry now leads Mike down the hallway past the door to Larry's office and on to the next door.

Larry pauses and says, just before opening the door, "In here are the locker rooms, restrooms and showers," then he opens the door and enters; Mike follows him in.

Inside there's a small anti-room with two doors, one with 'MEN' and one with 'WOMEN' on them.

Larry takes Mike through the door with 'MEN' on it and shows Mike where he's to change and has Mike select an empty locker where he can put his street clothes.

Then Larry goes to a closet and asks what size, Mike wears, after he gives Larry his size, Larry gives Mike five sets of jumpsuits and tells Mike he's to wear a clean set each day and he's responsible for getting them laundered; Mike puts them in his new locker.

After Larry shows Mike the restroom and showers, Larry tells Mike he's to obtain his own bath towels, soap and etcetera.

Then Larry led Mike through yet another door and they're now standing in the hangar.

When the door closed, it had 'MEN' on the outside; another door a short distance away had 'WOMEN' on it.

The hangar had a large overhead door with a normal door to the right and was closed at the moment.

The inside was brightly lit with a very clean concrete floor; there were several Helicopters parked in two rows.

On one side there was two old Bell 47G's with folded sprayers and on the other side there were two old Robinson R22 Beta Helicopters and a Robinson R66 four passenger Helicopter; Mike was now very excited.

Then Larry took Mike over to another door, and when he opened this door, Mike saw to his dismay a Janitorial closet with a floor basin with drain, soap and detergent containers, a cabinet filled with paper towels, garbage bags, cans of spray cleaner of different kinds and rolls of toilet paper.

An empty mop-bucket, two mops, a push broom, several regular brooms, brushes, sponges and a bunch of rags.

Larry informs Mike with a grin, "This is your area—you're to clean the locker rooms, restrooms, showers, conference room and my office, but

most of all you're to keep the hangar spotless including washing and waxing the Helicopters. The only outside work you'll have, is to assist in the loading of chemicals when and if needed, but that won't be until you had training on the handling of hazardous materials. As I told you in the beginning, this is a irksome and unpopular job—your job title, like I previously told you is Ground-handler."

Mike's excitement turned to shock and dismay and thinks, "This isn't a Ground-handler—this is a goddamn Janitor—what did I get myself into?"

Then Larry asked, "Do you have any questions?"

Croaking, Mike responded, "I'm not so sure that this is a Ground-handlers position—this sounds to me like a Janitor."

Larry with a scowl rebuffed in a hard tone, "Do you want the job or not?"

Mike hesitated, thinking if he should pass, but knowing he'll only be working here for the next two months, and besides, he could use the extra cash, nods, and then says, "Yeah—when do you want me to start?"

"Next Monday," replied Larry whose grinning again, "tomorrow is the fourth and everyone will be celebrating."

"Yeah right—the fourth," returns Mike, and then he added, "I need to find a place to live for the next two months—the Motel is too expensive, it'll cost me a fortune. I guess I could camp out in my van in the parking lot, unless there's a cheap campground nearby."

Larry shakes his head asserting, "You can't camp out in the airport parking lot unless you want to spend some time in the county jail—you'd be breaking about dozen city ordinances. The only campground that I'm aware of is the Mendota Hills Campground which is north of Sublette, about 28 miles from here—not sure how much seasonal rentals are, but you can call and find out—they're in the phone book."

"That's too far away and almost 60 miles a day—no that won't work," affirmed Mike shaking his head, "if I can't stay in my van I guess I'll have to pass on your generous job offer and head straight home."

Looking despondent at the prospect of losing this worker and the fact that Larry been trying to fill this position for about a year was upsetting, and then he remembered a discussion he had with his Wife a week ago, about his Wife wanting to rent out part of their duplex home to help pay the mortgage and taxes.

As Mike turned and was about to walk away, Larry piped up, "You can stay with us."

Mike stops and turns back and exclaims, “You serious—stay with you at your house?” Larry nods with a smile.

“Yeah—I have this large duplex and half of it is empty,” Larry announces. “My Wife wants me to rent it out to help pay the huge mortgage and the taxes. I’ll rent to you for—let you say for Two-Hundred a month including meals, if you want to eat with the Wife, my two boys, my Daughter and me—you pay for your own electric, Internet, TV and heating—what ya’ say?”

“I say yes,” replied Mike nodding with a blissful expression, “that’s a very generous offer and thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, and now, if you’ll follow me I’ll show where I live,” said Larry with a cheery smile.

As Mike and Larry walked to their vehicles Larry said, “I live at Seven-Twenty-Three South Selby and Oak Streets—it’s a fairly new large brown duplex house on a corner lot in Ladd, which is about four miles North East just off Interstate Eighty. Just follow me and I’ll show you—you really can’t get lost—Ladd is quite small, but growing.”

Mike got into his van and waited for Larry in his large black pickup, and when he drove by, Mike pulled in behind him and followed him out of the airport to Plank Road; Larry drove Northwest on Plank Road until he reached Interstate eighty.

Larry entered Interstate eighty and headed west with Mike following not too far behind; at the next interchange, Larry exited and headed north on Illinois State Highway eighty-nine.

A few minutes later, Larry and Mike entered Ladd and made a right turn at the first street which was Hickory.

Larry drove east on Hickory until he came to Selby Street, where he turned north and drove to the next street which was Oak, and turned onto a wide driveway of a very large brown house and pulled up and stopped in front of a two car attached garage; Mike pulls up next to him and stops.

They both get out of their vehicles at about the same time, Mike walks over and joins Larry and together they walk to the entrance of the house.

Larry enters the house with Mike following, and as soon as he’s inside he calls, “NORMA, I’M HOME FOR LUNCH AND I BROUGHT A TENANT,” and motions for Mike to follow, and then they go into the kitchen.

A minute or so later, a tall, thin, dark haired woman in her early forties enters the kitchen.

When she sees Mike she inquires, "Whom do we have here?"

"This is Mike Troff, he just got discharged from the Army and accepted the Ground-handler position for the next two months and will be renting our extra bedroom," explained Larry.

"Only for two months!" exclaimed Norma.

"Yes dear, but maybe we can convince him to stay longer, huh Mike," said Larry looking at Mike; Mike returns a forced grin.

"So Larry says you just got out of the Army," remarks Norma looking at Mike.

"Yes ma'am," Mike politely replied.

"Please—just Norma will do, or we'll never hear the end of it from the kids," advises Norma with a smile, and then she asked, "Where are you from?"

"California—Victorville," replied Mike, "I have family and friends there—I need to get back, and that's why I can't stay longer than two months—sorry..."

"That's Ok—I understand—don't we Larry?"

"Yes dear—are you going to show Mike his room before or after lunch, because I need to get back to the business," contend Larry in a firm tone.

"Larry, why don't you wash up while I show Mister Troff the room—we'll eat when I get back," declared Norma, "Mister Troff, please follow me."

"Please—just call me Mike," Mike asserting, and follows Norma as she leads him deeper into the house.

Fifteen minutes later, both Mike and Norma re-enters the kitchen; Larry was already seated at the table waiting.

Norma pointed with her hand to one of five empty chairs telling Mike, "Please have a seat and I'll have lunch for you in a minute or two," so Mike seats himself on one side of the table next to Larry.

After Norma had placed the food on the table she sat down opposite of Larry and remarked, "The Kids won't be home till later, so help yourselves," and so they started eating.

After they had finished eating, Larry said, "I need to get back to the airport—I'll see you this evening Hon," he gets up goes over and gives Norma a peck on the cheek, and then walks out the back door; a few minutes later they hear the truck start up and back out.

Mike gets up next announcing, “I need to get sheets, pillow case and blankets for my bed—any idea where in town I can find them?”

“You won’t find any stores that sell that stuff in Ladd or Spring Valley,” replied Norma as she started to clean the table, “there’s a Walmart store off the interchange of I80 and Highway 251 at Peru—about six miles from here--the store is on the north side of I80.”

“Thanks—I know where the store is, I stopped there yesterday afternoon, I stayed at a Quality Inn just down the road,” Mike explained, and then he turned and started for the door.

Suddenly Norma piped up, “Wait—I need to give you something—I’ll be right back,” and she hurried out of the kitchen; a short while later, she returns and hands Mike a set of keys informing him, “Here and don’t lose em’ and dinners at eight, so don’t forget.”

After Mike receives the keys she explains pointing to each key, “That one is for the front door and that one will get you in the back door. I’ll call the Kids and tell them that you’re our new renter so they won’t get excited when they get back and find a stranger in the house—so be sure to introduce yourself if either I or Larry isn’t here.”

“Thanks and I will,” said Mike, “I’ll be here by eight—I promise,” and then he walks out of the house.

CHAPTER 19 -- Paintball Team.

Brigadier General Henry Troff calls Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark on Thursday for an update on Mike.

Speaking on the phone, Henry inquires, “Colonel, have you gotten any new information on Mike?”

“Sorry General, I haven’t heard anything new,” replied Colonel Clark, “he hasn’t used any commercial transportation, I’ve checked and left messages at all public carriers and so far nothing, and that was a week ago—my guess is, he’s hitched a ride with someone, probably a friend whom he got out with.”

“Well, he couldn’t have fallen off the face of the earth,” Henry heatedly asserting.

“He’ll show up,” affirmed Colonel Clark, “I’m pretty sure he’s headed back to your old address, and when he finds its been sold, my guess is, he’ll go to the airport to look up Manning and when he discovers that he’s gone, I think he’ll head on out to Fort Irwin to see if his old friends are still there—that’s where we’ll finally get a hold of him—we just got to be patient.”

“Well I hope you’re right, because he’s only got two months until he’s listed as AWOL,” argued Henry

“I am’—just be patient,” said Colonel Clark composedly, “They’re not going to incarcerate a national hero—we’ll be hearing about him shortly. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, just touching base to see if you came up with anything—keep in touch—bye,” replied General Troff and ended the phone conversation and hung up.

Late Thursday afternoon, Mike had finished his shopping and bought all of the needed items as well as a few extras, and then he headed to the airport.

It was after five and past quitting time for most businesses, but Mike was hoping Larry might still be there, because he would like to take that little Robinson R22 for a spin and wondered if Larry might rent it for an hour or two.

When Mike walked in, Larry and the all of his employees were gathered in the conference room.

Mike stops at the doorway just as Larry was about to start the meeting, and when he sees Mike, he motions for Mike to enter telling him,

“Mister Troff come in and join the group, we were just starting,” so, Mike enters with everyone wondering who’s this new guy, and seats himself in an empty chair between a very young guy and a woman in a flight suit.

Then Larry introduces Mike to the staff, “The young man who just sat down is Mike Troff and he’s going to be our Ground-handler for the next two months or so—hopefully he’ll stay longer,” Larry smiles and Mike, with a forced smile, smiles back.

Then Larry continues with the introductions, going around the table starting at his left, “Please raise your hand so Mister Troff knows whom I’m referring to. First, on my left is Chris Askie, he’s the Chief Pilot, Foreman and Head of Operations,” Chris raises his hand and Mike nods.

Then Larry continues to the next man, “Next to him is Victor Cad-del, we call him Pops, because at fifty-three he’s the oldest one here and a seasoned bush Pilot from Colorado—he’s also did some flying in Alaska. The next man is one of the young’uns, Kevin Collins. On the other side of the table is the lovely Misses Laura Donley our lady Pilot—by the way, she’s also is a certified instructor. And finally, we come to our cub, Albert Hadler, he’s our Aircraft Mechanic and he just got certified by Robinson to work on our Robinson Helicopters—he’s also been certified out of Vo-Tech to repair the two old Bell 47G’s. I guess that’s everybody. For your information, Mister Troff just got out of the Army and was driving home to California when he kinda’ ran low on funds, so I offered him this job for the next couple of months. You can all get to know him later, but first let’s get this meeting started. Before I get to any problems or concerns you all may have, I have one concern that needs to be addressed and that has to do with how we use our aircraft. Gentlemen and Lady, I’ve had some requests to rent the Robinson’s for personal weekend use. Because of the liability exposure and the fact the insurance coverage is only for company use, there will not be any Helicopters rented to anyone for their personal use.”

A couple of hands went up; Larry pointed to Kevin and he responds, “Isn’t renting part of doing business, because we’re paying the company for their use.”

“No—not according to the way the insurance policy is written,” replied Larry, “I talked to my attorney and he tells me that once I rent a Helicopter to a private party, then I’m transferring that Helicopter to that party and it’s no longer engaging in the stated company’s operating mission which is Agriculture Services. In order to fall under the company’s operations, that person must be performing flight as an employee on official company business—any other questions?”

Chris pipes up, “So what would satisfy the insurance concerns in order to rent a Helicopter for personal use after hours?”

“The only way you can legally rent one of the company’s Helicopters is for you to obtain full insurance—that’s full hull and liability insurance and provide proof of a policy,” explained Larry.

They all looked at him bug-eyed, except Mike, he already knew about the insurance problem, because he has his own Robinson back at Bob’s and his FBO in California, but this also means no chance for a joy ride in the near future unless there’s another business that rents Helicopters nearby.

Then Larry looked down at his notes and announced, “Starting on Monday, Del Monte informs me that there are corn and bean fields that need spraying west and north east of Mendota, so we’ll be working up there for the next several weeks. We’ll use the Mendota airport as a refueling and reloading place. It’s just a grass strip with very little traffic and will be perfect—I’ll arrange for a fuel truck to be there, and the chemicals will be supplied by Mendota Farm Services Co-op. The next area will be around Cherry. There’s a farm just off of Highway 89 and 2025 North Avenue where we can land and refuel, again I’ll arrange for a fuel truck. The chemicals will be provided by Cherry Agri Services Co-op—are there questions?”

“Yeah,” piped Kevin, “This grass strip at Mendota, just where is it? I never heard of Mendota having an airport.”

“It used to be private, but was donated to the city of Mendota—it isn’t much,” replied Larry, “just some old run down hangars and such—it’s located a few miles southeast of Mendota—does that answer your question?” Kevin nods.

Then Larry asks, “Are there any more questions or concerns?” Looking around the table and seeing no one having anything, Larry closes his notebook and concludes with, “Ok, that’s all I’ve got, so, have a great fourth and I’ll see you all on Monday morning bright and early,” he gets up followed by everyone else.

As Victor walks out of the room he looks at Mike, Kevin, and then Albert and shakes his head remarking, “Now we got three young’uns,” Mike and Albert give him a cold stare.

Then Albert offers his hand saying, “Welcome aboard—now I’ll have someone to talk to—it gets mighty lonely around here when everybody is out flying—except the Boss—he’s always here, likes to sneak up and check on what you’re doing, so keep busy.”

“Thanks for the welcome and tip—I’ll make sure to keep an eye peeled,” said Mike taking his hand smiling, then he asked, “So—tell me something about yourself and the rest of the crew.”

“Well,” began Albert as he and Mike entered the locker room, “the Pilots pretty much hang together, especially Askie and Caddel. Kevin’s kind of an outcast, because of his age—he’s like us still in his twenties. Now Laura, she’s nice and treats everyone with respect even us young’uns, as the Boss likes to call us—she’s giving me flight instruction after hours—hope to solo sometime next week. Once I get my commercial ticket I hope to do some flying besides fixin’ these birds.”

“Then why did you go to school to learn how to fix Helicopters, if you don’t like fixin’ em’?” Mike asked with a quizzical expression.

“I didn’t say I didn’t like fixing Helicopters, I couldn’t afford to go to college for a degree in aviation or take flight instruction from a regular flight school, so here I am’. The Boss was kind enough to send me to California to the Robinson factory where I got certified to repair our Robinson’s—I guess they trained me, because Larry has three of em’ and planning to get a fourth to use to crop dust, if he can convince Robinson to make a few changes and outfit it,” explained Albert as he started to climb out of his dirty coveralls.

Then Kevin rounds the lockers and firmly declares, “Quit jawin’ and hurry up and get changed—that’s if you want to eat--Askie is picking up the tab at Dells Dinner.”

“Yeah, yeah—I’m hurryin’,” replies Albert in a huffy tone, then he looks at Mike and adds, “You can come too, now that you’re part of the team.”

“I can’t this time, maybe the next time,” affirms Mike, “I promised Misses Brentworth that I’ll eat dinner with them.”

“You’re eating with the Bosses Family!” Albert exclaims with a surprised expression along with Kevin.

“Yeah, I’m renting their spare room and meals are included,” Mike explains with a nod.

“Ok then, --I guess you won’t be coming,” concluded Kevin and started for the door.

Albert hangs back closing his wall locker and locking it, and as Kevin is about to exit, he looks back and declares, “You comin’ Albert?” Albert nods with, “Yeah, I’m comin’.”

Then he looks to Mike and says, “I’ll see you Monday—bye,” and hurries to Kevin and they both exit the locker room.

Norma was in the Kitchen making dinner when Mike walked in through the back door; Larry was in the living room relaxing in his favorite easy chair reading the newspaper.

As Mike walked through the kitchen with his recent purchases, Norma said, "I'll have dinner ready in about an hour—the kids will be home shortly so you can meet them, --that's if you're going to eat with us."

"Yeah, I'll be eating with your family—how could I not pass up a home cooked dinner," Mike told her with a smile, then he pointed to his room, "I'll be in my room making my bed. Just bought some sheets and blankets," holding up the shopping bag he was carrying; Norma nods with a smile and goes back to cooking and Mike heads to his new room.

When Mike was almost finished putting his things in the closet, he heard kids talking in the kitchen, and then a loud voice called, "MISTER TROFF DINNER IS READY."

When Mike entered the kitchen, Larry was already seated at his place at the head of the table.

Mark and Troy were sitting on Larry's right with Troy next to his Father; Darcy was helping her Mother and when she saw Mike her eyes got large and she smiled.

Norma introduced Darcy to Mike, "Darcy, this is Mister Troff."

"Please, just Mike. Mister Troff is to formal," said Mike.

"He's really cute," Blurted Darcy grinning.

"Darcy!" Chorused Larry and Norma; Darcy sits down next to where Norma sits.

"Don't get any Ideas," barked Larry scolding, "he's too old for you, besides, you have a boyfriend."

"Yes Dad," Darcy responding with Mike looking aghast.

Then Larry introduces his two boys, "Mike, sitting next to me is our youngest, Mark."

"Yeah, he's our baby," Norma adds with a big smile to Mark's embarrassment.

"Ma'—I'm fourteen," blared Mark, Mike smiles, and then Larry continues, "My other Son is Troy—he's the middle child."

"Dad, good grief—I'm sixteen and no little child," complained Troy.

"Hey it's Ok," Mike says, as he sits down in the only vacant seat between Larry and Darcy which she grins from ear to ear; "When I was your age my parents called me the baby too, because I was the last one born."

"They did?" Chorused Mark and Troy.

“Yeah,” Mike replied giggling; “And my older Brother was the worst, he’d mess up my hair and call me baby Brother.”

Now feeling doleful and knowing he’ll never see Brian again, Mike tells Mark, “Don’t feel bad about being called the baby, or child,” looking at Mark and then Troy, “they know you’re both grown, because someday after they’re both gone, you’ll remember these days and wish they were here again, just so you can hear them call you their baby—I know, because my older Brother is dead and I’ll never see or hear him again,” a tear runs down his cheek.

“I’m really sorry,” said Norma in a somber voice.

“Yes we all are—how did he die, --he couldn’t have been very old?”

Larry inquired sounding remorseful.

“Thank you,” said Mike looking grave, “he was twenty-six and he was killed in the Sinai. I didn’t even know until much later.”

“Wait,” piped Troy, “you said Brian—Brian Troff, --Python is your Brother.”

“Yeah,” replied Mike with a nod, “he was a Marine F30 Fighter Pilot—why?”

“Because he’s a war hero,” gushed Troy looking wide-eyed, “Captain Troff is a Double Ace and he’s your Brother!”

Mike nods and laments, “Was my Brother—he’s gone now,” followed by Troy exclaiming, “wow!” Mike just smiles proudly.

“You said you were in the Army,” said Larry as Norma placed the final bowl of steaming white mashed potatoes on the table and sat down at her place opposite Larry, “where you overseas too?”

“Yeah, I was in India,” Mike replies looking stolid and not wanting to revisit that painful part of his life, and then Norma bows her head, requesting, “Let’s give thanks.”

After they had said grace, everyone started to fill their plates with food, and then they started to eat.

This ritual brought back cherished memories of Mike’s Family eating together before Brian graduated from high school.

Then the conversation returned to the war with Mark asking, “Mike did you see Pegasus when you were in India—you know he’s a Quad Ace.”

Mike laughing tells him, “There’s no such thing as a Quad Ace—and I was in the Infantry so, how would I get to see him. Please—if you all don’t mind I really don’t want to discuss it anymore—besides losing my Brother, I lost another dear Friend as well.”

With painful thoughts, Mike started eating looking woeful.

For the next several minutes everyone quietly ate.

Then Darcy piped up, “Max is coming by tomorrow morning to pick me up—we’ll be spending the fourth together and at the fireworks afterward.”

Then Larry inquired of Mike, “If you don’t have any plans you can spend the day with us.”

“Yeah, sure, I don’t have anything—I’m totally open,” affirmed Mike.

“Great—you can watch me and Troy in the paintball games at Delzell, at the Gun Club tomorrow afternoon at two,” announced Mark with gusto.

“Paintball?” Questioned Mike looking perplexed.

“Yeah,” said Mark looking radiant, his eyes shining, “it’s a lot of fun and we might even win.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” admonished Troy, “We’ll be lucky to be in fourth place—remember, the Spring Valley Destroyers and the Peru Commandoes will be there, and the last time I looked, we don’t have any Auto-Loaders.”

“We don’t need those fancy guns,” retorted Mark, “because, we’re better than they are, and besides we have Roger and Sara—they’re the best shots in the county.”

“I don’t know,” rebuffed Troy, “Tony of the Destroyers and Bob of the Commandoes are just as good, remember, they got military coaches and we don’t have anyone.”

“If you don’t have a coach—who coaches you?” Asked Mike looking confused.

“Roger Ferden, he’s our Captain,” quipped Mark looking blissful.

“So is Roger a military guy?” Asked Mike.

“No,” replied Troy, “he’s my friend in High School, and he’s got these military books we learn from.”

“So, let me get this straight,” affirmed Mike, “you guys don’t have an adult coach or adult supervision.”

Both boys give Mike a cold hard stare with a return barb from Troy, “I’m not a child and I don’t need adult supervision—I’m sixteen and full grown.”

“Yeah, sure you are, but you and your friends are still a minors,” corrected Mike to Larry and Norma’s nodding agreement.

Then Larry bluntly asked, “Does your friends Parents know that you’re engaging in a potentially dangerous activity without any supervision?”

The boys looked at their Father with brooding expressions and slowly shook their heads.

Then Larry firmly asserted, “Until such time you have an adult coach, you’re both forbidden from any further activities involving paintball guns—is that understood?”

Looking despondent, they both nod, and then Troy dolefully asked, “What about the games tomorrow afternoon—our friends are depending on us?”

Larry thought for a minute, and then he said, “If there’s going to be adult referees and judges, then you may compete, but no more practice with paintball guns until you have an adult coach—is that clear?”

First, the two boys were elated about being able to compete, and nodded, but then were despondent about not being able to practice.

For the next several minutes they ate dinner in silence, with Mark and Troy looking despondent; Mike seeing their sadness remembers back when he was a teenager and had to hide his Helicopter training, because he thought his Father didn’t want him to fly Helicopters.

Then Mike piped up, “I’ll be your Coach—that’s if it’s Ok with Larry and Norma.”

The two boys turned to look at Mike with astonishment.

Then Troy asked, “What do you know about paintball?”

“Well,” Mike began, “Like I said when we started eating, I was in the Infantry and fought in the war in India, so I know about military tactics and I’m not a bad shot, plus, we used simulated weapons that shot paintballs in our maneuvers—and I’ll be twenty four in a couple weeks, so I’m legally an adult by four years--does that qualify me?”

Both boys looking bug-eyed were nodding fervently.

Mike looked to Larry and Norma, they nodded their approval smiling, and then Larry asked, “Ok, so when do you plan to Coach—don’t forget, you have a job Monday through Friday eight to ten hours a day?”

As the two boys sat with a quizzical expressions, Mike coolly replied, “I’ll coach them on weekends and on my time off.”

“Ok, then it looks as if you two have an adult coach,” affirmed Larry.

That evening, Larry called the parents of the other kids and appraised them on what he discovered and that Mark and Troy won't be allowed to play with paintball guns until they have adult supervision.

The next day, the Brentworths, minus Darcy, she was enjoying the day with her boyfriend, Max Kalman, were in Delzell at the local gun club grounds watching Mark and Troy along with their teammates take part in the Paintball games.

Troy broke the bad news to his teammates about not being able to play until they get an adult coach.

Roger Ferden, the team's Captain, looking somewhat doleful said, "Yeah, my Parents told me this morning at Breakfast that I couldn't play either," the other team members all sadly nod.

Then Sara Jostock asked, "Now what are we going to do? You know the gun club won't let us use their property to practice and play without our Parent's permission."

"I think we have a Coach," announced Troy.

"We do!" Exclaimed Sara, "Who?"

"A new guy Dad just hired," replied Troy, "he's staying with us for the summer."

"So, who is he?" Asked Roger.

"He just got out of the Army and he's only twenty four, so he's not real old," explains Mark with a grin, "and he says he was in the war and knows military tactics—now ain't that cool."

"Yeah--so, when can we meet him?" Asked Roger sounding a bit peeved.

"I'll go and get him," declared Troy, "he's here with my Parents to watch the paintball matches," pointing towards the spectators, and then he turns and hurries over there.

A few minutes later, Troy returns with Mike and introduces the group to Mike, "Mister Troff, these are my teammates—Guys, this is our Coach, Mister Troff."

"Please—drop the Mister," Mike responding, "just call me Coach or Coach Troff—Ok?" They all nod, and then Mike asks, "So—what do you call yourselves?"

"We're the Berserkers," announced Roger; Mike gives a slight nod saying, "Good title—Berserkers, and who might you all be?"

"I'm Roger Ferden—Captain," said Roger sounding bilious; Mike eyes him with a bit of suspicion.

Then Mike turned to the older girl and asked, "And you are?"

"Sara Jostock," she answered with a smile.

"Sara—Jostock," Mike repeated, she smiled nodding, "Yeah."

The girl standing next to her introduced herself next, "I'm Valerie Darley—fifteen," she said with a big grin.

"Fifteen—," Mike repeated with raised brow; she nods and points to Sara and says, "She's sixteen."

Then Sam steps up and offers his hand with a big smile and says, "I'm Sam Hiley—fourteen," Mike takes his hand with, "great to meet you Sam, and how old is your Captain—I don't recall him saying."

"I'm sixteen and what's it to you?" Piped Roger before Sam had a chance to reply.

Now Mike senses Roger has an attitude issue, so Mike harshly barbed, "I don't know what your problem is, Roger, but if you want to play paintball you better get rid of that chip you're carrying, because as your Coach I'm not going tolerated it—in the Army if a subordinate doesn't straighten up, corrective action is instituted and one of the punishments is reduction of rank, so if you want to remain Captain I suggest a change of attitude."

Roger gave Mike a glaring stare and blared, "My teammates chose me as their Captain and you can't take that from me, besides, you're not my Parent, and I don't have to take any orders from you."

"No—I'm not your Parent, but I am your adult Coach, and as such, you will obey me as if I was your Parent—and if you don't—then you won't be on this team," rebuffed Mike in a hard scolding tone.

"You can't kick me off this team," Roger blared.

"Oh' I most certainly can," retorted Mike, "if you don't cool down, you can watch today's matches from the sideline—it's your choice."

With eyes glazed in anger, Roger blared in Mike face, "SCREW YOU—I'M PLAYING AND YOU'RE NOT MY BOSS!"

"That does it—you're out of the games," Mike told him in a firm authoritative voice, and then motioned to a nearby Referee who was now looking in their direction after hearing Roger's rant; the Referee comes over.

When the Referee arrives, he eyes Roger and inquires, "What's the problem here?"

"I'm taking Roger Ferden out of the games and I need you to make it official," Mike affirmed in a calm firm voice.

"Ok, if that's your decision," announced the Referee.

"Yes—that's my decision," affirmed Mike in a serious tone; the Referee nods, and then he looks at Roger and declares, "You're hereby barred

from playing.”

Roger is stunned and huffily walks away.

Then the Referee asks, “Is there anything else before we start?”

“No, that about takes care of everything and thank you,” Mike tells him offering his hand; after they shake, the Referee walks away.

After the Referee had gone, Troy with a worried look asked, “Now that we don’t have Roger we only have five players—how can we compete without Roger and with only five?”

“You don’t need six players to compete,” Mike informing them, “according to the rules for today’s game—all you need to compete is five players, and as for not having Roger, I’m sure one of you is as good a player as he is.”

“But—we don’t have a Captain now,” Valerie bemoaned.

“Who’s normally in command when Roger isn’t there?” Asked Mike.

“Sara takes over when Roger isn’t around,” replied Mark with everyone nodding.

“Ok then, Sara’s your new Captain,” announced Mike, “so, let’s see how good you are.”

For the next four hours the six paintball teams competed and when it was over the Destroyers won and the Peru Commandoes came in second, but alas, the Berserkers were last, because they didn’t have any coherent strategy and they lacked endurance and coordination; they were stumbling and fumbling and weren’t playing as a coherent team.

Later, before they left, Mike tried to reassure them, “Don’t feel so bad—I think you knew you weren’t going to win and why is that Sara?”

“Because we played like crap.”

“Yeah and why?” Mike bluntly asked.

“Because we didn’t play hard enough,” replied Sam looking ashamed.

“Partly,” Mike told them, “but it’s deeper than that—can anyone venture a guess.”

“We played like shit, because we aren’t properly trained,” contended Roger sounding miffed; Mike smiled and points at Roger declaring, “You hit the nail on the head—you all were at a disadvantage, because you didn’t have a Coach to give you the proper training—well that’s going to change. I’m going to work you all very hard until you have the stamina and coordination to compete, then I’ll get you all to work as a single unit—as one. No more grandstanding with one or two persons doing it all, from now

on its teamwork, and once you've able to do that, then and only then, will you practice shooting skills and learn offensive and defensive strategy—any questions?”

Roger raised his hand and Mike pointed to him, then Roger in a calm amicable tone asked, “I’m I still the Captain?”

Mike looked at him for several seconds, and then nodded with, “Yes, and Sara will be your second—your Lieutenant, and she’ll lead the team when you’re not here.”

Roger smiles and offers his hand to Sara telling her, “You were great out there today in my absents—you’ll make a great second.”

“Thanks Roger,” Sara said taking his hand, “but I really sucked.”

“We all did,” affirmed Roger smiling, then he looked at Mike and asked, “So when do we start, Coach?”

“I’ll see you all here Saturday morning at eight—any questions?” They all looked at each other, and then shook their heads.

Mike dismissed them with, “Ok—I’ll see you Saturday at eight—you’re dismissed.”

The group broke up and headed off in different directions, Mike followed the Brentworths.

Mike and the Brentworths arrived back in Ladd and stop at the local Pizza Parlor for a late lunch.

At three a small parade went down Main Street and later they watched a ball game; that night everyone watched the fireworks.

CHAPTER 20 -- Coach Troff.

Early Saturday morning, Mike, Mark and Troy headed to the Delzell Gun Club field along with the other Berserker members to start training.

Standing in front of the gathered team, Mike started the training exercises with a lecture, “I understand you have some military manuals that you’re been using to practice by—well, you can see how well that went—you can’t learn how to fight from a book.

Today we’re going to start by getting you people in physical condition.

You can’t execute military moves if you’re not physically fit, so we’ll start with military calisthenics—like what I did in the Army.”

Mike had them position themselves to allow enough room to do the calisthenics he had in mind, for the next hour, Mike had them doing Jump-jacks, Body twists, Running in place, Pushups and Sit-ups.

By the time nine-thirty arrived, they were weak, out of breath and sweating; and as the Sun got higher and hotter, Mike took them over to a large stand of trees next to a large creek where it was cool and there he had them sit.

Then he started to lecture again, “In the Army we called what you just did Physical Training or PT for short, and there’s going to be a lot more until you’re ready to move on. There are other exercises like the low crawl, the overhead ladder and a mile run. We don’t have an oval track to do a mile run, but there are plenty of country roads we can use. I’ll mark out a field for you to do the low crawl, so be sure to wear old clothes, because they’ll be getting grass stained and dirty. As for the overhead ladder, I’ll talk to the Gun Club and see if they’ll build us one. After I explain what it is and what it’s used for, I think they’ll probably want to use it themselves—do any of you have any questions so far?”

Troy raised his hand to which Mike pointed and acknowledged him, “Go ahead.”

“So, what are we going to do for the rest of the day—sit here and listen to you lecture us—I thought you were going to Coach us on how to win at paintball?” Troy asked in a criticizing tone; followed by the rest of the team chorusing, “Yeah—what is this.” Ending with Roger complaining, “You’re supposed to teach us how to win at paintball—this doesn’t look like paintball practice to me.”

Mike raised his hand to get their attention, and once he did, he argued, “You’re not going to be practicing paintball until you’re physically fit and coordinated to engage in hard paintball, like the two teams that won yesterday. Most of the teams I watched yesterday had you so outclassed it’s a miracle, that you even finished. But, more importantly, you need to function as a single unit—not like five or six individuals. So, until you become competent in those three areas, there’s no amount of practice that will get you a win—you’ll continue to come in dead last—a loser. Troy originally asked, ‘What are we going to do for the rest of the Day?’ you’re going to learn how to function as a single unit until lunch. After lunch some more PT and some more practice learning how to move as one.”

Then Roger piped up, “We’re not in the blasted Army—this isn’t any fun—the reason I play paintball is to have fun.”

“Did you have fun yesterday stumbling and falling all over the field? Was it fun to come in dead last, how did it feel to be the losers—a joke, huh?” Asked Mike argumentatively, and then he asserted, “No you’re not in the Army and you’re not going to learn how to function as a single unit from a book, so—what will it be, continue with the status quo or allow me to Coach you?”

At first they looked at Mike in silence, then slowly one-by-one they begin to nod until Roger announced, “Ok—we want you to Coach us.”

“Great,” Mike blared, “and we’re going to have many more lectures like this on what you did right, and ways to improve, but especially what you did wrong and how to correct them. Ok, from now until lunch lets practice on how to move as one. So—everyone on your feet for your first lesson on coordination and learning how to move together—as one unit.”

When they were standing in a disorganized group, Mike barked, “What is this? Form a line facing forward like you’ve seen Soldiers do in the movies.”

The six kids reoriented to a straight line looking at Mike standing in front of them.

Then Mike smiled and said, “Yes, that’s more like it, very good,” then he lectured again, “now there’s several crude and nasty ways to teach you how to move as a single unit, but the Army uses a graceful and simple way to accomplish this, plus its fast, easy and always works—its marching. Don’t laugh, once you’ve mastered it you’ll find it’s a lot of fun like learning to dance with a partner. Later, if you want, I’ll show you how to include your Marker (Actual name for a Paintball Gun.), then you can really show off. All right, we’ll start by moving forward together. The object is to keep

a straight line and to step out together with the same foot. The first step is always with the left foot, if you remember that, you can always get back in step with a quick skip. Ok, now just like if you're in the Army, come to attention by standing erect and looking forward. I'll call attention followed by the command of forward march—I'll call halt when I want you to stop. You'll be sloppy until you get the hang of it, to help you to keep in step I'll call cadence—let's try it—AT T E N T I O N—FORWARD D--MARCH."

The team took their first step using their left foot and started forward, but by the time they have gone twenty feet the line was no longer straight and by the time they had gone another twenty feet they were all out of sync.

Mike call, "HALT!"

They stopped, and then Mike told them with a big grin, "Now look around, see where you are—at this point you should still be in a straight line—are you?"

They looked around and shook their heads, and then Roger hotly declared, "This is impossible—how can I possibly keep in step with someone with longer legs—they're taking bigger steps?"

Laughing, Mike responds, "Everyone takes a uniform step of approximately thirty inches—about three feet or one meter, and you do this at a rate of one-hundred and twenty steps per minute."

Everyone looks at Mike bug-eyed and Mike laughs with reassuring words, "Don't look so shocked—with enough practice you'll get the hang of it, and a lot sooner than you think—everyone in the military are able to do it, and in about a week or two—I was in the same position as you when I was in the Army, but I learned and so can you. If you think this is impossible, try doing it while you're running."

The look on their faces caused Mike to bend over laughing.

When Mike had finished with the hysterics, he had them reorder, and then had them march in a straight line again; for the next several hours, Mike drilled them like an Army Sergeant until it was almost lunchtime.

At eleven, several pickups, two vans and four cars pulled up to the Gun Clubs clubhouse.

As Mike continued to drill the Berserkers in a mowed grassy field, the ladies began to prepare several picnic tables while several men started a fire in the barbeque pit.

As brats and steaks were frying, several of the club members stood and watched with curiosity as Mike drilled the Berserkers; by now the

Berserkers were catching on and weren't as sloppy anymore.

At twelve, the odor from the cooking meat from the barbeque pit, carried by a cool breeze, drifted over to the Berserkers.

Mike feeling very hungry along with everyone on the team decided it was time to head into town to get a bite to eat.

As they walked to their vehicles, several of the Gun Club members approached them; one of the men inquired, "What are you kids doing? We thought you were training to play paintball."

"We are," Mike replied for team, before Roger could reply, "I'm their Coach and I'm trying to teach them coordination and to work as a single unit, as well as building up their stamina."

"I see," replied the man, "after watching you guys play the other day—you need it, ha, ha, ha..."

Every one of the Berserkers displayed an expression of humiliation; Mike looking cheeky nodded.

Then the Man asked, "So when are you all going use your guns and do some target practice?"

"After we get back from lunch," Mike casually replied to the teams pleasant surprise, then Roger hotly piped correcting, "We don't call our guns—guns, they're call markers, because they shoot paint balls instead of bullets and leave a paint splat to mark a hit."

"Sorry for the mistake," said the Man, "anyway you guys sure look like you're having a lot of fun playing the other day in the games."

"We did, but we lost," said Roger dismissively, "that's why we got Coach Troff."

The Man nods along with the others with him, then he offered, "Say—we've got plenty of food, why don't you guys join us."

"Are you sure—we don't want to impose," Milk politely responds.

"Yeah, we'd be honored to have you join us," the Man said with dignity; those with him all nod.

"Ok, and thanks," said Mike and they followed the men over to the picnic tables.

After lunch, the Berserkers broke out their paintball Markers and the Gun Club members setup several targets.

Roger was the first to shoot, and while he was able to hit most of the targets, he couldn't hit any bulls eyes; Troy and Sara, the other two sixteen year olds, faired the same.

Now Mark and Sam weren't able to even hit the target whereas Valerie did manage to hit it a couple of times.

Most of the Gun Club members just shook their heads, and then one of the members asked if he could give it a try.

Troy handed his Marker to the guy and when he shot he hit the target, and even put two of the eight rounds in the bulls eye; with a smile he passes the Marker to another member and that guy did even better.

After six of the Gun Club members had their turns, the last member hands the Marker back to Troy advising, “I think you need more shooting practice than all of that marching and calisthenics.”

Troy receives his Marker looking rather despondent, as well as the others.

Then one of the Gun Club members looking at Mike piped up, “You’re their Coach—let’s see how well you can shoot—hey Kid, give your Coach your Marker,” pointing at Mark; he hands his Marker to Mike and Mike takes it.

“Ok Mister Coach let’s see how good you are,” the Gun Club guy contends.

Mike eyes him dismissively, walks over, aims at the rather large target at thirty meters and puts four paint splats on the bulls eye covering it up with red paint so it’s no longer visible; everyone is all bug eyed especially the six Berserkers.

Mike hands the Marker back to Mark informing him and the other Berserkers, “I’ll teach you all how to properly hit a target after you’re physically conditioned and can operate as a team.”

Mike turns to the Gun Club guys and tells them, “You guys need lots of practice,” they look at Mike with bilious expressions; Mike gives them a big sarcastic grin.

Then Mike orders, “Ok Berserkers lunch period is over—time to work out,” looking downcast, they dip their heads and follow Mike over to the field to begin the afternoon doing PT.

For the next two weeks, all the Berserkers could talk about was Mike and how well he could shoot.

In the evenings the other members of the team would come over and sit out on the back lawn with Mike and talk about military stuff.

Mike would tell them about his adventures and when Darcy’s large orange and black striped tomcat cuddled up next to Valerie and began to purr, Mike talked about his companion, Sheila, with a faraway and pained look in his eye, but he never told them that she was a Tiger.

For the next two weeks all the kids could talk about was Mike, and soon the other kids parents began to get concerned about their kids

spending so much time with Mike rather than doing other things, so on Saturday, the week Mike was to turn twenty-four, they had a private meeting with Larry and Norma Brentworth when all their kids were at the Gun Club with Mike.

Mr. Ferden sounding judgmental said, “Outside of what you told us,” looking at Larry, “we know nothing about this guy—he could be a deserter that the Government is looking for, or worst, a sex predator or pedophile—has anyone done a background check on him?”

“Now, now,” interrupted Larry, “I’m sure he’s none of those things.”

“How do you know?” Mr. Ferden huffishly argues, “Have you done a background check on him?” Larry shakes his head.

“There you go,” Mr. Ferden hotly concludes, and in an accusing tone he adds, “for all we know, he could be a wanted fugitive.”

“I doubt that,” Larry responds in a reassuring voice, with Mr. Ferden grunting, “I’m not so sure.”

Then Mr. Hiley pipes up with, “Me too, and what about all those wild stories Sam tells, like the one where he and another soldier single handedly freed a whole group of people from a squad of Pakistani Soldiers—seems highly unlikely. He’s filling our kids head with nonsense and fairy-tales.”

Then Mr. Jostock pipes up, “Until his background can be verified, he should be prevented from any further coaching of our kids—are we all in agreement?”

Everyone except the Brentworths nods, and then Larry declares in a melancholy tone, “Tomorrow morning I’ll inform Mister Troff that he can no longer coach the kids, and when the kids learn that he can no longer coach them they aren’t going to take it lightly. May I add, I don’t agree with your thinking—I think you’re all paranoid.”

“We may be paranoid, but with our kids welfare at stake—it’s the right thing to do,” rebuffed Mr. Ferden in a firm voice.

“Ok, Ok,” bemoaned Larry, “tomorrow I’ll make some call’s to see what I can find out about Mister Troff.”

Monday morning at breakfast with Mike and all of the Brentworths present, Larry announced, “I have an important announcement that involves all of us—including Mike,” Larry pauses and takes a deep breath and in a firm asserting tone says, “Because of the concerns of your teammates parents, as of now, Mike can no longer Coach the Berserkers nor can he have any further association with any of you.”

Looking aghast, Mike, Troy and Mark were stunned, finally Mike asked, “Why, what have I done?”

“Nothing, as far as I’m aware of,” replied Larry composedly, “but, the other parents are concerned that no one knows anything about you, except what you told us, which isn’t much. So, until such time we learn more, you can’t coach.”

Mike looks at him with a doleful expression, and then says, “I have nothing to hide—I told you everything when you hired me—I don’t know what else you want to know.”

“Mister Ferden thinks you might be a deserter and the government is looking for you, --are you?”

Both Mark and Troy looked shocked, especially Mike, and shaking his head he responds, “No—I was legally discharged and if you need proof I’ll show you my discharge papers.”

“Yes, as your employer I would like to see them,” proclaimed Larry with a nod.

“Ok—I’ll show them to you tonight.”

“Dad—Mike’s not a deserter—he’s a war hero,” declared Mark with Troy nodding.

“We don’t know that,” argued Larry, “as for those so called adventures stories you guys told me about, well—they sound pretty far-fetched.”

“So—how are we to avoid him when he lives in our house and eats at our table?” Asked Troy looking bewildered.

Larry looked at him and concluded, “You can’t, so I guess the restriction only applies to the other kids, and because of that—you’re not to be inviting any of your friends over, and Darcy, the same goes for you—no Max.”

“Dad—that’s so unfair,” complained Darcy.

“Sorry kids, but until we have a background check done on Mike, no friends over—capisce,” affirmed Larry, followed by all three kids nodding, and then Larry looks at his watch and announces, “It’s time we head on in to work—we can discuss this further this evening.”

Finishing his coffee both Larry and Mike get up, then Larry motions to Mike telling him, “C’mon let’s go,” and they both walk out of the house.

As Mike cleaned, swept and polished, he kept thinking about what was discussed at the breakfast table, and the more he thought about it the more he felt like he was being ostracized.

Then as quitting time approached, Mike said to himself, “Maybe it’s time to head on home like I originally planned—I should have enough saved

up to get me to California plus a little extra in case I run into car trouble.”

Larry was so busy with the job at Mendota that he forgot to make any background calls to check on Mike.

That evening, Mike got his Discharge Document and showed it to Larry asserting, “Are you now satisfied that I’m no deserter.”

Larry looking expressionless nods and hands the document back to Mike; after receiving the document, Mike turns and walks back to his room and closes the door.

Tuesday morning, Mike walks to Larry’s office, opens the door, pokes his head in and asks, “Larry you got a minute?”

Larry looks up from his paperwork and nods with, “Yeah—come in and have a seat,” pointing to the chair in front of his desk; Mike walks in closing the door behind him and seats himself.

Then Larry asks, “What can I do for you? I’ve still got lots of loose ends to tie up at Mendota, and I gotta’ job for you to get the Robinson Raven all cleaned up for Friday. There will be some Photographers from Tri-State Mapping, they wanta’ take some aerial photos, so make sure the windows are nice and clean.”

“Yeah—about that,” says Mike dismissively, “the reason I want to see you is to give you my two week notice—I’ve decide to head home, I’ll be leaving around the first of next month—sorry.”

“You’re quitting!” Exclaimed Larry looking aghast; Mike nods with, “Yeah.”

“Why?” Asked Larry looking perplexed.

“It was the discussion yesterday at breakfast--quite frankly, I felt demeaned,” explained Mike with a sullen expression.

“I see,” said Larry solemnly, and then countered, “you must understand, parents have the right to do background checks on someone who’s mentoring their kids.”

Mike nods and argues, “Yeah, but not after the fact. Why didn’t you tell me I had to wait until after background checks were completed before I was allowed to Coach? No o o—you all were perfectly happy until your kids started to spend more time with me then at home—if it would’ve been during school days I wouldn’t have spent so much time Coaching, and insisted they tend to their school work, but it was Summer and they had nothing else to do—would you rather have them chasing around causing trouble?”

Larry looks at Mike with a stolid expression and after couple of seconds shakes his head.

Then Mike adds, “That’s all I wanted to tell you—and I’ll make sure the Robinson is ready for the job on Friday. Is there anything else you need

me to do?”

“No—outside of the Robinson, there’s nothing special—and thanks for the advance notice, I appreciate that. I’m sorry I made you feel demeaned—that wasn’t my intention—sorry,” said Larry in apologetic tone.

On Wednesday, Mike turned twenty-four without any fanfare; it was a regular day of work.

On Friday, Mike had the Robinson Raven all shined up for the photo flight and was sweeping the hangar floor when in walked Larry and Laura; Larry was in a very irate state.

Albert walking to a Helicopter that he was working on carrying a set of spark plugs asks, “What’s happenin’?”

“Victor called in sick and now we’re shorthanded,” explained Laura.

Then she asked Larry, “So, do you still want me to fly the photo job this afternoon?”

“No—I need you to take Victor’s place at Mendota—those fields won’t wait—we need to get the spraying done by the end of the week or we’ll lose the Del Monte contract,” affirmed Larry, “I’ll just have to call and tell Tri-State Mapping that I’m short a Pilot and see if I can get it rescheduled.”

Then Albert piped up, “If I had my license I could fly.”

“Yeah, but you don’t, and it’ll be at least another year before you’ll have your commercial—hell, you haven’t even soloed yet.”

“I would’ve if you’d pay for my flight training,” asserted Albert.

“He’s right,” declared Laura, “an extra Pilot to have on standby isn’t a dumb idea.”

“I’ll think about it,” grumbled Larry.

Then Mike raised his hand piping up, “I can fly Helicopters—I’ve got a commercial with an instrument rating.”

“You!” Exclaimed Larry looking astounded, along with Laura and Albert.

“Where did you learn to fly?” Inquired Larry, both Laura and Albert were also curious.

“Back home in California before I got drafted,” replied Mike, and then he added, “I had a job flying.”

“I’ll need some proof,” said Larry with an etched expression.

“I don’t have a logbook with me at the moment, but here’s my flight certificate and medical, and I’m current,” Mike said composedly as he withdrew the two cards and handed them to Larry.

Larry examines them with Laura looking on.

Then Laura comments, “Looks Ok.”

“Ok, what kinds of aircraft have you flown?” Larry asks with a searching expression.

“Well, I’ve flown the Aerospatiale Dolphin, Hughes OH-6 Cayuse and Robinson R22,” Mike responding with a grin.

“But you’ve never flown a Robinson R44,” questioned Larry; Mike shakes his head.

Then Mike rebuffs, “If it has the same kind of handling and flight controls as the R22, then I don’t see where it would be a problem.”

Larry looks at Laura and she agrees nodding, “He’s right—they’re somewhat similar with the R44 being more powerful and faster. If he’s flown the Helicopter he said he has, he should be able to fly the R44.”

“All right,” said Larry with a nod, “you can fly the photo job, but first, I want you,” looking at Laura, “to give him a check flight in the R44.”

Laura nods and then says to Mike, “I’ll get the R44 Flight Manual for you,” Mike nods.

Then Larry looks at Mike and orders, “You need to change—you can’t be flying our clients wearing that,” pointing to Mike’s dirty coveralls.

Mike looks at his clothes and nods smiling, and then he hurries to the locker room to change.

When Mike returns, Laura hands him the manual and tells him, “Read this over—ten o’clock is your check flight—you got until then to get familiar with the R44,” Mike takes the manual and heads for the conference room to read.

At ten o’clock Laura enters the conference room and announces, “Time’s up—time to fly and to see how good you are—you ready?”

Mike nods, gets up and together they walk out to the tarmac where the Helicopter was moved too.

After doing a quick walk-a-round inspection they both get in and buckle up.

Mike had no problem in starting up the R44; it was somewhat similar to the R22, which was covered in the manual.

Mike pointed out the other digital instruments and explained how they functioned; they were very similar to the ones he used in EXR2 and 3.

After spending an hour flying, Laura was quite surprised at how smooth and precise his flying was especially for someone this young; and so, Mike’s going to be flying the photo job at one o’clock.

At one o’clock the two photographers arrived and Mike takes off with them, two hours later, Mike returns with two very satisfied

photographers and they head for the office; Mike heads to the locker room to change back into his coveralls, because he still has another two hours to work.

After the two photographers leave, Larry walks out into the hangar looking for Mike, and when he finds him mopping the locker room floor, he's surprised and bluntly remarks, "It sure didn't take you long to change and get back to your old job."

Mike looks at him confused, and then he remarks, "There's still two hours left—what do you want me to do, stand around and do nothing?"

"No—I guess not," replied Larry in a somber tone, "I just came out here to thank you for a job well done—you saved my butt and the company a very large fee—thanks."

"You're very welcome, Sir."

"You know, Laura speaks highly of your flight skills—we could use another Pilot around here," says Larry in a commending tone along with an offer.

"Thanks, and that's mighty gracious of you, but I can't, because I'm leaving at the end of next week—remember," Mike politely thanking him and turning down the offer.

"You know—you don't have too," Larry begging, "please, why don't you stay I can make it well worth your while."

"Again, thank you, but I've made up my mind," Mike firmly replied, "I can't live in a community with everyone thinking I'm some kind of criminal, anyway, I miss my family."

Larry nods sadly and walks out of the locker room and back to his office.

With Mike leaving at the end of next week, Larry didn't bother doing any background checks on Mike, as he didn't see the point any longer.

That weekend, Mike packed his bags and loaded his van with his stuff from his room in anticipation of leaving early next Saturday morning.

On Sunday, Mike went shopping to get a few items for the trip home, and while he was gone, Mr. Ferden stopped by to learn what Larry had discovered from the background checks and was shocked when Larry told him that he hadn't done any, because Mike was leaving.

Mr. Ferden in an irate state barked, "You didn't do any checks at all—Troff might be a wanted criminal—it's our duty to notify the authorities!"

"I saw his discharge paper, so he isn't a deserter, and I seriously doubt he's a wanted felon," rebuffed Larry, "and since he no longer coaches our kids and is leaving I see no point in doing a background check, besides, I

don't have the time. If you want to do it—fine, be my guest.”

“Fine, I'll do just that—and if he's wanted, I'm notifying the authorities,” Mr. Ferden huffishly retorted, and then he turned and stomped out of Larry's house.

Like Larry, Mr. Ferden was busy with his job and didn't get the opportunity to make any calls regarding Mike, but on Thursday, he found some spare time later that afternoon, so he first checked the government web sites to see if Mike is listed and found nothing, so being curious he called the Department of Defense to see what they had to say.

Most of the call was automated, you know, push one for one thing and two for something else, etcetera, then finally, after going through a lengthy confusing menu he was able to talk to a real person, “Good afternoon, my name is Jane Higgins and how may I help you,” she asked?

“Hi—I'm Mister Ferden from Peru, Illinois, and what can you tell me about an Army Corporal Michael Troff.”

“Just a minute Sir,” she replied and began accessing the Department of Defense's database.

A couple of minutes later, she came back and said, “We currently have no one by that name on active duty listing—can you give me his full name?”

“I don't know his full name, and he's not on active duty—he was discharged about five or six weeks ago—does that help?”

“Thank you, Sir, I'll try the inactive and discharged listings—please hold,” she politely tells him.

After another few minutes, she's back on the phone and informs Mr. Ferden, “I found Corporal Troff listed in the inactive listing.”

“Inactive,” Mr. Ferden repeated sounding confused, “I was told he was discharged.”

“That's nothing to be concerned about,” She affirmed, “he was currently discharged from active duty—technically he's still obligated for another four years. You see—everyone who's drafted serves four years on active duty and four years inactive duty.”

“Oh', so he's still a Solder for another four years,” concludes Mr. Ferden.

“Yes that's correct, Sir,” said Jane, and then she noticed Mike's entry has a small red dot next to it and remarks, “What do we have here?”

“Is there something wrong?” Asked Mr. Ferden his curiosity peaked.

“Not sure—his entry has been flag,” Jane responding.

“Is he wanted for something?” Asked Mr. Ferden with a heightened sense of interest.

“Could be,” responded Jane Higgins as she clicks on the flag and gets a popup message which reads, “ATTENTION! Please call Major General Richard Griggs at 555-555-5599 with any information to the whereabouts’ of Corporal Michael Troff.”

Then she relays the message to Mr. Ferden and he writes it down with a devious smile thinking the FBI is looking for him.

Jane Higgins adds, “I suggest calling tomorrow morning, because the General has probably left the office for the day—is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, you’ve been very helpful and thank you,” said Mr. Ferden prior to hanging up.

“You’re welcome and have good day Sir,” she responded and hangs up.

Mr. Ferden had a big grin as he thought, “Figured that kid was wanted by the law—tomorrow I’ll give the FBI a call and tell them where to find him—I was right, Troff is a wanted felon, hee, hee...”

Friday morning as Mike helped Albert with a Helicopter on the tarmac, old vintage airplanes started to land, and an hour later two home-built airplanes landed.

After refueling, they took off and headed north followed by several of the vintage airplanes two hours later.

Later that morning as well as into the afternoon vintage, home-built and even several vintage WW2 Military airplanes landed and later took off; Mike also noticed while they arrived from the west, south and east, they all headed north after leaving.

While eating lunch with Albert and Larry, and being curious about all the old airplane traffic, Mike asked, “What’s up with all of the vintage and home-built airplanes headin’ north?”

“They’re heading to Wisconsin for the International Air Show, it starts tomorrow and runs a week,” replied Larry, “I attend the Air Show several years ago—was quite an experience that I’ll never forget—someday when I’m not so busy I would like to go again. Every year they have a theme, I believe this year they’re honoring our Aces and Heroes who flew in the current conflict—I believe it’s called ‘Hero’s in the sky’,”

Mike’s heart skipped a beat or two, then Larry added, “There’s a big write-up in today’s paper—you should check it out.”

Out of curiosity, Mike inquired, “What about the dead Pilots—will they be mentioned,” thinking of his Brother Brian.

“Defiantly, including Pegasus,” affirmed Larry with a nod, “I’m sure the Military will also have most of the live Hero Pilots along with their Aircraft at the War Bird exhibit, so the visitors can ask questions—good PR you know,” he smiles.

Mike goes on eating his lunch wondering how they’re going to represent Pegasus, live or dead. “That would be something I would like to see.”

Later Friday morning, Mr. Ferden called the FBI to tell them about Mike and where they can find him.

When the phone stopped ringing a male voice answered, “This is David Baker Enforcement Division of the FBI, how may I be of assistance?”

“I understand you’re looking for a Michael Troff and I can tell you where he can be found,” said Mr. Ferden.

“One moment please while look up his file,” said Dave Baker in an authoritative tone.

Mr. Ferden was put on hold with faint music playing in the background, after several minutes of music, Mr. Ferden was wondering whether he was forgotten and was starting to get upset when Mr. Baker came back, “We have no one by that name listed under ‘Wants and Warrants’, are you sure you gave me the right name?”

“Yes, Michael Troff, the Department of Defense told me he was wanted,” Mr. Ferden firmly asserting.

“Department of Defense,” Mr. Baker repeating, and sounding a bit annoyed he advised, “This is the FBI, not the Department of Defense—I suggest you call them—is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No—and thanks, good day,” said Mr. Ferden feeling very disappointed and disconnects, and then he dials the number he was given yesterday.

After several rings, a Male voice answers, “Hello—Pentagon, General Staff, Major General Griggs Office, Specialist Five Dickman speaking, how may I help you?”

“Yes, my name is Ronald Ferden and I was told to call General Griggs at this number—it’s in regard to Corporal Michael Troff,” Mr. Ferden politely announced.

Mr. Ferden can hear typing on a computer keyboard, and then Specialist Dickman says, “Yes—I see Corporal Troff has been flagged high priority and the General definitely wants to talk to anyone with information on Corporal Troff’s whereabouts’, but the General is at Staff meetings all day

and I'm afraid he won't be in his office until Monday morning—you'll have to call back then."

"Does he have a cell phone?" asked a rather frustrated Mr. Ferden.

"I'm sorry," replied Specialist Dickman, "The General will be in a secured area and can't be reached by outside phones—is there anything else?"

"No—I'll call early Monday morning and he better be there—bye now," barked a rather upset Mr. Ferden and hangs up.

Just before quitting time on Friday, Larry enters the locker room where Mike is changing out of his dirty coveralls for the final time.

Larry walks over to Mike and hands him his final check and cheerlessly says, "I wish you would reconsider about leaving, I really need you to stay."

"Thanks, but I've made up my mind, and I must be heading home, I've been here to long—I've should've been home a long time ago—you know how it is." Larry nods and mouths, "Yeah."

After unloading his wall locker, Mike says goodbye to Larry and Albert, the only ones there, along with a handshake, and then walks out to his van; on the way he picks up a copy of the local newspaper.

Early Saturday morning, Mike is headed out of Ladd to I80, then instead of heading west, he heads east to Peru, and then to the interchange with I39 where he takes I39 north.

After reading the paper last night, Mike has decided on one more side trip before he heads home.

About forty minutes later, Mike arrives in Rockford where Interstate 90 merges with Interstate 39 and continues north toward Madison.

After another hour or so, Mike reaches Madison Wisconsin where he turns onto US151 and heads northeast; his next destination is Fond du Lac where he plans to stop for gas, a nature call and a bite to eat.

Mike arrives in Fond du Lac at ten-thirty and pulls into a Kwik-Trip gas station; fill's his tank, visits the men's room, buys a couple slices of Pizza and a bottle of pop.

About twenty minutes later, Mike's on his way again; when he reaches Interstate 41 he exits US151 and heads north on I41 to his destination of Oshkosh.

Mike stops at another Kwik-Trip to top off his tank and get directions for a place to stay and is told he may have some trouble as the motels are probably full, but he can call anyway.

He's told his other option is to stay at one of several rustic campgrounds.

Mike locates a phone booth and searches the directory for motels. After spending nearly a pocketful of coins, Mike lucked out with Comfort Suites Motel just off the Interstate; it only has one room left and it was expensive, but Mike decided to take it for the weekend, he'll be leaving early Monday morning.

Following the directions he was given involved going around two ridiculous roundabouts, he arrives at the motel.

After securing the last room, its lunchtime and he sees a restaurant across from the motel, so he gives it a try.

After enjoying the great meal and feeling full, Mike walks back to the motel and gets into his van and heads to the Air Show at the Airport.

CHAPTER 21 -- Oshkosh Air Show.

Mike pulls onto a grassy field within walking distance of the main entrance to the Air Show; which was used to temporary handle the massive amount of visitors arriving by car.

As Mike follows the directions from the officers directing where to park, he very slowly inches to a parking place; after several tiring minutes, Mike was finally in his parking place and shuts the engine off hoping that it doesn't rain or this place will turn into a quagmire with no one being able to leave without being towed.

Being the last weekend in July, this day was going to be long and it was going to be hot, so as to not get Sunburned, Mike wore a light long sleeve shirt and loose baggy light colored cargo pants and sneakers.

After applying a liberal amount of Sunscreen on his face, neck and arms, he grabs his old Army boonie hat and his Sunglasses; after putting the bottle of Sunscreen into his left cargo pocket and his wallet into this right cargo pocket, he exits the van.

With the Sun approaching the highest point in the sky, it beats down relentlessly as Mike walks to where people were gathered at two buildings on either side of the main gate; there they paid admission.

Mike got in the second of four lines on the right building; after paying for two days, Mike got a pass and was able to enter the Air Show, and with a guide pamphlet he decided to see what the Fly-in Market had to offer.

Mike discovered on his way to the Fly-in Market, everything was really spread out, and involved a lot of walking.

When Mike got to the Fly-in Market he found a dazzling array of just about anything involving airplanes from used radios, flight instruments and engine parts, as well as some items that aren't related.

It seemed to Mike, if you had a large enough pocketbook you probably could find enough stuff here to build your own airplane.

After spending almost two hours at the Fly-in Market, Mike decided to check out the vintage aircraft's after seeing that it was nearby, but nearby turned out to be a bit of a jog in the early afternoon heat.

When Mike arrived, he discovered row after row of old restored aircraft, mostly by hobbyists.

After walking up and down the rows, he came across several old Helicopters; old restored Bell 47's.

Mike was intrigued by the fully enclosed red and white Bell 48B.

On the lower front there were windows by the Pilots feet, and it had four wheels instead of skids unlike the other 47's.

The old red and white Bell intrigued Mike and he looked it over closely.

While Mike was looking in the window at the cockpit a male voice said, "Nice huh?"

"Yeah, it sure is," Mike replied nodding, and then he asked, "Where do you find these old Helicopters, let alone get parts?"

"I ran across this one three years ago in an old hangar in Tennessee. She was covered with a dirty old canvas tarp and forgotten, rusting and generally falling apart. Mice and Squirrels had made the cockpit their home—it was filled with trash, twigs, leaves, straw and etcetera. As for parts—some you have to fabricate—others, you do a lot of searching—you don't give up, because they're out there somewhere."

"Where do you learn how to restore these old birds?" Inquired Mike.

"Well, you do a lot of reading and attending seminars, like the ones here. Then you seek out others or clubs who already have restored old aircraft and seek their help, and of course you do a lot of observing and listening, but most important, if its manufactured you'll need an A&P Mechanic to oversee and supervise—he doesn't need to be there, but he must inspect your work and sign off in the aircraft's logbook to be legal," explains the Guy wearing a Bell baseball cap.

"Does she fly?" Asked Mike.

"You bet," said the Guy, wearing the Bell baseball cap, nodding.

"I assume you fly her a lot," remarked Mike with a smile; the Guy nods, and then asks, "How about you, do you fly?"

"Yeah," Mike says nodding.

"You from around here?"

"Naaa, headin' home to Victorville California—just got out of the Army a month or so ago," Mike explained.

"What's takin' you so long?" The Guy asked with a quizzical expression.

"Took too many sight seein' detours, I run out of cash," replied Mike shrugging, "had to find a job to earn some dough."

"Hmm, I see," grunted the Guy, and then he asked, "So, what did you do—flip burgers or stackin' shelves at Walmart's?"

"No o o, got a job at an airport as a Ground-handler—also did a bit of flying," Mike told him looking cheeky.

The Guy looks at what he sees as a very young man and assumes he rented an Airplane and says dismissively, “Musta’ been a good payin’ job—with rentin’ an Airplane and coming here.”

“I didn’t rent an Airplane—I can’t fly an Airplane,” Mike rebuffed with a stern look, “I flew for hire—I hold a Commercial Helicopter Certificate, so I took some guys on a photo flight.” With a surprise expression, the Guy retorted, “You’ve got a Commercial Ticket! Where did you earn a Commercial Ticket?”

“In California, before I went into the Army,” Mike replies.

“I suppose with that Commercial Helicopter Certificate the Army had you flyin’ their Choppers,” remarked the Guy with a big smile.

“I was fixin’ em’,” Mike countered with an etched expression, “enlisted men don’t fly Military Aircraft—you hav’ta be an Officer.”

Then Mike looked at his watched and said, “Nice chattin’ with ya’, I best be going—wanta’ see the homebuilt’s before they close the place down,” and with a wave of his hand, Mike walks away and heads down the road to the Homebuilt Aircraft location.

When Mike enters the homebuilt area, he discovers that it’s much like the Vintage Aircraft area, but with not as many Aircraft’s.

These Airplanes are very well built, are small, light and beautiful; Mike just couldn’t believe these Airplanes were built in someone’s garage.

Then Mike arrived at the Homebuilt Helicopters and he stared slack-jawed and bug-eyed; several had outboard boat motors, and a very small Helicopter, that was totally open, was powered by a motorcycle engine.

Off to one side was a large tent with a company flag and a sign that read, ‘Rotorway International’.

Mike a bit confused wondered what was a commercial Helicopter company doing in the Homebuilt area.

Out of curiosity, Mike walks over and enters the tent; sitting there, inside the tent with several people looking at it, was a nice two passenger blue and gold Helicopter.

A company representative was talking to a couple of men who looked interested; another two representatives were manning a counter, passing out pamphlets and answering questions.

Off to one side was a large poster with pictures of the company’s original Helicopters and they looked like Homebuilts.

Now Mike was even more confused, so he walked over to the counter and asked, “How come a commercial Helicopter company is here with the Homebuilts?”

"We don't sell fully built Helicopters," the company representative behind the counter replied, and then explained, "What we sell are kits—you do the assembly and test flying, and after you have it certified as Experimental, you'll be able to perform all the needed maintenance and repairs."

"So how much does a kit cost?" Mike asked.

"Not as much as one you'd buy fully built and certified," replied the Man with a big smile, "depending on the options, between \$152,000.00 and \$183,000.00."

Mike looked at him bug-eyed thinking that's a lot of dough, but a lot less than his Robinson back in Victorville.

The company representative hands Mike a brochure and imparts, "This explains everything and if you need more information there's several telephone numbers and an internet address on the inside."

"Thanks," says Mike as he takes the brochure and walks back outside.

It's now late afternoon with Sun sinking towards the horizon, so Mike starts walking back towards the main gate.

When Mike got back to where he entered, People started gathering near a tall fence separating the runway from the Air Show grounds.

Mike overheard several people talking about aerobatic and flyby displays which are schedule to begin shortly, so, Mike decided to stay and watch; he walked over and found a nice place to sit on the freshly mowed grass.

Sitting there, waiting for the show to begin, Mike remembered the time he and his Family were at the air show in Roseville, and where he flew the red and black Helicopter.

Then he smiles remembering how frighten he was when all the spectators started shouting, "Encore, Encore, we want Pegasus, we want Pegasus!" and that his Father might find out he flies, which later, he did in fact discover.

Mike now wonders if the Hummingbirds will be flying today, and if they are, "I'll go over an say hi," he says to himself.

Then the loudspeakers blared, "If you look to the north, a B80 and the new B81 Bombers are coming and will do a low level flyby. They'll be followed by an old B52 which was used to great effectiveness in the Middle East."

Everybody turns and sees two tiny black specks that can be seen high in the sky; they are almost invisible.

And as everyone watches, the specks grow larger and larger until two large aircraft become discernible.

When they get near, first one and then the other aircraft starts to descend, and when they get to the runway, the lead Bomber makes a simulated landing with its wheels lowered; this is called a touch-and-go, but the Bomber didn't actually touch down, it flew the length of the runway and pulled up retracting its wheels in the process.

As the first Bomber turns the second Bomber did the same.

Then they both made another wheels up pass a bit higher, and then they flew away.

As everyone watched the two Stealth Bombers depart the loudspeakers announced the arrival of the B52, and when everyone turned to look, it was already starting to descend, but it didn't descend as low as the previous two Bombers, but it only made one pass and then it departed.

After the B52 had disappeared from view the loudspeakers blared, "The next twelve flybys will be formation flying of F30 and F32's, and if you look closely you'll see starting with the second group one of the planes in each formation will be missing—this is to pay tribute to fallen Pilots," then taps begun to play from the loudspeakers as each group passed by.

A tear ran down Mike's cheek as he remembers his Brother.

Then loudspeaker announced, after the last group had passed, "The Marines and Air Force will have two of their fighters on display over by the War Birds, and be sure to visit the tent, 'Hero's in the sky', where there's information about all of our Pilots including a memorial to those who died."

There was a slight pause for everyone to relax, and then the loudspeaker announces, "The next Military demonstration is by four EXR3 Helicopters courtesy of the Army's new 83rd EXR Battalion all the way from Fort Belvoir in Washington DC. The four Pilots are Captain Keith Deniger, call sign Griffin, Lieutenant Keith Davison, call sign Sneaky Snake, Lieutenant Todd Holz call sign Sidewinder and Stanley Picklemyer call sign Alley Cat. You all know who these guys are from the news accounts of their exploits—all double aces. Here they come, so give em' a big hand and welcome them to the Oshkosh Wisconsin."

As the Helicopters flew single file down the runway a loud applause and whistling sounded up and down the grassy field where the spectators sat.

Mike was red-faced with perspiration and it wasn't from the hot afternoon Sun; Mike knew all of these guys, because he flew with them.

After the Helicopters had performed some maneuvers, nothing like what Mike had done with Hummingbirds, the spectators applauded and the announcer on the loudspeaker informed, “All four of the Helicopters will be over by the F30’s for your viewing—all of the Pilots will be there as well, to answer any questions you might have, and they will be in the ‘Hero’s in the sky’ tent in their own section.”

As the four EXT3 Helicopters departed the announcer said, “Now for the final Military demonstration, we have the Air Force Blue Angels.”

For the next ten to fifteen minutes, everyone watched as the Blue Angels performed and after they had finished, civilian acrobatic airplanes performed, one after another for the next two hours until the Sun was about to set.

After the aerial displays, Mike walked back to his van hungry and tired.

It was getting dark when Mike finally was able to pull onto the interstate and head back to his motel; stopping on the way for Dinner.

Mike walked into his motel room dirty and tired; the first thing he did was take a long refreshing shower before he went to bed.

On Sunday morning, Mike stopped for breakfast, and then he headed back to the air show.

After parking in the grassy field and hoping it isn’t going to rain today, he heads to the main gate.

Today, his last day, his plans are to visit the product displays and this afternoon the ‘Hero’s in the sky’ tent and the war birds area.

So Mike heads to the first display which is computer simulators.

Entering the tent, Mike watches someone manipulate a computer flight simulator of a Cessna; it was nothing more than a game, and Mike has played a similar one with his Brothers several years ago when he was still in High School.

As Mike walked around, all he saw were computer games.

Then as Mike got near the back of the tent, he sees an entrance to another room where people are entering and returning.

When Mike entered, a group of people were standing and looking at a replica of the front section of a EXR2 Helicopter.

When Mike finally wormed his way to the front, he sees a control console with an Army Spec Five sitting down operating it and an Army Spec Six standing next to him overseeing everything.

A sign on the back wall read, ‘81st EXR Tactical Training Company Fort Irwin California’.

Mike was in shock, because this is exactly what he trained in when he took flight instruction from Captain Larry Clark; now he wonders if Wayne and Scott are still there.

After several minutes the top part opens and a teenager takes off the helmet, gets out and steps down shaking his head; the Army Spec Six walks up to him and in a consoling tone said, “Nice try Son,” and pats him on the back as he starts walking back to his friends shaking his head.

As the kid’s friends pat him on the back he tells them, “Its tough man—really tough—I didn’t make it through the first dogfight, the bastard nailed me from below—didn’t even see him.”

“Yeah, I know,” said one of his friends, “the same thing happened to me.”

Then the Army Spec Six asked, “Anyone else wanta’ give it a try? It’s the closest thing to actually flying the EXR2 Fighter Helicopter.

Anyone who can make it to level five gets a Pegasus patch,” he looks at the group for raised hands and after some time and finding none, he bemoans, “No one—it’s a lot of fun.”

Mike looks around and seeing no hands raised, he raises his hand announcing, “I’ll give it a shot.”

“Great,” declares the Army Spec Six and walks over and opens the rope gate which everyone is standing behind, and then Mike enters the simulator area.

The Army Spec Six asks, “And you are?”

“Mike Troff,” Mike replies smiling thinking this is going to be lots of fun, like old times.

Then the Army Spec Six introduces himself and the simulator operator, “I’m Specialist Lloyd Mathre and at the control console is Specialist Jason Fogarty,” Mike raises his hand in acknowledgment to the console operator and to the Spec Six a dip of his head.

“Are you ready?” Asked Specialist Mathre.

“Yeah,” replied Mike with a nod, and with everyone watching, Specialist Mathre led him to the simulator.

When Mike gets to the open simulator cockpit and picks up the helmet, he sees ‘Pegasus’ stenciled across the front and smiles thinking, yeah that’s my call, they’re going to shit when they find out it’s really me; he puts the helmet on, climbs in and buckles up.

As in the past, the top of the simulator came down and when it fully closed the interior illuminates.

Then the console operator, SP5 Fogarty, announced on Mike’s head

set, “Are you ready for the first scenario—this will be level one.”

“Yeah, bring it on,” said Mike with a nod.

Soon Mike was in the midst of two enemy HX2’s and he dispatches them in very short order, and then asks, “What else have you got?”

“This next scenario is a bit harder—get ready for level two,” SP5 Fogarty announced.

“Ok, let’s have it—I’m ready,” replied Mike eagerly.

Soon Mike was in the midst of another aerial dogfight and within two minutes had completed this level and asks, “I’m ready for the next level.”

“This next scenario, level three, is where our EXR2 Pilots begin their Advanced Flight training,” explained SP5 Fogarty, “so get ready to be discombobulated.”

This time the scenario was a bit more difficult with three HX2’s and two MIG’s, but Mike handled them just like he did in India, and three minutes later he’s ready for level four and beginning to get a bit bored.

Mike remarked sarcastically, “What’s so discombobulating about that scenario? Why don’t we skip the next level and give me level six.”

“You want the sixth scenario?” Repeated SP5 Fogarty.

“Yeah, you heard me—I want level six,” Mike huffishly replied.

“Ok—you asked for it,” said SP5 Fogarty confirming, “get ready for level six—it’s your funeral.”

When SP6 Mathre sees what’s happening he’s very interested and watches closely.

As Mike prepares for this level, he remembers back to when he did this taking flight instruction from Captain Clark and the problems he had.

With some trepidation, Mike got ready and before he could say Okie-Dokie, he’s being attacked from all sides and just as he had done in India, he quickly locked up the target in front of him and fired a missile.

Swinging his Helicopter around he comes to the next target and fires another missile then another missile and finally a fourth missile; then he lets the bottom drop out and performs an inside loop targeting the final attacker with his cannon.

Now he has three missiles to evade that were launched from three of his attackers before he destroyed them.

Now flying straight at the closest missile, as he did in Turkey, he fires his cannon and it explodes; Mike turns to the left and at the same time climbs to avoid the debris field.

The next two won't be so easy, because both are locked on him and are closing fast.

Mike goes for broke and heads for the ground at high speed, as the two missiles quickly close, and as the ground quickly rushes up, Mike fires two flares, kills his engines to eliminate the engines heat signature and pulls up converting all the remaining energy into the main rotor.

The maneuver worked, as the two missiles locked on the only heat source, the flares, and flew into the ground exploding upon impact.

Mike put the EXR2 into a controlled auto-rotation hoping there's enough energy transferred from his speedy decent to the main rotor to allow him to safely land.

Once in the auto-rotation, Mike proceeded to restart the engines hoping he won't have to actually land.

Now both SP5 Fogarty and SP6 Mathre were bug-eyed and looked at each other in disbelief with SP6 Mathre earnestly quipping, "Who is this guy?"

"Pegasus—maybe," responds SP5 Fogarty with a shrug of his shoulders and looking a bit befuddled.

"I've never seen those maneuvers," declared SP6 Mathre in astonishment, "I didn't think the EXR2 could perform maneuvers like those."

"I bet Pegasus has, and I bet he could perform them with no sweat," affirmed SP5 Fogarty with a serious look on his face.

"Yeah, well—we all know Pegasus was killed, so that guy in the simulator isn't Pegasus," firmly declared SP6 Mathre.

"Ok, Ok—then let's see how good he really is," announced SP5 Fogarty, "there's two scenarios remaining—no Pilot has gone through the eighth one—we'll see if he can, and if he does, this has to be Pegasus."

"Ok, but he's not Pegasus—Pegasus is dead, period," said SP6 Mathre with a sharp nod.

Then SP5 Fogarty announced to Mike, "Get ready for the seventh scenario, very few Pilots have successfully completed this level, and good luck."

Mike swallowed hard and prepared himself for a very brutal fight, and choking, he sputtered, "Ok—but first, give me two PL9 missiles in each rocket pod, and then let's have at it."

"Are you sure about this?" Questioned SP5 Fogarty, "You'll be sacrificing firepower."

"Yeah, I know," replied Mike, "but as a weapon, PL9's can be very effective."

“Ok—it’s your funeral,” said SP5 Fogarty with a smile and looks up at SP6 Mathre.

By this time the people standing behind the rope bearer was beginning to wonder why this guy is still in the simulator.

Some of them were already getting bored waiting for their chance to use the simulator and departed.

Now Mike was really working to stay alive in this scenario, as the enemy kept coming at him from all directions, and for a brief time, Mike figured it was futile, that is, until he saw an opportunity and used two of his PL9 missiles and took out a whole bunch of MIG Fighters at once.

Ten minutes later, with the ground littered with broken aircraft, Mike completed one of the hardest scenarios he’s ever flown.

With a sigh and feeling good, Mike asked, “Is there another one or was that the last of em’?”

SP5 Fogarty looks at SP6 Mathre with expressions of astonishment.

SP6 Mathre comments, “Only two other Pilots have completed this scenario and they didn’t use PL9’s the way he did, and they were Major’s Donald Zempel and Harold Tate.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” chirped SP5 Fogarty, and then he told Mike, “there’s only one scenario remaining—the eight. Are you sure you want to do this—no other Pilot has ever completed this scenario—we’re not even sure if it can be completed.”

“Yeah, bring it on—I’ll give it a shot,” Mike declared.

“You want four PL9’s again?” Inquired SP5 Mathre; Mike thought for a few moments and replied, “Yeah—give em’ to me.”

So with a fully armed EXR2 Fighter Helicopter, Mike begins.

So, Mike begins the last scenario and after five minutes he’s about ready to throw the towel in, because it’s impossible to win; no single Fighter would ever engage these many enemy aircraft in any battle, it’s just not done.

Then Mike thinks before he capitulates, he’ll try one last maneuver, the one maneuver he hasn’t used yet, his favorite the Möbius.

With nothing to lose, Mike begins what he thinks is his move of desperation, and executes the Möbius maneuver.

As he executes the Möbius, he locks on target after target with launch after launch, including the four PL9 missiles.

Mike is now inside a globe of destruction with missiles headed in all directions, and thinking all the while he isn’t going down alone.

With SP5 Fogarty and SP6 Mathre observing in awe, the playing field is littered with explosion after explosion.

Then as Mike exits the maneuver, he finds that he's all alone, every enemy fighter has been destroyed.

Then the realization takes hold and Mike realizes he's won, he successfully completed the eighth and final scenario.

Now SP5 Fogarty and SP6 Mathre can't believe their eyes, this guy has just completed what everyone thought was impossible.

SP5 Fogarty looks at SP6 Mathre and with a serious expression asserts, "Now what do you say—dead huh?"

SP6 Mathre just looks dumbfounded and commands, "I think it's time to let him out."

Then Mike asks, "Don't you think it's time you let me outa' this thing?"

"Let the man out Specialist Fogarty," says SP6 Mathre in a suave tone.

After the top of the simulator opened, Mike removed the helmet and climbed down and was met by both SP5 Fogarty and SP6 Mathre.

The first thing a shocked SP6 Mathre asked was, "Who are you—you just did what no other EXR Pilot has been able to accomplish?"

"Like I told you, I'm Mike Troff."

"You're a EXR Fighter Pilot," piped SP5 Fogarty, and asked, "How come you're here and not overseas flying—are you on leave?"

Mike looks at him with a fixed expression and then barbed, "I was discharged."

"Discharged!" Exclaimed SP6 Mathre, "Officers don't get a discharge—they are released from active duty, retire, or resign."

"I'm not an Officer—I was a Corporal and was discharged," affirmed Mike.

"If you're not an Officer and not an EXR Fighter Pilot, then tell me how were you able to complete all eight scenarios when no one else was able to?" argued SP6 Mathre; Mike looked at him for a few seconds, and then shrugged with, "Maybe luck."

SP6 Mathre looks at Mike with suspicion informing him, "No one can operate that thing without training," pointing to the simulator, "especially not the way you did."

"Hey look, I was in the infantry and was a maintenance tech on the EXR Helicopter—a couple of Pilots taught me how to fly—I wasn't license to fly without them," explained Mike with a little white lie thrown in.

SP6 Mathre with doubt in his mind hand Mike a Pegasus patch as a reward for completing all eight levels and congratulates him, “Here—this is for completing all of the levels—you’re the first one here to do it.”

“Thanks,” Mike says as he receives the patch and shakes his hand.

SP5 Fogarty offers his hand and whispers, “I know you’re Pegasus, because nobody can fly like him, and don’t worry I’ll keep your secret.”

Mike shakes his hand and whispers, “Thanks, and for the record, you didn’t see me,” and smiles giving him a wink of his right eye, and then he turns, walks through the rope gate, the group of people and the tent leaving SP5 Fogarty standing there looking astounded.

For the rest of the morning, Mike visits the many commercial display booths inside the three large hangar like buildings.

With all of the people milling around looking at the displays, and without any air-conditioning, it was hot and humid inside and Mike began sweating profusely.

At noon, finding it to be a lot cooler outside in the hot Sun and flowing breezes, Mike looks for a concession stand to get something to eat and a cool place to sit and relax.

CHAPTER 22 -- Hero's In the Sky.

After eating lunch at the concession stand, Mike heads for the 'Hero's In the Sky' tent.

Upon reaching the huge tent, he sees lots of people entering and leaving.

When Mike entered the tent, he found it was divided into two sections, with the left side devoted to Fighter Helicopters and the right side to the Fighter Jets.

The area in front was devoted to portraits of the most famous Pilots from both types of aircraft, and in the center was a very large portrait with a silhouette denoting Pegasus; no name was given, as is with the other portraits, but a brief synopsis of his history is displayed below the portrait.

On each side, near the entry to each area, there was a large glass case where a roll of all the Pilots who flew with their ranking and victories; any Pilot who was killed in action was denoted with a larger font and in italics.

Mike was curious about what was written about him, so he walked over to the large portrait and elbowed his way through a very large group of people.

When Mike finally made it to the front, he stood next to a young man who looked to be no older than eighteen.

As Mike read, he couldn't believe the BS, and when he finished, he just shook his head in disbelief; the young man looking at Mike shaking his head and softly asked, "What! Don't you believe he did all those things?"

"No I don't," Mike replied looking serious, "most of what's written there is BS—he was never that good—just very lucky, and besides, he was never at some of those locations that are listed there, and as far as being a Ninja—well—that's outright ridiculous."

"That's Sky Ninja—and that's what the Pilots, he helped, called him," corrected the young man, "and how do you know he wasn't fighting at those locations—were you there?"

Mike looked at him thinking how to respond without letting the cat out of the bag or looking stupid, "From reading the internet Blogs from the Pilots who flew with him, and they don't mention half of those places. Before you believe everything you hear, do a little research first," Mike huffishly told him; the young man just looks back with a sheepish blank expression.

Then Mike inquired of him, “So—are you going to college this fall?”

“No—I’m planning to join up and fly EXR’s,” the young man replied.

“Ah h h’, for you information,” began Mike looking serious, “they won’t let you fly unless you have some college—I know—I tried and wound up in the Infantry.”

“The Infantry!” Exclaimed the young man looking shocked; Mike nods.

“Anyway, the War is winding down,” announced the young man, “even if I were to join, by the time I finished basic and made it to Flight School, the War will be over—it could happen any day now.”

“Another reason to go to college,” said Mike smiling; the young man looks at him with a bleak expression, and then slowly he nods; Mike smiles back, and then worms his way out of the gathering and heads over to the Fighter Jets, because he wanted to see if his Brother is listed or some of his school friends, but most of all, he wanted to see if there’s any information on how Brian was killed.

When Mike reached the entrance to the Fighter Jets there was a wooden arch over the entry with the words, ‘F30 & F32 Fighter Pilots’.

Mike walks under the arch and into the Fighter Jets section; there, he sees two sections one for the Air Force and one for the Navy and Marines.

In each section there’s a huge board with pictures of Pilots that are Aces; some of the pictures are on black backings and below each picture there’s a piece of paper describing that Pilot’s flight history.

Off to one side of the huge picture board is another picture board with pictures of aerial combat, and next to the board with combat pictures are two small rectangle tables with Fighter Pilots sitting behind answering questions and signing autographs.

Mike heads for the Navy and Marine section, because he knows his Brother was a Marine Fighter Pilot.

Now when Mike first entered the area, one of the Marine Pilots sees him and the look on his face is of surprise, he then finishes with the autograph, smiles, excuses himself, gets up and walks over to meet Mike, as Mike is walking to the board with the Pilot pictures.

With a blissful expression, the Marine Pilot steps up behind Mike, as he’s searching for his Brother’s picture.

When Mike locates the picture of his Brother Brian, he hears, “He was a great Fighter Pilot and a very close friend.”

With a tear in his eye, Mike nods with, “He was my Brother.”

“Yes—I know Mike, and my heartfelt condolences,” said the Pilot very solemnly.

That voice sounded very familiar, so Mike turns and there stands Brian’s old friend, Captain Warfield.

“Bill—you’re here!” Exclaimed Mike looking surprised and very pleased, because now he might get some information about how Brian died.

“Yeah, and so are you,” quipped Bill Warfield, “we all thought you were killed too.”

“Naaa—I’m fine,” said Mike smiling, and then he asked, “Tell me how did it happened?”

“Well, I wasn’t there, but according to a Pilot who was...” Bill began, and while they both looked at Brian’s picture he related everything that happened that day as well as the funeral at Arlington.

“I’m glad Brian’s buried at Arlington and thanks for being his Pall-bearer,” Mike tearfully told him.

“You’re welcome,” said Bill warmly, “you were supposed to be one yourself, and when you couldn’t, we substituted another Marine. The only people at the funeral were I, Bob Smith, your Brother’s wife and Daughter, your other Brother Jeff and your parents.”

“Jeff made it back!” Exclaimed Mike looking surprised; Bill nods with, “Yeah—the Air Force let him off to attend his Brother’s funeral—you know he’s flying B52’s now.”

“B52’s—yeah I know,” Mike said, “I met a friend of his in Germany and he told me all about it.”

“Why were you in Germany? I heard you were in India,” questioned Bill.

“You heard I got shot—didn’t you?” Mike asked. Bill nods.

“Well—I was sent to a NATO Hospital in Germany after the Pakistani’s started shelling the base where I was initially taken.”

“By the way,” began Bill with a grin, changing the subject, “your old man is now a one-star General and he works at the Pentagon.”

“Dad’s a General!” Exclaimed Mike blinking, and then he started looking at the pictures to locate another.

Bill asked looking quizzical, “Now who are you looking for?”

“An old high school friend,” replied Mike, and locating him, he smiles pointing to it saying, “there he is—and he’s still alive.”

Then Mike reads the information on the page below the picture and a very big smile breaks out on his face when he discovers he’s an Ace and remarks, “Knew it—Joel’s an awesome Fighter Pilot.”

“High school, huh,” croaked Bill, “think I might’ve met him once—can’t remember where.”

Mike nods with, “Yeah.”

Then he turns and tells Bill, “Nice to have met you and thanks for telling me about how Brian was killed, but I’ve got to visit the Air Force display—need to see if my other high school friend is still alive and maybe also an Ace.”

“One question before you walk away,” remarks Bill.

“Yeah, and what’s that?” Mike inquired.

“Just, what are you doing here and why aren’t you home letting your parents know you’re still alive?” Asked Bill.

“I’m headin’ there right after I leave here,” replied Mike, “I plan to be back in California in a couple of days—I’m driving.”

“Driving!” Exclaimed Bill with a surprised look on his face, and then he pointed east and affirmed, “DC is that way—you’re headed in the wrong direction.”

“Wrong direction!” Exclaimed Mike looking astounded, “Mom and Dad live in Victorville and that’s in California.”

“Your Parents don’t live there anymore—they now live in Arlington, because like I just told you, your Dad now works at the Pentagon.”

Mike looks at him bug-eyed, and then with Bill grinning at him, points again to the east nodding; Mike shakes his head and counters with, “I need to see Bob Manning. I’m part owner in his flight operation—I own a Helicopter, and I need to see my Girl, Pam.”

“They’re thinking you’re dead and have moved on with their lives,” affirms Bill, “your Girl has probably married someone else and has a kid by now.”

Mike looking impassive says, “I need to find out, besides, Bob is probably still runnin’ the business, and when I show up he’ll be overjoyed.”

“Yeah—I hope you’re right,” Bill remarks, and then he whispers, “So, when are you going to announce that Pegasus isn’t dead, besides, I think Colonel Clark is looking for you.”

Looking aghast, Mike gasps in a whisper, “Shut up—I don’t want people to hear you—Pegasus is dead—leave it at that—I don’t want a swarm of newspaper people chasing after me.”

Bill straight-faced whispers, “Ok, but what about Clark—he probably knows you’re still alive and is looking for you at this very minute.”

“Why? I played his game, now I want some peace,” retorted Mike in a huffish manner.

“Well, unless you resigned your commission you’re still in the Army,” explained Bill.

“I was discharged—I don’t have a commission,” explained Mike looking smug.

“Then answer me this,” countered Bill, “enlisted men aren’t allowed to fly, so how was it that you flew?”

Mike shrugged his shoulders replying, “Clark was in evolved and I was doing special ops, so they musta’ bent the rules—I don’t know—all I know is, they let me fly as an enlisted man,” then Mike smiles and adds, “the Indian Army made me a Captain, so that might be the answer.”

“You were in the Indian Army!” Exclaimed Bill looking astounded.

“No, not in their Army—I was attached to them. Clark was my contact—I got my orders from him through the Indian Commander I was under,” explained Mike; Bill looks at him with a wooden expression.

Then Mike says, “If you’re finished, I would like to see if my friend is still alive,” pointing to the Air Force display.

“Yeah, I’m through—nice seeing you again,” Bill said with dignity, “maybe we’ll meet again sometime—have a safe trip to California.”

“Thanks Bill and you have a nice day yourself,” Mike politely said, and then they shook hands and Mike turned and walked over to the Air Force display.

Scanning the display board of pictures, Mike locates first Mark Doubleday and little further down he finds Glen Justin, and of the two, only Glen is still alive, but both are Aces; Mike smiles and thinks if Russ was still alive he would also be an Ace.

Mike is now wondering where Glen is stationed, because he would like to email him.

After reading Glen’s and Mark’s war histories, Mike walks over to a lone Air Force officer answering questions.

Mike politely inquires, “Sir—can you tell me where Captain Glen Justin is now stationed—I would like to email him—he was my high school friend,” pointing to the board with all the pictures.

“Just a minute while I go look,” he replied and walks over to a table near the back of the tent; after paging through a ring binder, he returns and tells Mike, “Captain Justin is currently stationed at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington DC. To get his email address you’ll have to contact the Base Personal Office.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that,” Mike replied, and then he walks out of the Fighter Jet section of the tent and heads to the Fighter Helicopter section.

At the entrance to the Fighter Helicopters there was also a wooden arch over the entry with the words, 'EXR Fighter Pilots', and to one side of the entryway there stood a lone single-legged stand with an open book on top.

Mike pauses at the book and finds that it's a 'Guest Register' with names and commemorations, and then he continues into the Fighter Helicopter section.

Inside, Mike finds a similar setup as was in the other section, with a very large board with pictures of Pilots, living and deceased along with a war history of each on one, and a short distance from large board with pictures was a table with two Army Pilots sitting behind; one of the Pilots was standing nearby answering questions and signing autographs.

There was a rather large group of people looking at the picture board display, so Mike had to worm his way to the front.

When Mike finally made to the front the first thing he saw was an oversize silhouette picture on a black backing with the name of Pegasus on the bottom and a question mark following the Caption; he smiled and started searching for the names of those he knew and flew with.

Soon old familiar names showed up like, Major Donald Zempel to which Mike thought, "He's now a Major and when I knew him he was a civilian in charge of the Humming Birds—wow!"

When Mike saw the picture of Major Dave Barq call sign Wrecking Ball, all he could think of is, "Jeezus—he was only an acting Captain during the war games—that was fast."

Then Mike came across Major Larry Nickerson whom he only knew as Acid Burn and remarking to himself, "So that's who Acid Burn is."

Then a big smile came to his face when his old EXR training buddies, Captain's Harold Tate and Wayne Tripp, both were Aces and still alive.

The next picture, Mike recognized was Captain Steven Halver, Rock Raker, from when he was in Turkey.

Then came a long list of Lieutenants, which Mike flew with in India and only knew by call sign, like, Chris Griffey as Gas Attack, Dave Gibson as Falcon, Keith Davison as Sneaky Snake, Todd Holz as Yellow Jacket, Pete Mathews as Sidewinder, Stan Picklemeyer as Alley Cat and even his friend whom he worked with for a while until he left for the Army, Ed Kiver Freaky Ed; they were all on the board and most were Aces and everyone is still alive.

With a big smile on his face, Mike walks over to the Pilots and sees Captain Hayes, so he steps up and knowing he's Back Blaster from his picture, offers his hand remarking, "You're Shane Hayes, Back Blaster?"

"Yes," replied a confused Hayes, and then he asked, "How do you know my call sign—do I know you?"

"From your picture," replied Mike pointing to the display of pictures.

"Of course," affirmed Hayes shaking Mike's hand, "nice to meet you—would you like an autograph?"

"No, the handshake is enough," Mike replied with a smile, and then he added, "I've been wanting to meet you for quite a while—and it's an honor Sir."

"The honor is all mine," affirmed Hayes in a solemn tone, "is there anything you would like to know?"

"Only if you can tell me, if by chance, is Sneaky Snake here at the air show?" Mike asks in a composed manner.

"Yeah, he's answering questions over at the war birds at his Helicopter," replied Hayes with a quizzical expression, after looking at his watch he imparts, "he'll be there for another two hours, then he'll come here and someone else will take his place."

Mike nods with, "Thank you," and then he walks over to the first Pilot seated at the table and inquires, "You're Sidewinder—Pete Mathews?"

Lieutenant Mathews looks at Mike with a bewildered expression and finally nods with, "Yeah—how do you know my call—have we met?"

"From your picture over there," replied Mike pointing to the display of pictures again.

"Keep forgetting they got me plastered all over," announced Lieutenant Mathews giggling, "do you need an autograph?"

"Naaa," answered Mike shaking his head, and then he extends his hand saying, "I just want to finally meet you and shake your hand—it's been a long time a comin'."

"The way you sound, it's as if we met before," said Lieutenant Mathews in a suggestive tone while shaking hands.

"Not personally," responded Mike nonchalantly, and then he changes the subject and asks, "may I ask as to what unit you're now assigned too?"

"I'm with the eighty third EXR Battalion at Fort Belvoir as is all five of us here at the air show, I'm in the six hundred and sixtieth EXR Tactical Response Company—Major Nickerson is the XO and our wing commander," replied Lieutenant Mathews sounding a bit proud.

“Isn’t Colonel Clark the Battalion Commander?” Inquired Mike.

“Yeah,” affirmed Lieutenant Mathews, and then countered with, “but how do you know that?”

“Seen it on the internet,” Mike contended.

“Oh,” remarked Lieutenant Mathews.

Then Mike steps over to where the next Pilot is sitting and firmly proclaims with an out held hand, “You’re Griffin—I heard all about you.”

Blinking, Captain Deniger hesitated, and then he slowly took Mike’s hand and they shook.

Captain Deniger inquired, “Do I know you?”

Lieutenant Mathew’s pipes up, “He probably got it from you picture,” pointing to the display, Mike grinning nods, and then imparts, “Remember the first time Pegasus flew with you and saved your butts that day—I believe his parting words went something like, ‘You guy’s need to practice—you’re terrible’,” giggling.

The people standing around began laughing and Captain Deniger’s face turned a nice shade of red; Mike points to Lieutenant Mathews and nods which cause the people to now start laughing at both Pilots.

Lieutenant Mathews face now also turns that nice shade of red and they both looked embarrassed.

Mike finally apologizes, “I’m really sorry guys, but I couldn’t resist,” and then he turns to the people gathered around the table and imparted, “What I said happened a long ago before they became Heroes and Aces. Today they’re the best EXR Fighter Pilots in the world—our Top Guns.”

Captain Deniger was now very curious as to where Mike learned this information, so he bluntly asked, “Just how did you happen to know about a radio communication between Pegasus and myself.”

“It wasn’t only between you and Pegasus, but every EXR Pilot within radio range was listening, and I might also add that every F30 Pilot heard it as well, so it wasn’t very private.”

Captain Deniger looks at Mike with a deadpan expression.

Mike grins at him, turns and with a quick wave he heads for the exit.

After Mike walks out of the Helicopter section, he stops by the single-legged stand with the open book.

Mike looks at it for a moment reading the list of names and the brief commemorations scrawled in it by each author’s hand.

Mike picks up the pen and begins writing a short commemoration, “Today, with a great amount of pride, I met some of you brave Heroes that I had

the privilege to fly and fight alongside of, and shook your hands. Today, I was able to connect the Call Signs to names and faces and it was indeed a great day for me even if I may not ever see or talk with you again, it was truly a great honor for me.", and then he signs his name and call sign; after turning the page, Mike, with a smile puts the pen down and puts his hand on the page and takes a deep breath and walks away.

As Mike exits the huge tent he brushes an Army Pilot heading into the tent and excuses himself, "Sorry," and continues on his way towards the war birds area.

As Mike enters a throng of people headed down the street, the Pilot suddenly halts at the entrance of the huge tent; for a moment he stands there not moving, and then he turns and looks, at the groups of people walking up and down the street, with a ghostly pale complexion.

Then he hurries to the street, stops and looks for a while in both directions, after a while he slowly walks back to the huge tent and goes inside.

With a ghostly pale complexion and a glazed expression the Pilot seated himself next to Captain Deniger, not saying anything and just sat there transfixed, looking straight ahead.

Captain Deniger noticing his strange demeanor quipped, "Lieutenant Picklemyer—did you just see a ghost?"

Lieutenant Picklemyer slowly turns his head to Captain Deniger, and nodding he slowly says, "Yeah—I thought I saw Pegasus exit this tent as I was about to enter."

"You know who Pegasus is and what he looks like!" Exclaimed Captain Deniger looking astounded.

"Yeah—he was at Rucker and India—I was there when he got shot," explained Lieutenant Picklemyer.

"And you just saw him leave this tent?"

"Yeah, but it couldn't be him," said Lieutenant Picklemyer trying to make sense of this, "I saw him get shot and helped him."

"You were there when he got shot—you saw him die?" Captain Deniger bluntly asks.

"I was there, but he didn't die—he was Medevac'd out after the sniper was killed," explained Lieutenant Picklemyer.

"He died later in a New Delhi Hospital, so you couldn't have seen him," remarked Captain Deniger.

"Yeah, I know, I know," moaned Lieutenant Picklemyer.

Then as people entered the tent they were excited about something; a young man hurried up to Captain Deniger and excitedly told him, “Pegasus was here—he wrote in the guest book,” pointing towards the entryway.

“That’s impossible,” argued Captain Deniger, “Pegasus is dead—it must be a prank.”

“It may be, but go look,” urged the young man, so Captain Deniger followed the young man out to where the guest book was.

Then Lieutenants Picklemyer, Mathews and Holz got up and headed after them.

When they arrived, there was a group of people gathered around the single legged table looking at the open guest book along with a lot of murmuring.

Captain Deniger said in a huffy voice, “Excuse me—excuse me—excuse me,” as he and the other Army Pilots wormed their way through the group.

Looking down at the open book with Mike’s page clearly visible, Captain Deniger reads the passage and sees the signature, then a host of questions rushed to his mind, the least of which was is this a hoax.

Then Lieutenants Todd Holz, Pete Mathews and Stan Picklemyer had their turn reading the passage.

Then someone bluntly asked, “Does this mean Pegasus is still alive, and why wasn’t he with you guys?”

“This is no proof that he was here,” Captain Deniger argued in a firm voice, “we all know he died and this is simply an elaborate hoax perpetrated by someone who’s looking for attention.”

Then as the group of people started to drift away, the four Army Pilots headed back to their area.

When they got back to their stations, Lieutenant Picklemyer stated in a skeptical tone, “I’m not so sure about what you told those people—when I bumped into him, I swear that he was Pegasus—if he wasn’t, then that guy was his twin Brother.”

“Ok Lieutenant—you said you know what his name is and what he looks like,” declared Captain Deniger in a crisp voice, “—so is that his name in the book and what does he look like?”

Lieutenant Picklemyer stood there looking at them with a wooden expression and when he didn’t respond, Captain Deniger barked, “Well Lieutenant?”

Then Lieutenant Picklemyer nods with, “The name in the book—Michael Troff, is his name and he’s about five-foot-five, slender and has carrot red hair—I mean its really red.”

Captain Deniger, Pete Mathews and Todd Holz all had looks of astonishment, and then Captain Deniger piped, “He was here—all he wanted was to meet me and shake my hand—like what was written in the guest book.”

“O’ my God!” Exclaimed Captain Deniger, “It was the guy in the blue baseball cap.”

Lieutenants Holz and Mathews looked bug-eyed, and Lieutenant Picklemyer bemoaned, “I never got to shake his hand and say hi when I bumped into him, I had the chance, but like an idiot I blew it.”

“I need to notify Major Nickerson, right after we finish for the day, that Pegasus is at the air show,” announced Captain Deniger.

Mike entered the war birds area and spent the next half hour walking amongst the displays and when he finished, he walked over to the war birds flight line and looked at all of the old restored war aircraft.

Then Mike headed to the modern war aircraft like the two F30’s and the F32, and on the very end were two EXR3 Helicopters.

When Mike got a glimpse, he froze, thinking here was his EXR3, because these Helicopters were painted the same color scheme that he painted his.

Then as Mike was heading for the EXR3 Helicopters, he first approaches the F30 fighters and one of the Pilots who were talking to a small group of people, “My call sign is Sandman,” replying to a question someone had asked.

Upon hearing this, Mike suddenly comes to a halt and looks over to where the Pilot is standing, and then he walks over and joins the group.

Another question is from someone else in the group, “Were you stationed in India?”

“Yes—I was, and flew some of the first sorties,” replied Sandman with Mike turning to look at who posed the question.

“Did you get a chance to fly with Pegasus?” Asked yet another person, a Woman this time; Mike has a double take and quickly turns to see who she is.

“Yes—I did have the opportunity to fight in several aerial encounters that he was also in, and he was magnificent—never saw a Fighter Helicopter fly like that one,” replied Sandman grinning.

Then Mike raises the next question, “May I ask what’s your name Captain—I arrive late and missed your introduction if you’ve already given it—sorry.”

“That’s Ok—no problem,” returned Sandman, “my name is Captain Rick Jorgenson.”

“Thank you Captain Jorgenson,” Mike politely said, and then he asked, “You wouldn’t know Wumper by any chance?”

Captain Jorgenson looking astounded declares, “How do you know Captain Justin, let alone his call sign?”

Everyone in the group now has eyes on Mike.

Mike composedly responded to the Captain Jorgenson’s accusation, “Glen Justin is a close friend from high school, and I was curious if you knew him and flew with him.”

“Yes, I know him—we attended Flight School together, but I didn’t get a chance to fly any combat missions with him. He was sent to the middle east—some place in Turkey I believe, where as I was sent to India,” replied Captain Jorgenson nodding, and then he added smiling, “He’s an awesome Pilot—I believe he’s a quad Ace. Do you have any more questions?”

Mike shook his head with, “No, that’s all I have, and thanks.”

Then Mike turns to leave and just as he’s leaving the group, he stops and looks over his shoulder and says, “That combat sortie southwest of Chandigarh—out of those three MIG’s who decided to take on that EXR3—that EXR3 can only take credit for one kill, the other two killed each other,” and issues a sarcastic grin and walks towards a group of people heading towards the EXR Helicopters.

Captain Jorgenson stands there for a few seconds stunned with bug-eyes, then finally realizing only Pegasus or one of the participating Pilots could’ve know that, he comes out of his stupor.

Then Captain Jorgenson rushes through the group hoping to catch Mike, but all he sees is a group of people heading towards the EXR3 Helicopters; shaking his head in disappointment, Captain Jorgenson returns to his group.

The group of people that Mike’s with arrives at an EXR3 Helicopter with an Army Pilot sitting in a chair nearby.

When they arrive, some go and walk around the Bluish Gray EXR3 Helicopter looking it over while the rest of the group, including Mike, gathers around the seated Pilot.

The Pilot gets up and introduces himself, but Mike already knew this guy from Ground School at Fort Rucker, and as one of the five he taught special flight training to.

“Allow me to introduce myself—I’m Lieutenant Keith Davison, Call Sign...,” and before he could finish, from within the group, Mike pipes up, “Sneaky Snake—yeah, we all know.”

Lieutenant Davison scans the group for the one who rudely interrupted him, but is unable to determine who it was.

The Lieutenant Keith Davison takes a deep breath and inquires, “Yeah--does anyone have any questions?”

For the next half hour, Lieutenant Davison answers questions about his EXR3 Helicopter and about his combat experiences until Mike bluntly asks, “When did the Army change the Regs to allow EXR Helicopters to be painted that color scheme,” pointing to the EXR3 Helicopter behind the Lieutenant.

Lieutenant Davison turns to look at the Helicopter and replies, “The Regs were changed shortly after Pegasus was killed. The Pentagon saw the stealth advantage and ordered all EXR Fighter Helicopters to be repainted with the new colors—and probably to honor Pegasus’s memory.”

“Ah’ I see—to honor Pegasus’s memory,” Mike repeated in a sarcastic tone.

“Ye ah h,” said Lieutenant Davison in a slow drawl, “anymore questions?”

“Have you seen Gas Attack lately—I heard you two had some flight training from Pegasus while you were stationed in India,” Mike imparting with a smug grin; Lieutenant Davison looks at him slack-jawed and replies,

“He’s in the eighty-first at Fort Irwin—we’re in the same Battalion—and where did you hear about my supposed special flight training?”

Mike replied with a shrug, “Don’t remember—I think they mentioned it on the news or it could’ve been on the internet where I saw it—don’t rightly remember.”

Then Mike asked giggling, “So—was it true—did Pegasus actually give you flight lessons?”

There were several moments of absolute silence as everyone looked at Lieutenant Davison and watched his face grow redder and redder in apparent embarrassment.

With no reply forthcoming, someone in the group bluntly asked, “Well—did you take flight lessons from Pegasus, or not?”

Lieutenant Davison looks at Mike shamefaced and shaking his head firmly denied it happened.

Mike looking roguish countered, “Oh, but I think you did, and I believe at the time your flying really sucked—isn’t that how Pegasus described your flying,” as Lieutenant Davison’s face morphed into an even brighter shade of red.

As the people in the group began laughing hysterically, Mike began to feel sorry for him and with a solemn expression and a reassuring tone he said, “There’s nothing to be embarrass about—it’s not your fault that your flight school short changed you on flight instruction—you should be proud that you were able to receive training from Pegasus—in fact, he only trained five—the best of the best and you were one of em’, isn’t that right Snake?”

Lieutenant Davison’s red face began to fade and he stuck his chest out nodding, and then Mike stepped forward with extended hand saying, “I’m very proud to have known you—it’s a pleasure and honor,” and they shake heartily.

Then thinking it’s time to leave before Lieutenant Davison recognizes him from ground school; Mike turns and starts walking away.

Now after all of this, Lieutenant Davison can’t shake the feeling that he’s met this guy somewhere, but where?

Then as Mike is about to enter a large group of people leaving, he turns and loudly remarks, “Hey Sneaky Snake—watch your six o’clock and keep a sneakin’ in,” and with a smile he waves to Lieutenant Davison, turns and enters the group.

Suddenly, Lieutenant Davison’s eyes get large as he now knows who this guy is, and mouthing, “Pegasus is alive,” he rushes to try and catch Mike, but when he gets to where a large group of people were, all he sees are small groups walking here and there with no sign of Mike anywhere.

Looking very disappointed and upset, Lieutenant Davison slowly walks back to his EXR3 Helicopter and the small group of people he’d been talking too.

Mike heads to his van thinking he’d seen the afternoon flying show yesterday and didn’t need to watch it again, and besides, he wanted to beat the mad rush that followed.

As Mike drove to his motel, his plans were to pack, have an early dinner and be in bed by ten, so he can have an early morning checkout, breakfast and be on the interstate heading west; hoping to be in California in three to four days.

CHAPTER 23 -- Auld Lang Syne.

Early Monday morning, after checking out of the motel and eating a hearty breakfast, Mike gets in his van and heads west on Wisconsin State Highway 21 until he comes to Interstate 94 where he jogs south until he reaches Interstate 90.

When he reaches Interstate 90, Mike turns west and about an hour later, he's in Minnesota and heads for Interstate 35 South at Albert Lea.

After another forty-eight minutes he stops to refill his tank at a QuikTrip at an exit near Stewartville, south of Rochester; Mike also gets a quick snack and pop.

Twenty minutes later, Mike is back on the Interstate heading west to Albert Lea where he turns south on Interstate 35 to Iowa.

At around noon, Mike arrives in Des Moines and stops for gas and lunch; forty-five minutes later, Mike is back on the road and heads around the west side of Des Moines until he reaches Interstate 80.

Taking the west entrance, Mike enters Interstate 80 and heads once more west; Mike is now on his way to California, Bob and Pam.

Monday morning Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark receives a phone call, "This is Major Barq over at the 660th, I just was informed by Major Nickerson, that Captain Deniger at the air show in Wisconsin says Pegasus is there."

"Well—tell Captain Deniger to have Pegasus, I mean Captain Troff, call me immediately, and that it's extremely important—you got that?"

"Yes Sir, but I'm afraid Captain Troff has vanished," replied Major Barq, and then he adds, "From what I understand from my conversation with Major Nickerson, is that Captain Troff doesn't know he has a commission—he thinks he's been discharged, and is on his way to California."

Looking aghast, Colonel Clark exclaims, "Discharged—on his way to California—Ok Major, let me know immediately if something new turns up."

"Yes Sir," Major Barq responding, and then injects, "By the way—I learned from Marine Captain Bill Warfield, that Captain Troff been told that his Dad works at the Pentagon and his parents now live in Arlington, so he may come back after he looks up some friends of his."

"Thanks for the tip, Major and a good day to you," says Colonel Clark and hangs up.

After pausing to think, Colonel Clark calls Major Donald Zempel at the 81st Tactical Training Company at Fort Irwin.

After several rings, Colonel Clark hears, “81st Tactical Training Company, Commanding Officer Major Zempel speaking.”

“Ah’, Major Zempel, this is Lieutenant Colonel Clark.”

“Yes Sir—how may I be of service?” Responds Major Zempel.

“Major—I need your help in getting hold of Captain Mike Troff—I believe he’s headed to Victorville, and I believe he might try to see a couple of old friends he trained with at Fort Irwin, so if he does, try to keep him there, and then notify me immediately—you got that Major?”

“He’s alive!” Exclaimed a shocked Major Zempel.

“Yes—that he is, and I need to have him return to Fort Belvoir—so if he shows up you notify me immediately,” emphasized Colonel Clark.

“Yes Sir, I’ll be happy too—and I might add, I would like to see him again myself for old time sake,” said Major Zempel slightly grinning.

“Of course—lots of people would—that’s all I have for now—good day Major,” said Colonel Clark and hangs up.

Then Colonel Clark looks at his watch and dials the number for Brigadier General Henry Troff at the Pentagon.

After several rings Colonel Clark hears the phone being answered, “Hello—this Brigadier General Henry Troff speaking—how may I help you?”

“Good morning General Troff, this is Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark at the 83rd EXR Battalion and I have some news on your Son,” said Colonel Clark in an official tone.

“Colonel, you’ve located Mike,” said General Troff being presumptuous with a tone of expectation in his voice.

“Yes Sir,” responded Colonel Clark, “Mike was at the National EAA Air Show in Wisconsin on Sunday and is currently on his way to California to see some friends—he’s been informed that you no longer live in Victorville and now reside in Arlington. I left word with Major Zempel at the 81st at Fort Irwin to keep him there and notify me immediately if he should show up. I feel that after he finds no one left, he’ll head back here to see you and your wife, and if he does, call me at once and I’ll come over. He’ll be AWOL in a few days—so time isn’t on our side.”

“I’m so happy he’s alive and back in the US, but why would he risk going to prison by just taking off—he wasn’t brought up that way?” Questioned General Troff.

“Mike doesn’t know he’s been commissioned—he thinks he was discharged,” explained Colonel Clark, “and that’s why he needs to return as

quickly as possible to his assigned unit, the 660th at fort Belvoir or report to the 81st at Fort Irwin of which both are under my command.”

“Yes, --of course I will—as soon as he shows up I’ll give you a call,” affirmed General Troff, “let’s hope he shows up at Fort Irwin or here—Maria will be overjoyed to hear Mike’s has been seen. Thanks for your time and effort—my wife and I sure appreciate it. I need to run, got a staff meeting in a few minutes with General Snyder, so if there isn’t anything more I must go.”

“No Sir, that’s about it—have a good day—bye now,” says Colonel Clark ending the phone conversation and he hangs up.

On Wednesday night, Mike arrived in Victorville and pulled into a motel with a vacancy sign and got himself a room; tomorrow, he’ll look up Pam and see Bob, and maybe take his Helicopter out for a quick flight, as it’s been awhile since he’s flown.

After eating a very late dinner, Mike crawled into bed feeling worn out and tired from the long drive.

The next morning, Mike arose early, because he was impatient to see Pam, so after checking out at the front desk, Mike heads to breakfast.

At nine o’clock, after having eaten a hearty breakfast, Mike heads for the Taylor residence.

Several minutes later, Mike pulls up to the Taylor house and stops, gets out of the van, walks up to the front door and rings the doorbell.

A few seconds later the door opens and Mike, with bright shining eyes and smiling face, is met by Missis Taylor.

When Missis Taylor sees Mike, she has a shocked expression.

Mike cordially announces, “Good morning Missis Taylor.”

Hesitating to catch her breath and with a hand on her breasts, Missis Taylor says, “Mike—you’re not dead—oh dear how do I say this?”

“Say what?” Asked Mike piping up.

“Pam no longer lives here,” announces Missis Taylor, “Pam has gotten married and has moved to Los Angeles—she and her husband go to college there—I’m so sorry.”

Looking crestfallen, Mike sounding distraught said, “She told me she’d wait for me.”

“You never wrote or called for well over two years,” explained Missis Taylor, “when we heard that you were killed she was devastated—finally after several months, she met someone at college and two months ago they were married—I’m so sorry.”

With tears welling up in his eyes, Mike sounding despaired, said with dignity, “Will you tell Pam, the next time you see her, that I wish her the best and a very happy life.”

“I will—this very evening I’ll give her a call, and thank you Mike,” reassured Missis Taylor with a smile.

With a weak smile, Mike nods, and then he turns and with a broken heart he walks back to his van; as Mike gets in, Missis Taylor closes the door.

As Mike drives away a tear runs down his cheek, then as he approaches his old high school, memories come flooding back of that last year he spent there and the friends he made, and then he wonders how they’re doing.

Mike suddenly and unconsciously pulls into the parking lot and finds an empty spot and parks; after shutting off the engine, Mike realizes that he has parked in the same place where he and Glen used to park.

Feeling emotional, Mike sits there thinking he’s making a big mistake and shouldn’t be doing this, because nobody he knew is still here, except his teachers, and they will no longer remember him or any of his friends.

As Mike walks to the main doors, his mind is telling him this is a bad idea and to go back to the van and leave, but his feet aren’t listening and keep taking him to the doors.

Upon reaching the main doors, Mike opens one of the doors and enters the main hallway.

Standing there, Mike looks around and everything still looks the same—it’s as if time has stood still these past four and half years.

Mike is at loss as what to do now, when suddenly his feet start taking him down the hallway towards the display case with all the trophies and such.

Standing in front of the display case with his reflection staring back, Mike is surprise to see pictures of his three friends, Glen Justin, Joel Reese, and yes, his once upon-a-time bully and now friend, Mark Doubleday, and then he’s shocked to see his picture and it’s a bit larger and is positioned above all of the others; there are many pictures all arranged by class year, except Glen’s, Joel’s, Mark’s and his, they are separated from the others.

Then a student steps up next to Mike and looks into the display case; after a minute or so, he looks at Mike and remarks, “Awesome huh,”

“What’s awesome—the trophies? Then yeah it is,” affirmed Mike.

“No—the guy’s in the pictures,” returned the Student pointing to the

four pictures, “to think that some of the greatest Fighter Pilots and war Heroes came from this school.”

Mike looks at the pictures as there are now two reflections coming from the glass in the display case.

Mike nods with, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Did you go to school here, Mister?” Asked the Student.

“Yeah I did.”

“Did you know any of those kids in the pictures?” Inquired the Student; Mike nods.

“Which ones?”

“Those three,” Mike replied pointing at the pictures of Glen, Joel and Mark, “and then to several girls.”

The Student was about to speak when another reflection appeared, and it was of a middle-aged man in a white shirt and tie, and he firmly advised the Student, “Mister Davidson—shouldn’t you be someplace?”

“Yes Sir,” the Student sharply replied and hurried off down the hall.

Then Mike looking at the man remarked, “Principal Marshman—I see you’re still here.”

“Yes, and why wouldn’t I be,” sharply returned Principal Marshman.

“No reason—didn’t expect to see you—although it’s kind of a nice surprise, since everyone else I knew has long gone,” Mike laments with a hint of melancholy.

“Do I know you?” Asked Principal Marshman.

“Yeah, you should,” Mike replied huffily, “I went to school here four years ago.”

“So, who are you?” Principal Marshman asked with one raised brow.

“Michael Troff, Sir,” Mike replied and pointing to his large picture above the others, “that’s me there.”

Principal Marshman looks at the picture, then at Mike and back again, then with an expression of astonishment he said, “You’re Pegasus—you were killed—you’re dead!”

“Do I look like I’m dead,” Mike sharply asserted; Principal Marshman looks at Mike with an expression of disbelief and after a few seconds shakes his head with, “No you don’t.”

Mike smiles at him, offers his hand and cordially tells him, “I’m very happy to see you again—I’m glad that I stopped by.”

As they shake, Principal Marshman asks, “Why did you stop?”

“Don’t really know—I hadn’t planned too, it just happened,” replied

Mike with a big smile, and then he asked, “Is classes starting early now? This is early August,” pointing down the hall to where the Student had gone.

“No, we’re hosting special activates groups for kids who are into Computers, Math, Literature and the performing arts,” replied Principal Marshman with a big grin, “regular classes will begin as normal right after Labor Day.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be taking up anymore of your time and be on my way,” announced Mike, “and again it was great seeing you and my old school.”

“Thank you,” Principal Marshman graciously imparted, “and the pleasure was all mine, and thank you for stopping by—and please do so again—I think the students would like to meet you as well as the other war Heroes from this school.”

“I will,” affirmed Mike, “bye now,” and he leaves the display case and heads for the main doors.

As Mike drives to the Victorville Airport, he is impatient to see his business partner, Bob Manning, and maybe take his little Helicopter for a spin.

Mike turns onto the street that ran past the parking lot to the large building with two hangars.

Mike pulls into the parking lot and the first thing he noticed was the large sign between the two entrances, on each side of the building, was missing the name of Bob’s business; Mike thought, had Bob moved?

Getting out of the van, Mike briskly walks to the door to ‘Manning Aviation’ with heighten anticipation of seeing Bob again.

After entering the hallway, Mike went to the Bob’s office door and opened it; after the door opened, Mike stood there with a surprised expression, as the room was empty with only a few stray sheets of paper strewn about on the dirty carpet.

Mike enters the office totally confused and picks up one of the sheets of paper, it was a list of jobs, and the dates were over two years old; Mike was now really confused and wonders what happened.

Dropping the page, Mike heads for the lounge and the glass doors leading to the tarmac.

When Mike entered the lounge there were several people sitting in chairs reading magazines, no one was managing the counter, so Mike exits through the right glass door leading to the service and hangar area of Manning Aviation.

Outside on tarmac, Mike sees only Airplanes and no Helicopters; he enters Bob's hangar through a side service door, because the large overhead door was closed.

Stepping inside, Mike froze, there weren't any of Bob's Helicopters; what happened Mike wonders, as all he sees are small Airplanes.

Mike slowly walks down the aisle between the two rows of Airplanes looking for his little Robinson Helicopter, but it wasn't there.

Now wondering if he's in the right hangar, Mike turns and briskly walks back to the service door.

Re-entering the lounge, Mike walks up to the counter and taps the button on the top of a silver bell sitting there with a little card that reads, "Ring Bell for Service".

A man came out from the room in back and asked, "Yes, how may I help you?"

"What happen to Manning Aviation—where did they move too?" Mike inquiring. "The office is empty and all of Bob Manning's Helicopters are gone."

"Manning Aviation no longer exists," he replied.

"No longer exists!" Exclaimed Mike looking aghast, "I don't understand—did he go out of business—where did he go?"

"He's currently resides in Victor Valley Memorial," said the Man behind the counter.

"He's dead!" Blared Mike looking horrified.

"That's right," affirmed the Man with a solemn expression.

"How—when?"

"A heart attack—about a year or so ago," explained the Man behind the counter, "they found him slump over at his desk—what relationship was he to you?"

"My business partner," replied Mike with a tear forming in his eye.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the Man behind the counter, "where were you, if you were his partner—why weren't you here?"

"I was in the Army—in India," replied Mike and wipes his eyes with his hand, and then he asked, "What happened to the Helicopters?"

"When his business associates couldn't be located, namely you, the company assets were turned over to the court for disbursements to pay for any outstanding debts. Most of the Helicopters were sold outright and the rest were auctioned," explained the Man behind the counter.

Upon hearing the bad news, Mike felt sick; his Helicopter was gone and so was Pam and now Bob too.

After gathering himself together, Mike thanked the Man behind the counter and slowly and painfully walked back down the now lonely hall to the back door and parking lot.

As Mike drove away from the airport, he was feeling somber and alone; he looks at clock in the van and it shows nearly time for lunch, so Mike decides to go to lunch, and then decide what to do next.

While eating lunch at a local diner, Mike thinks there's no point on staying in Victorville, because there's no longer anything for him here.

As Mike eats his lunch, he feels lost and alone; all of his family is now living in Washington, back east.

Mike now wonders if his old bank account is still open, so he decides to go there next, because he'll need more money than what he has in his wallet to drive back to Washington; Mike isn't too keen on working his way home like he did coming west.

Now with no income and a place to hang his hat, he's basically homeless.

After finishing his lunch, Mike returns to his van and gets his wallet out and locates an old card with his bank and account number, because he doesn't have his old checkbook; he left it with his Parents when they still lived in Victorville.

Thank goodness he was able to retrieve his old wallet from his Helicopter when he was at Rucker, otherwise he'd be clueless as to which bank his money is in, once he reads the card he heads for the bank in town.

When he inquires about his account in the bank, he's shocked to learn that the account is empty and has been closed.

Devastated, Mike slowly walks back to his van nearly penniless and homeless; destined to live out of his van.

Then Mike remembers his Father telling him about another account which contains the royalty funds from his software he sold to the Government, but that's way up in Roseville and he doesn't have a clue as to where the account is located.

Mike sits in his van trying to think of what to do next, his options aren't many.

Sitting there as the minutes tick by, he now doesn't want to go back to the motel and spend precious money on a room.

Mike thinks he has no other choice than to head back to the east coast and locate his parents; looking at the money in his wallet, Mike figures he can make it to the Midwest before he has to go job-hunting again.

Taking stock of how much money he has left and the need to refill his tank, Mike now has to get real frugal.

Figuring to spend the nights in his van, he gets the road map and starts plotting the route back, noting all of the rest stops; he computes the driving time, amount of fuel needed and where he needs to be to spend a night at a rest stop.

Mike figures if his calculations are correct and he doesn't have any problems, he should make Oklahoma before he needs to job hunt.

Mike now plans to start back tomorrow and decides to spend the afternoon stocking up on supplies from the local supermarket, because it's a lot cheaper than eating at restraints and fast food joints.

The next stop is a gas station to top off his gas tank.

As Mike is filling his tank, he hears the sounds of Helicopters flying overhead and looks up to see a formation of three EXR3's in a vee formation heading northeast out into the desert.

Then Mike thinks there might be someone at Fort Irwin who would know how to get in touch with his Dad, who could send him some money to get home.

So, Mike decides to chance it and go to Fort Irwin; he looks at the clock in the van and thinks he can be there in the late afternoon, so after paying for the gas, Mike heads out on Interstate 15 northeast to Barstow, and five miles beyond Barstow, Mike exits the Interstate onto Fort Irwin Road; Fort Irwin is another sixty or so miles northeast.

CHAPTER 24 -- New Beginnings.

As Mike drives to Fort Irwin, he thinks what is he doing wasting his time going there; there's probably no one he knows that are still there and probably won't be allowed through the main gate.

Then it dawns on him, he should be going to George Air Force Base, his Dad's old assignment, as they will probably have the information he's seeks.

So, Mike looks for a place to turn around, because he doesn't want to do it in the desert; he might get stuck, as this isn't an all-wheel drive van.

With no place to turn around, Mike hopelessly continues on until he passes by a large military sign announcing he's entering Fort Irwin military reservation.

Mike now thinks he can turn around at the main gate.

A short while later, Mike pulls up to the main gate, stops and rolls down his window.

A Guard steps up and asks, "Who are you and the reason you're here."

Mike looks at him for a few seconds trying to think of how to answer, then with the Guard waiting, Mike replies, "I'm Mike Troff and Colonel Larry Clark told me that I could come and visit—that was several years ago, and I know he's no longer here. I also know Lieutenants Wayne Tripp and Scott Schultz, but that was a while ago—they're probably gone as well, so if I could please turn around, I'll leave."

Upon hearing the names, the Guard's eyes open and says, "Just wait—I need to check with the Duty Officer," and he steps back into the guard shack and picks up the telephone.

As Mike sits waiting, the Guard talks on the phone, nods and glances at Mike, all of which makes him very uneasy.

Finally, the Guard hangs up, comes back and tells Mike, "You've been cleared and you're to proceed to the 81st Tactical Training Company—the building is just up the road and the second left—you can't miss it. Someone will be waiting at the front door to escort you to the orderly room."

"Thank you," Mike graciously thanking him, the Guard dips his head in reply, steps back and waves Mike through.

Following the Guards directions, Mike locates the building for the 81st Tactical Training Company and turns into the parking lot and parks.

A bit apprehensive, Mike walks up to the front doors and starts to enter when several Officers walk past and into the building; Mike enters the

building and a Sergeant standing in the hallway steps up and introduces himself, “Hi—I’m First Sergeant John Hall and you must be Captain Mike Troff—if you will follow me Sir, I’ll show you to the orderly room.”

Mike with raised eyebrow, upon hearing himself being addressed as Captain, follows the First Sergeant with a feeling of uncertainty.

Upon entering the orderly room, First Sergeant Hall tells Mike, “Please wait here Sir, while I get the Commanding Officer—it’ll only be a few minutes.”

Mike nods and the First Sergeant walks over to one of several doors, knocks and when he hears, “ENTER,” he opens the door and goes inside.

As Mike waits, he notices the men and woman working at their desks would periodically look up and gaze at him, and when Mike returned their gaze they would smile back.

As the short few minutes wait turns into ten minutes, and then into twenty minutes, Mike is beginning to get anxious, and decides to sit in a nearby chair.

When Colonel Clark had finished talking to Major Zempel, he pushed the handset cradle button to hang up, and then he dialed Major General Richard Griggs office.

General Griggs secretary answers, “Major General Richard Griggs office, Specialist Davidson speaking.”

“Good afternoon Specialist Davidson, this is Lieutenant Colonel Larry Clark and is the General in—I need to speak with him—it’s quite urgent.”

“Just a minute Sir, I’ll see if he’s in,” responded Specialist Davidson; the line went quiet and Colonel Clark starts tapping his fingers on his desk top thinking he needs to call Brigadier General Henry Troff next, to inform him that his Son is at Fort Irwin.

Then Specialist Davidson comes back and announces, “The General is in Sir—I’ll put you through,” there was several clicks, and then Specialist Davidson said, “Go ahead Sir.”

“Major General Griggs here.”

“General—I have some good news about our special man Sir,” said Colonel Clark sounding lively, “I just got a call from Major Zempel in the 81st at Fort Irwin. Captain Troff has showed up there, Major Zempel will get him settled into the BOQ there.”

“That is great news,” declared General Griggs, “Does he know he has a commission and is still in the Army?”

“Yes Sir he’ll be appraised of his status,” replied Colonel Clark and he explains, “Major Zempel will informed him and tell him I’ll be arriving with his Parents to escort him back in a couple of days, Sir.”

“Good!” Exclaimed General Griggs, “I’ll make arrangements for the presentations—I think the Chief Of Staff, Secretary Of Defense and the President will want to meet with him. Is there anything else?”

“No Sir—that’s all I have at this time,” replied Colonel Clark.

“Ok then, have a good day Colonel,” General Griggs ending the call and hangs up.

Colonel Clark once again pushes the handset cradle button to end the call, and then he dials Brigadier General Henry Troff.

When General Troff comes on the line he says, “This is Brigadier General Henry Troff speaking.”

“Good afternoon General Troff, this is Lieutenant Colonel Clark and I have very good news about your Son, Mike,” said Colonel Clark.

“That’s very good to hear—tell me what have you’ve got?” Asked a very jubilant General Troff

“Mike’s currently at Fort Irwin,” replied a light hearted Colonel Clark, and then explains, “He’s staying in the BOQ at the 81st Tactical Training Company and will be appraised of his current Army status. I just got off the phone with General Griggs and informed him as well, and from what he tells me, when Mike gets back he’ll be having a quite busy schedule—sounds like he’s going to be presented with some medals as well going to the White House to meet the President, so I’m leaving for Fort Irwin tomorrow to get him and bring him back. By the way, I told Major Zempel and General Griggs that you and your Wife will accompany me—I hope I wasn’t being too presumptuous.”

“No, no, not at all,” insisted General Troff, “I’m glad you’re including me and my Wife—when I tell her we’re going to get Mike she’ll be overjoyed—I’ll see if I can’t get a temporary leave for Jeff, so he can be here when we return—it’s been over two years since we all seen Mike, I’m sure Maria will be planning a large get-together.”

“Ok—great,” said Colonel Clark, “I’ll make all of the arrangements and let you know when and where our flight leaves. That’s all I have, so I won’t take up anymore of your time, Sir. Have a great afternoon and I’ll keep in touch—bye now,” and they hang up.

After sitting there for another twenty minutes, softly tapping the floor with the ball of his foot, the door to the room where the First Sergeant had gone into, opens, and out walks a Major who looks familiar; followed by

the First Sergeant.

The Major walks over to where Mike is sitting, and as soon as the Major approached, Mike immediately recognizes him as the leader of the Humming Birds; which he trained with when he lived in Roseville six years ago.

Mike gets up with a huge smile and with an out held hand, he happily greets, “Mist—err...I mean Major Zempel, it’s so great to see you—didn’t know you were in the Army.”

Major Zempel with a large smile grabbed Mike’s hand, and as they shook, Major Zempel said, “Not as great as I’m to see you—I thought you were dead—so did everyone else—that is, until Colonel Clark called a few days ago telling me you were alive and might show up here—and here you are.”

Now everyone in the orderly room was looking at Mike and the Major with happy expressions, especially the First Sergeant.

Then Major Zempel tells Mike, “Let’s go to my office—there’s some things I need to fill you in on, things you need to know,” pointing towards his door.

As Major Zempel walks to his office, Mike follows and behind him is the First Sergeant; when they were inside, the First Sergeant closes the door, and then Major Zempel offers, “Please have a seat Captain,” motioning to the chair in front of his desk.

As Major Zempel sits down at his desk, Mike also sits down; the First Sergeant stood off to one side with his arms behind his back.

Mike announced, “Major Zempel, I’m not in the Army and I’m not a Captain.”

Major Zempel shook his head reaffirming, “That’s incorrect on both counts.”

“I got discharged as a Corporal,” alleged Mike looking perplexed.

“Wrong again,” Major Zempel announced shaking his head again, to Mike’s chagrin, and then he explains, “As a commissioned Officer, the only way to leave the service is to retire, resign, die or have your commission revoked. In your case, that Discharge is invalid because you were commissioned about two years ago.”

“Commissioned!” Beseched Mike, “I never went to OCS!”

“According to what Colonel Clark has told me,” began Major Zempel, “two years ago you were granted a battlefield commission—Colonel Clark can fill you in on all of the particulars when he arrives.”

“Larry Clark is coming here?” Asked Mike with a quizzical expression.

“Yeah,” Major Zempel replied with a nod, “He’ll be here as soon as he can arrange it in a day or two—he’ll also be bringing your Dad and Mom with him.”

“Mom and Dad are coming too?”

“Yup, so you need to stick around for a few days,” advised Major Zempel.

“You got a campground nearby?” Inquired Mike, “I’m kinda’ short on funds, motels are too expensive.”

“You’ll be staying here with us in 81st—the top floor is a BOQ for our unmarried flight training officers—you may already know some of them,” said Major Zempel with a grin.

“Stay here—I only have a couple of uniforms and Corporal insignia—what about formations?” Questioned Mike.

“Two uniforms will be fine, if their clean and serviceable—the First Sergeant will get you Captains insignia to pin on and a meal card to get you into the mess hall—that should suffice until you get back to your unit at Fort Belvoir, and as far as any formations, only the enlisted men stand formations, the training officers are on their honor and are excused,” explained Major Zempel.

“I don’t have an ID card, Data Disk or Data Link—I still have my Dog-tags though,” Mike contended, “I need an ID to get around.”

“I’ll have one of my staff to assist you with new ID’s,” apprised Major Zempel, “You don’t need a Data Disk, because I believe Colonel Clark has already taken care of that at Fort Belvoir, I believe you’ve been assigned to the 660th.”

“The 660th at Belvoir?” Questioned Mike looking surprised; Major Zempel nods, and then he turns to the First Sergeant and commands, “First Sergeant—take Captain Troff and see that he gets a meal card, insignia and a place to stay. I’ll have one of my staff training officers meet you in the orderly room to take Captain Troff and get him his ID.”

“Yes Sir,” First Sergeant Hall firmly replied with a salute; after Major Zempel returned the salute, First Sergeant Hall firmly said to Mike, “Sir, will you follow me.”

Mike nods and says to Major Zempel, “Thank you Sir, and it was nice to see you again,” offering his hand again; Major Zempel takes his hand imparting, “Yes—it was nice seeing you again as well, and I’ll see you again when Colonel Clark and your parents arrive in a day or two,” and they shake heartily.

Mike then gives Major Zempel a salute and when the salute is returned, Mike turns and follows First Sergeant Hall out of the room.

In the orderly room, First Sergeant Hall got a Battalion meal card made and handed it to Mike with, “Now this will get you into any mess hall in the Battalion, so it’s good here as well as the 660th at Belvoir, so don’t loose it.”

Then First Sergeant Hall picked up the telephone and after a short chat he hung up and was about to speak when in walked Captain Harold Tate, another member of the Humming Birds.

When Mike sees him he’s overjoyed and exclaims, “Mist—err—Captain Tate,” when he sees Harold’s insignia, “you’re in the Army too!”

“Yup—afraid so,” replied a smiling Captain Tate, “God I’m so glad you’re alive and kickin’,” offering his hand; Mike takes his hand and they shake heartily.

Then Captain Tate imparts, “My call—by the way, is Weasel.”

“Weasel huh,” Mike remarked.

“Yeah, Pegasus,” replied Captain Tate and loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, which caused Mike to wince and glance around.

When Captain Tate sees Mike wince he tells him with a grin, “Hey, it’s Ok—everyone in here already knows that you’re Pegasus, so relax, because after today, a lot more people are going to know who you really are.”

Mike has a wide-eyed expression.

Then First Sergeant Hall pipes up, “Here are the keys to Room 412 on the 4th floor, and I’ll have someone take you to the Quartermaster Supply to get bedding and some insignia.”

“I’ll take him,” announced Captain Tate, “I need to take him over to G1 later for an ID and Data Link.”

“Yes Sir,” replied First Sergeant Hall, and then Captain Tate turned and started for the door requesting, “Follow me Captain Troff,” and Mike starts out after Captain Tate.

Leaving the Supply room with an armload of bedding and Captain’s insignia in his pocket, Mike follows Captain Tate up five flights of stairs from the basement to the fourth floor.

When they arrived at room 412, Captain Tate inquired, “Give me your key and I’ll open the door.”

With arms loaded with bedding, Mike responds, “It’s in my left pocket,” turning to expose his left jean pocket; Captain Tate reaches in and extracts the key and proceeds to unlock and open the door.

Mike enters the room and puts the bedding on a military bunk; Captain Tate hands the key to Mike telling him, “I gotta’ go—you can dig out one of your old fatigue uniforms or summer class A’s and I’ll be by in an

hour to take you to dinner—bye,” and with a wave he walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Mike looks the room over; the room is small, with a roomy walk in closet.

Inside the closet, Mike finds it's a larger version of the wall lockers he's used too.

On one side was a rod to hang uniforms with a shelf above, and below a cabinet with two sets of two drawers; the other side is similar for civilian clothes.

A single window with a shade, and to the left of the window a computer table with two file drawers on one side, a shelf above and a rolling office chair.

The bunk was positioned on the right side of the window with a nightstand and light.

The door was opposite the window, and to the left of the door was a small walled off sink and a crude vanity with a small refrigerator underneath.

Mike proceeds to make his bed thinking, “Good grief I’m back in the Army—I didn’t remain a civilian for very long—well, at least I’ll be flying.”

After Mike finished making his bed, he heads to his van to see what kind of uniforms he has left from when he got discharged.

Rummaging through his old duffle, he finds two fatigue uniforms, a cap, boots and a pair of shop shoes; he also has a Class ‘A’ uniform, but it's an enlisted man's uniform with Corporal strips on the sleeves.

Putting all the unusable stuff back into his duffle, Mike heads back to his room.

After laying the fatigue uniform on his bed, Mike is ready to change when there's a knock on the door.

Mike goes to answer the door, and when he opens it there stands his old friends from Pegasus Aviation in Roseville, Wayne Tripp and Scott Schultz.

“Can we come in?” Requested Wayne in a cheery blissful tone.

“Yeah--,” Mike returned looking radiant and sounding jubilant.

Once in Mike's room, Scott pointing to the wall says, “Our rooms are that way just down the hall—how long are you going to be staying? Are you getting assigned to the 81st?”

“I’ll be here a couple of days, I guess—until Clark arrives with my Parents, and from what Major Zempel tells me I’ve been assigned to the

660th,” Mike replies.

“Boy you sure are quite a Hero, and I heard you’ve got lots of medals,” Scott proudly proclaimed; Mike looking surprised responds, “I don’t have any medals and I’m not a Hero—I just did my job,” then he remarked—guess they demoted you guys to Captains, huh.”

“Yeah, like they demoted you from Corporal to Captain,” asserted Wayne giggling, Mike smiles nodding.

“Whata’ you mean—you don’t have any medals!” Exclaimed Scott looking confused.

“I never got any medals except the good conduct medal and the National Defense Service medal,” alleged Mike.

“Boy—haven’t you heard,” declared Scott, “The Indian Prime Minister has recommended to the Indian President that you should receive the Bharat Ratna Medal, and you may even be eligible for the Medal of Honor,” Mike stood there looking astounded.

Then Mike looked at his watch and told them, “If you guys don’t mind I need to climb into some fatigues, because Captain Tate is coming to take me to dinner—I’ll see you two later,” and with a nod and a wave of their hands they both walked out of the room leaving Mike to change.

The next morning, Mike awoke with the sound of reveille sounding in the hallway.

For a few minutes, Mike was disoriented and thinking he’s having a bad nightmare, and then he remembers he’s back in the Army and sits up in bed and rubs his eyes in disbelief.

Then a knock on the door, Mike answers, “Yeah—come in.”

The door opens and there stands Scott; men are hurrying up and down the hall behind him, he enters and asks, “Are you up—chow is in hour?”

“Yeah—I guess so,” said Mike in a somber tone, and slides over and sits on the edge of his bunk, yawns and takes a deep breath.

“You get yourself cleaned up and dressed, I’ll be back with Wayne, Harold and Steve--and we’ll all go to breakfast together.”

“Great—I’ll be ready,” affirmed Mike and gets to his feet; Scott leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Mike enters his closet and gets his shaving kit and a clean set of underwear; old military shorts and tee shirt left over from when he got discharged, and heads to the latrine; returning twenty minutes later refreshed and carrying his old underwear.

Ten minutes later, Mike is dressed in his green fatigues with Captain's insignia on his collars and stands at the window watching the formation below and feeling guilty for not being out there.

Then the knock on the door again, "Come in," Mike commands turning his head to look at the door, the door opens and in steps Scott, Wayne, Harold and Steve; now the room is a bit crowded.

They look all at Mike, Mike responds, "What—is there something wrong? This is all I was allowed to keep when I got discharged."

"Nope," replied Captain Tate, "after breakfast I'll take you over to the Quartermaster to get you issued new uniforms."

"C'mon, I'm hungry," beseeched Scott.

"After you," Mike proclaimed motioning with his hand towards the door; Scott heads out the door with Wayne, Harold and Steve with Mike following.

When they arrived at the mess hall dining room there was a long line of enlisted men waiting to get in; Mike follows the four Officers as they pass the enlisted men and enter the mess hall.

Mike once again still feels a bit anxious about bypassing the line, because it's his second time as an Officer and it's one of the perks; the first time was last evening with Captain Tate.

As soon as all five of the Officers are inside the dining room the NCO checking meal cards loudly called, "AT EASE!" and the dining room became quiet.

As Mike followed the Officers to the serving line, Mike sees a large portrait of himself high on the wall, and this time it wasn't a silhouette; there were smaller portraits of Major Barq, Captains Deniger, Tripp, Schultz and Lieutenants Griffey, Kiver, Holz, Davison and Picklemyer on both sides of Mike's large portrait.

As Mike followed Captain Halver all eyes were on the Officers, especially Mike; out the side of his eye, Mike noticed several men whispering and pointing at him, and this made Mike feel very uneasy.

As soon as the Officers were behind the serving partition, the dining room once again became a loud cacophonous sound of human voices.

Mike followed the four Officers to the Officer and high-ranking NCO section; which like in every mess hall dining room that Mike has been in, was partitioned off from the rest of the dining room.

Mike and the four Officers seated themselves at the same table that Company Commander, Major Zempel was seated.

The First Sergeant and several Master Sergeants were seated at another table nearby.

Some Staff Sergeants and Sergeants First Class were seated at another table in this section of the dining room.

Major Zempel said to Mike and Captain Tate, "You two needn't bother going to the Quartermaster to get Captain Troff reissued uniforms, because Colonel Clark tells me he has Captain Troff's old duffle with all of his gear, and he'll bring a set of Class A's with him when he arrives this afternoon with Captain Troff's Parents."

"So, Mom and Dad are definitely coming," contended Mike looking blissful; Major Zempel nods.

Then Mike remembers Class A's being mentioned and asks, "Why is Colonel Clark bringing me a set of Class A's—can't he wait until I get there?"

Major Zempel replies smiling, "I believe he plans on your returning with him—I believe he has your itinerary all planned for when you get to Washington—I do believe you're going to have a very busy next few days and weeks ahead of you."

Mike looking aghast croaked, "Itinerary—going back with him! But I have a van, and what about my stuff I have in my room and in my van?"

"That stuff including your van will be shipped to you in Washington," replied Major Zempel, and then he adds, "You're a celebrity, and after you visit the Pentagon and the White House next week, you're going to be famous and written about in the history books."

Now Mike was in total shock, sweating and wishing he had turned around and headed back to Victorville; instead of seeing his Parents again, he is not looking forward to a Hollywood kind of homecoming.

All Mike wants is anonymity and to fly Fighter Helicopters.

As the Officers at his table finished eating, they got up and walked away leaving their trays, the high-ranking NCO's did the same thing; the men on KP cleaned up the table and bused the trays to the disposal window.

When Mike finished, he felt as if he should bus his own tray to the disposal window just like he felt yesterday, and was about to pick up the tray when Captain Tate declared, "What are you doing? That's what KPs are paid to do—just leave it."

For a moment Mike looks at him expressionless, and then he leaves it be, turns and walks out of the dining room thinking, "this is something I've got to get used to."

That morning, Mike followed Captain Tate from one classroom to another, observing from the back as to what was being taught.

In one class that Mike was observing, he shook his head slowly and silently mumbled, “That’s not correct—you’re still not teaching basic flight maneuvers,” after hearing the instructor tell the class the EXR Helicopter isn’t capable of doing high ‘G’ maneuvers.

When Captain Tate sees Mike’s disapproval, he inquires in a whisper, “I see you don’t agree with the instructor.”

“No I don’t,” Mike whispers back in a firm disapproval, “he’s wrong—the EXR most certainly can execute high ‘G’ maneuvers—how do you think I was able to defeat all of those enemy aircraft in India.”

Captain Tate nods, and then he raises his hand to get the instructors attention.

Mike panics and whispers almost to the point of being heard, “What are you doing?”

“Trust me,” Captain Tate whispers back.

The Instructor, Lieutenant Gibson, halts his instruction and acknowledges Captain Tate’s raised hand, “Yes Sir, is there something you wish to add?”

“Yes Lieutenant,” affirms Captain Tate lowering his hand, “Captain Troff, call sign Pegasus, is in disagreement with your line of instruction.”

Mike’s face turns a rosy shade of red and he starts to sweat, as the instructor stares at him bug-eyed and the students in the class quickly turn in their seats to stare as well.

Then the instructor alleges, “And what part of the syllabus don’t you agree with, Sir?”

“The part where you’re telling everyone the EXR Helicopter is incapable of executing high ‘G’ maneuvers,” Mike firmly asserting.

“Then, maybe you would like to come up here and explain to us why the manual is wrong,” argued the Instructor; Mike nods, and then he boldly walks to the head of the classroom and stands next to the Instructor and announces, “Those manuals are very conservative—they don’t take into consideration that the EXR Helicopter was built for high ‘G’ Dog fighting maneuvers. How do you think I was able to defeat several MIG Fighters in India—believe me, the EXR can safely execute high ‘G’ maneuvers. I informed the Pentagon about this an year ago that the manuals are incorrect and they told me that the manuals will be corrected, but apparently that hasn’t happened.”

Then with everyone’s attention glued on Mike, he asks the class, “How many of you can execute a simple roll and loop?”

Not one hand is raised, then Mike looks at the Instructor and asks, “How about you—can you execute a simple roll and loop?”

The Instructor glares back and shakes his head.

Mike looking grim, proclaims, “None of you should be here—a roll and loop are basic flight maneuvers that you should’ve learned in flight school at Rucker. There’s no sense in continuing until you can execute basic flight maneuvers. In a combat situation—you’re all dead meat, just like what I witnessed in India. All of this instruction is a waste until you can execute basic flight maneuvers—not one of you is ready for combat. Thanks for your time—that’s all I have,” and Mike heads back to where Captain Tate is standing with a big smile.

When Mike reaches Captain Tate, he asks, “Is that all you’re going to do—just walk away?”

“What do you suggest I do?” Mike bluntly returns.

“Train them,” declared Captain Tate; Mike just looks at him straight faced.

“That’s not my job—that’s yours,” countered Mike.

“My job!” Exclaimed Captain Tate.

“Yeah,” Mike fires back, “as I see it, you should recommend that anyone not proficient in those basic flight maneuvers be recycled back to flight school, and Major Zempel had better get a hold of Colonel Clark and insist that basic flight instruction at Rucker include basic roll and loop maneuvers, and no one should be coming here unless they can demonstrate efficiency in those areas of flight.”

Captain Tate slack-jawed looked at Mike, and then Mike looked at the clock on the wall and bluntly said, “C’mon lets go—it’s nearly ten and I still need to get a new Id and Data Link.”

Mike and Captain Tate exit’s the classroom, and then they head for the main door.

Captain Tate drove Mike over to the post HQ and went into G1, Personnel.

After some explaining and phone calls, Mike finally got a new Id card and Data Link; this makes it official, Mike is now back in the Army.

At lunch, Major Zempel told Mike to stay in the building, because Colonel Clark and his Parents are due to arrive this afternoon; Mike tells him, he’ll be in his room.

Mike spent the next few hours, getting his belongings ready to be shipped to his new unit at Fort Belvoir; including obtaining several forms from the orderly room which needed to be filled out.

At three o'clock, a knock on the door, Mike goes to answer and a Spec4 hands him a folded note.

Mike takes the note and the Spec4 walks away; Mike reads the note and learns that Colonel Clark and his Parents are waiting in Major Zempel's office.

Mike puts the note in his pocket, walks out of his room, closes his door and locks it, and then he heads to the orderly room.

When Mike enters the orderly room, he tells the Buck Sergeant at the company clerks desk that he's to report to Major Zempel.

The Sergeant tells Mike, "Go right in Sir—the Major is expecting you," Mike nods and walks over to Major Zempel's door and knocks; when Mike hears, "COME IN," he opens the door and enters.

When Mike walks into the room, there sits Colonel Clark and his Father and Mother; as soon as Maria sees Mike she quickly gets up and rushes to him, Henry also gets up and walks to Mike.

Maria with tears of joy flowing from her eyes throws her arms around Mike in a bear hug, and then she proceeds to kiss him on the cheeks and forehead.

Maria blubbers, "How are you—were you badly hurt my dear baby-- I'm so glad you're safe."

"Mom—Mom, I'm just fine—I'm Ok—honest," beseeched Mike, barely able to talk much less breath with that bear hug she has on him, "please, if you can ease up a bit so I can breathe."

"Sorry dear," Maria graciously said releasing the tight hug, "but I'm so overjoyed to see you."

Once Mike was in the clear, Henry steps up and gives him a gentle manly hug, gushing, "I'm so happy to see you Son—I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you Father—I'm proud to be your Son," Mike graciously returned.

Then Colonel Clark come forward and offers his hand, "Well Mike, I've been waiting for this moment for over an year now—I want to welcome you to your new unit the 660th EXR Tactical Response Company part of the 83rd EXR Battalion at Fort Belvoir."

Mike takes his hand and they shake; Henry and Major Zempel have bold smiles on their faces.

Mike says earnestly, "I'm looking forward to it."

"So, are you ready to return with your Parents and me," inquired Colonel Clark.

"I've got a van and other stuff," advises Mike, and then looking over to Major Zempel, Mike alleges, "Major Zempel told me that my van and personal stuff can be shipped to Fort Belvoir, if that's true I'll go with you—otherwise, I'm not going back with you—I'm driving."

With Maria and Henry looking doleful and Colonel Clark looking sullen, Mike looks over to Major Zempel who shrugs his shoulders with a coy expression.

Then Colonel Clark announces, "I'll see what I can do—I'm not promising anything, but it's going to require a bit of paperwork."

"Ok," Mike declares, "I've already started some of the paperwork, but it's going to take a few days, so I can't leave just yet, besides there's another bigger problem."

"What problem?" Growled Colonel Clark looking bilious.

"Inadequate flight training from our primary flight schools," Mike firmly asserting, "I had the opportunity to attend one of the advance flight training classes with Captain Tate this morning. First, they're still teaching outdated and incorrect information, and second, even worse—I discovered no one in that classroom was qualified to be there—by that I mean, they weren't proficient in the very basic flight maneuvers, and that includes the Instructor. I thought after I informed you last year about the problem, I was assured the flight schools would make immediate changes—apparently they haven't. Sir, every one of those students should be recycled back through flight school—they aren't qualified to be in advance flight training."

Henry, Colonel Clark and Major Zempel were slack-jawed.

Then Colonel Clark asked, "What do you suggest we do?"

"Recycle anyone who can't execute controlled rolls and loops," replied Mike looking serious.

"We can't recycle the whole school!" Exclaimed Colonel Clark, "That would cause a backlog and foul up the works."

"Well—," Mike countered, "setup special classes and train them here—you can't teach these students advance flight until they become proficient in those basic flight maneuvers. I can do it while I'm waiting for the paperwork to get approved to have my van and personal stuff transferred to Fort Belvoir."

Colonel Clark shakes his head arguing, "The special flight classes can be arranged, but you can't stay and instruct—you're needed back in Washington—maybe in a month or so after you're finished in Washington I can arrange for you to be temporarily transferred to the 81st here. Is there anyone who you can suggest to instruct those classes?"

“Yeah—Captain Tate, Captain Tripp, and Captain Schultz,” replied Mike.

Colonel Clark turns to Major Zempel and commands, “See to it Major.” Major Zempel nods, and then Colonel Clark asks, “How soon can you be ready to leave?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders replying, “Don’t know—how ever long it takes to get the papers approved to ship my van and things, Maybe if you could sign it,” looking at Colonel Clark, and then he turns to his Dad and adds, “And you Dad—it would really speed things up if you and Colonel Clark were both to sign.”

“I don’t think my signature would be of any help—I’m in another branch of the Military,” Henry announced with a grin.

Then Colonel Clark imparts, “Get the completed forms to me and I’ll sign it and take it to General Griggs and see if he’ll sign it—would that meet your requirements?”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Mike looking blissful, “I’ll get the forms to you tomorrow morning—would that be Ok?”

Colonel Clark nods and injects, “Ok, that about does it for now—I imagine Mike and his Parents want to spend some time together—I have nothing more—does anyone else?”

They all shook their heads, so Colonel Clark says, “I’ll see you all in the morning,” and walks out of the office.

Mike spent the rest of the afternoon with his Parents; catching up on the past two years.

That evening, Henry and Maria took Mike to a restaurant for dinner, and that night, Mike finished getting this stuff in order to be shipped to Fort Belvoir; after finishing the forms, Mike turned in for the night.

The next morning, Mike sat at the same table in the mess hall with Major Zempel, Colonel Clark, Captains Tate and Wayne; Scott joined them later.

Later that morning, Mike was at Colonel Clark’s apartment and gave him the completed forms, and in return, Colonel Clark handed Mike his class ‘A’ uniform to wear on the trip back to Washington; then Colonel Clark informed Mike that they will be leaving the next morning.

That evening, Mike had his last dinner with his friends, Captains Wayne Tripp and Scott Schultz, telling them he’ll be back; the next morning, wearing his new Class ‘A’ uniform, Mike got into a car with his Parents and Colonel Clark and left Fort Irwin.

An hour or so later, they arrived at George Air Force Base Northwest of Victorville.

All of this brought back memories from when he lived here and went to high school; now that is in the distant past—Bob Manning is gone and so is his girl Pam Taylor as well as his best friends Glen Justin and Joel Reese.

A couple of hours later, Mike, his Parents and Colonel Clark are on an Air Force Personal Transport Plane heading east to Washington DC.

EPILOGUE.

The Airplane landed at Andrews Air Force Base, and after Mike, Colonel Clark and Mike's parents had departed the Airplane, Colonel Clark informed Mike that he's to report to 660th at Fort Belvoir in the morning by 0800.

Henry, Mike's Dad, says to Mike, "We have a three bedroom town house in Arlington, if you like you can stay with us and commute to your unit—it's only a twenty minute drive by freeway to Fort Belvoir."

"Yeah, that would be great once I get my van—that's if it's Ok with Colonel Clark," replied Mike looking at Clark; the Colonel nods.

"That's wonderful," declared Maria feeling joyful with a glowing expression, "when Jeff arrives we'll have both boys home—if just for a short time."

"I'll see if Jeff can be reassigned to a B80 Bomber Wing at Anderson," Henry suggesting.

"Both boys will be living with us again, just like when we lived in California," said Maria with exuberance.

"Only if I can get Jeff reassigned—there's no guarantees," affirmed Henry, "and only until either they or me gets reassigned, or they get married."

"There're already plans in the works, that once Mike gets situated, he'll be sent to Fort Irwin to assist in advance training, "Imparted Colonel Clark.

"I am!" Exclaimed Mike, "I thought I'm assigned to the 660th at Fort Belvoir?"

"You are," replied Colonel Clark, and then he explains, "You're a member of the 83rd EXR Battalion, and both the 660th and the 81st are part of the Battalion. You'll be used wherever your skills are needed in the Battalion—do you understand?" Mike nods with a mouth yeah.

Then Colonel Clark bid them farewell and walked away to catch a ride to Fort Belvoir.

The next morning, Henry drove Mike to his unit on Fort Belvoir, and then drove to the Pentagon where he works.

After meeting the CO of the 660th, Mike's old war games comrade, Major Dave Barq, Mike was shown to his quarters, a room all to himself with his original duffle with all of his old gear sitting on his empty bunk.

After Mike gets his bedding from the supply room, he makes his bed, and then unpacks his duffle and changes into a set of green fatigues; Mike spends the rest of the morning sorting through his gear, putting the usable uniforms into the closet and later exchanging the unusable stuff for usable stuff over at the Quartermaster building.

At noon, Mike sat next to Major Barq and Major Nickerson, with Captain, Deniger (Griffin), Lieutenant's Davison (Sneaky Snake), Ed Kiver (Freaky Ed.), Holz (Yellow Jacket), Mathews (Sidewinder) and Stan Picklemyer (Alley Cat); they were all there and overwhelmed to see Mike again, and yes, their portraits were on the walls with Mike's being the largest at one end of the mess hall.

After Mike had gotten situated in 660th, he spent the rest of the week with his Parents; Jeff arrived on Friday.

On Saturday they barbecued on the patio and talked about their adventures during the past four years.

On Sunday, they attended Church Services, with Henry, Jeff and even Mike wearing uniforms; Mike wasn't ashamed any longer, for now he was wearing an officers uniform with the rank of Captain, Just like Jeff, and they both sat together on their Father's right side.

On Monday, Mike was informed by Major Barq that next Wednesday he's to go to the Pentagon to have the Secretary Of Defense present him with the Silver Star.

On Friday there will be a parade in his honor where General Cook will present to him the Distinguished Service Cross, Major General Griggs will present him with Distinguished Flying Cross and Colonel Clark with two Purple Hearts.

At a meeting in the Company's conference room, Major Barq informed everyone that at Thursday's 1300 formation everyone in the Company will be required to attend, including all Officers and Enlisted Men, and the uniform will be Class 'A'.

Everyone sitting around the table was surprised and in disbelief; Captain Deniger gasped, "All Officers in Class 'A's!'"

"Yes Captain," Major Barq affirmed.

"But why, Sir?" Asked Captain Deniger.

"It's a formal formation to honor Captain Troff and to give me the honor to personally present him with the Air Medal," Major Barq solemnly explained.

Now Mike sat there looking astounded with a red face and speechless.

Then Lieutenant Kiver added, “About time Pegasus gets recognized and honored—a true Hero in our time,” smiling at Mike, who’s sitting across from him.

Jeff and Mike’s Parents were present at the parade when Mike received the four medals which made his Father very proud.

On the following Wednesday, Mike, in Dress Blues, was in the Pentagon to receive the Silver Star from the Secretary Of Defense; Jeff also received the Distinguished Flying Cross, and Henry couldn’t be more proud of his two Sons.

The next week, Mike flew to Quantico Marine base for joint training with the Marines, and there he met his high school friend Captain Joel Reese (Glave), he also met Captain’s Bill Warfield (Javelin) and Bob Smith (Hell Cat).

When Joel approached Mike, he couldn’t believe his eyes and neither could Mike.

Mike extending his hand and showing blissful emotion he gushed, “Joel—I I can’t believe it’s you—boy Glave it’s great to see you.”

Joel feeling just as blissful, takes Mike’s hand telling him, “And I as well Pegasus—it’s so great to see you again after all these years and I’m really glad you’re not dead—you had us worried there for a while.”

They shake hands with Mike returning, “It wasn’t that many years ago—its only been a little over six years ago since we graduated from high school. Sorry for scaring ya’ it was touch and go for a while, but I made it and I’m back flying.”

Then he shook Bill’s and Bob’s hand and together they entered the lecture hall.

That afternoon Major Barq told Mike that on Friday, he’s been requested to see the President in the White House, and he’s to wear his Dress Blues.

Friday, Mike, Jeff and his Parents were at the White House along with the Secretary Of Defense, Speaker of the House, a few congressmen and the news media to witness the President present the Medal of Honor to Mike.

Mike stood on the platform to one side of a podium with the Presidential Seal on the front; the President of the United States steps up to the podium and begins to orate, “We’re gathered here today to bestow upon the young man standing before us our highest honor for heroism and gallantry.

It was very difficult to choose the one action that stood out from so many that you so unselfishly did to save your fellow comrades,” turning to look at Mike, and then he continues, “But the one that was finally decided upon, was the action that took place in a small village in India by the name of Ladapur. Risking your life, you stayed behind even after your position was discovered by the enemy, to destroy a weapon that threatened an entire Company and squadron of Aircraft. Even under heavy fire, you destroyed the weapon and were wounded. You were also responsible for freeing many Indian villages and saving many lives—your exploits have become legendary and after this ceremony, the Ambassador from India has informed us that the Indian President would like you to come back to India to receive their highest award, but first, I am extremely proud and honored to present to you our country’s highest award, The Congressional Medal of Honor.”

The President steps from the podium and is presented with an open wooden box, he reaches in and takes the ribbon bound medal, and with camera flashes going off, he places the ribbon around Mike’s neck so the medal is hanging in front of Mike’s uniform, and then everyone starts applauding.

Maria has tears of pride in her eyes, and for Henry, this is his most proudest moment in his life.

The following week, Mike is standing in front of the Indian President, Prime Minister, US Ambassador to India and Mike’s Parents; there he received the Bharat Ratna medal.

While Mike was in India, he visited Sheila’s shrine and grave; he quietly knelt there on one knee with head bowed mourning her loss with tear filled eyes.

A week after returning from India, he had another happy reunion with his Blood Brother Air Force Captain Glen Justin (Wumper).

Mike learns that Captain Justin is now stationed at Andrews Air Force Base.

In November, Mike’s van arrived and Brenda writes to inform Maria and Henry that she’s remarried; she married a Doctor by the name of Carl Davis, and now, four-year-old Mary wants to become a Doctor.

At Christmas, Jeff informs them that he’s been reassigned to Andrews Air Force Base, thanks to his Father’s effort, which is very good news; now the Troff family is once again together, and that Christmas was a good one.

In February, Larry Clark was promoted to Full Colonel followed one month later with Donald Zempel and Dave Barq being promoted to Lieutenant Colonels.

In March, a very devastated Pam knocks on the Troff's door; Maria answers the door looking very surprised.

Pam asks in a very doleful voice, "Can I come in—I just lost my Husband and Son in a car accident—Mom and Dad are now living in Great Britain and I'm living with my Aunt and Uncle in Bluemont."

"You poor dear—come in," said Maria in a warm inviting tone; Pam steps into the house and follows Maria to the kitchen where she offers Pam a chair.

Maria places a plate of finger cakes on the table and pours two cups of coffee; one for Pam and one for herself, and then Maria sits down.

As Pam reaches for one of the small cakes, she asks, "The real reason I'm here is to find out where I can find Mike—I haven't seen him since he was drafted—the last email that I received from him was when he was in Turkey and nothing since—he isn't dead is he?"

"Heavens no," replied Maria, and then she countered with, "And why would you be looking for Mike?"

"I would like to see him again," said Pam, "I waited and waited to hear from him, and after an year and nothing I figured he didn't love me anymore or he'd had been killed, so I started seeing another old friend, and about two years ago we got married, and last October we had a baby boy."

"When did the accident happen?" Asked Maria with curiosity.

"About two months ago," replied Pam, and then she explains, "A drunk driver in a pickup crossed the center line and hit us head on, instantly killing my husband and my Son I was holding. My Son took the impacted sparing me—I was the only survivor. I buried them both and went to live with my Aunt and Uncle. After the funeral my Parents flew back to England where Dad works, he and Mom are planning on returning to the States and move back into our old home. I still have feelings for Mike, but I don't know if he still has them for me, that's why I'm here."

"I see," remarked Maria, "he hasn't said a word about you—I would assume he's forgotten all about you after all this time."

"Oh..." Pam responds in a distraught tone, "I still would like to see him and wish him well, so do you know where I can find him?"

"He's here in Washington at Fort Belvoir and should be here sometime around five or six," replied Maria.

"Thank you Missis Troff," said Pam graciously thanking her.

Getting up from the table, Pam announces, "I'll be back around six."

Maria also gets up and tells Pam, as they walk to the front door, "I'll have dinner ready—you can eat with us tonight—I'm sure Mike will be overjoyed to see you."

At six o'clock, Mike and Henry were sitting in the living room watching the local news, and Maria was in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on dinner when the doorbell rang; "Will someone please get that," called Maria, "my hands are full and that should be our dinner Guest."

"Dinner Guest!" Exclaimed Henry and Mike in unison, and then Mike said, "I'll get it," and got up and went to the door.

When Mike opened the door, and sees Pam standing there, he's quite surprised and exclaims, "Pam!"

"Hi Mike—may I come in?"

"Yeah—sure," responded Mike opening the door wider and stepping to one side as she enters the house.

Maria comes walking out of the kitchen and graciously says, "I'm glad you could make it—dinner is about ready, if you will please follow me," and then she tells Mike, "will you tell your Father that we're ready to eat."

As Maria led Pam to the dining room, Mike went to inform Henry that dinner is ready and they both head to the Dining room.

Sitting around the table the conversation immediately turns to Pam and why she's here.

Pam looking at Mike bluntly asks, "Why did you stop writing—don't you like me anymore?"

"Yes—I still like you very much," Mike proclaims reassuring her, "as for not writing you—I couldn't—most of the time I was alone with no way to communicate, and when I could I was too busy trying to stay alive. When I got back, I headed to California and stopped at your house—your Parents told me you had married and was living in Los Angeles—I was heartbroken."

"I'm so sorry," Pam sincerely tells Mike, "when I hadn't heard from you in over a year, and then the news of your death, I started dating one of my old high school friends, a year later we were married, and last year we had a child."

"So—where is he and your child?" Inquired Mike.

"About a month ago, we were involved in an accident and they were both killed, I survived with only minor injuries," explained Pam with a tear slowly making its way down her cheek.

"I'm so very sorry," said Mike with solemn dignity, and put his hand on hers.

She turns to look at Mike and solemnly asks, "I suppose you've got another girl," Mike nods and tells her, "I had a lady friend when I was in India—her name was Sheila.

“Sheila!” Exclaimed Pam looking confused, “What happened?”

“She was killed,” Mike replies faintly and now he’s the one with teary eyes.

“Was she pretty?” Asked Pam.

“Yeah—she was beautiful,” returned Mike with a far off look in his eyes.

“More beautiful than me?” Inquired Pam looking worried.

Mike looks at Pam and tells her smiling, “For a very large Tiger she was gorgeous—we were the best of friends.”

“A Tiger,” Pam exclaimed in disbelief! “Weren’t you afraid she’d attack?”

“When we first met—yeah, there was some concern, but as time went by, we became very close friends,” explained Mike, “as to how I earned her trust and friendship—well, that’s a long story for another time.”

“Do you still love me?” Pam abruptly asked; Mike looks at her for a few seconds, and then slowly nods with, “Yes Pam I do.”

Then she asked, “Would you like to go out with me again?”

“Yes, I would,” Mike earnestly affirms; Pam smiles and so do Henry and Maria.

Mike and Pam dated for the next several months; in June they announced their engagement.

In June, Henry received his second star and was now a Major General.

In July, Mike turned twenty-five and was promoted to Major.

That fall, Mike and Pam were married in the Chapel on Fort Belvoir and exited the chapel under an arch of sabers; they spent a week in India on their Honeymoon and afterward moved into their quarters on Fort Belvoir.

The following fall, Mike and Pam had a baby boy by the name of Robert or Bob for short.

In November, Major Nickerson was transferred to Turkey and Mike assumed the position of Executive Officer of the 660th.

The following March, Major General Snyder retired and Henry assumed Snyder’s position on the Chief of Staff under four star General Cook.

In the spring, Jeff introduced Julie to Henry and Maria, and in the fall, Jeff and Julie announced their engagement.

Mike and Pam had a second child in December just prior to Christmas; a Christmas baby, another boy they named Christopher or Chris for short, and a present from them to the Troff Family according to Mike.

Now every Memorial Day, the Troff's would go to Arlington Cemetery and place white roses on Brian's grave and observe a few minutes of silence, but this year, Brenda and her Husband were there with their three children; they were there to introduce and tell six-year-old Mary about her biological Father and her Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles and Cousins.

Everyone was overjoyed to see Brenda and Mary especially Maria.

When July arrived, Jeff and Julie were married at the chapel on Andrews Air Force Base, where Jeff is stationed, and went to Spain for their honeymoon; the following year, they had their first child, also a boy named Peter, Pete for short, the next year they had a second child, a lovely girl name Rosemary whom they nicknamed Rose.

Four years later, Jeff was transferred to Anderson Air Force Base in Guam; Jeff and Julie and their two kids spent the next eight years on Guam.

Just as Pete was about to enter high school, Jeff was transferred back to the States and Edwards Air Force Base, West of Victorville.

Now Mike didn't stay in the 660th, he was sent Germany as a Squadron Commander, for the next ten years; both of Mike's boys went to school in Germany.

When Henry turned sixty-eight he figured it was time to retire, and when Jeff told him the old house in Victorville was for sale, Henry thought it would be a great retirement home.

He wouldn't be too far from several military installations so he could use his pension benefits, and the house would be big enough for his now large family for get-togethers; so Henry officially retired as a three star General (Lieutenant General) and moved into their old house in Victorville.

Mike finished his tour in Germany and got reassigned back into the 83rd Battalion, and at his request, to the 81st EXT Tactical Training Company at Fort Irwin; now he was within driving distance of his Parents, Brother, Sister-in-law and their now teenage kids.

For the next twenty years, both Henry and Maria aged gracefully watching their Grandchildren become adults, marry and have children of their own.

Henry and Maria are now both in their nineties and living out their final years peacefully in their home with plenty of Family to look in on them quite often.

Jeff retired from the Air Force and moved back to Victorville, where he got a job at an aerospace company.

When Mr. and Mrs. Taylor passed away, Pam inherited her Parents house, so Mike and Pam moved into the old house.

Mike retired from the Army a Lieutenant Colonel at the age of Sixty-eight.

A few years later in early October, Mike now Seventy-six, was out for a drive with the intent of going to his old airport and watch the small aircraft do touch and goes; he was hoping to spot a Helicopter or two as well.

Because it was such a nice day, Mike was taking a roundabout way; approaching his old high school, and for no apparent reason he pulls into the parking lot and parks.

Mike sits there wondering why he's here; after all, it's been years since he was here last, to see his youngest, Chris, graduate, and now Chris is married with two kids in Elementary School.

Mike slides out of his car, grabs his walking stick and slowly makes his way to the schools front entrance; Mike's has a bit of trouble walking, because that old war wound in his leg is Arthritic and doesn't work the way it used too, when he was younger.

Mike remembers when he used to run to beat the bell.

Entering the building, Mike stands there looking up and down the hallway, trying to recognize old familiar features, but alas, nothing is recognizable except the hallway itself and the old doors leading to the classrooms, they're still there; the walls, floor and ceiling have been remodeled with new lighting, tiles, paint and a new tile design in floor.

There's even a new trophy case; it's bigger with lots of trophies.

Mike walks up and looks in, trying to find his motorcycle trophy, that he won in his senior year; he placed third in the State that year and gave the school the trophy twenty years ago; which he found in storage where his parents had put it when they moved to Washington.

Mike stands there dreaming back to that day in the auditorium when his two friend's Russ and Glen had Pam escort him to the stage.

He would never forget that scared feeling he had, as she and another cheerleader led him by the hand down the aisle, and then up onto the stage where he joined the schools motorcycle team and received a white letterman's sweater with a big red Vee on the right pocket.

But most of all, he'll never forget that kiss he gave her followed by the whole school cheering; now she's his beloved Wife.

Then suddenly the two o'clock bell sounds, and from every door gush students, filling the hallway, just as Mike had done those many years ago; that too hasn't changed.

Mike was jostled and bumped as the students hurried past him heading for their next class.

Once all the students were in their classrooms and last door had closed, Mike was alone once again as the bell sounds the start of the next hour class.

Mike continues to scan the trophy case, trying to locate something from when he attended school here, then he sees the pictures and moves over to get a better view; he repositions his glasses, as his old eyes aren't as sharp as they once were.

Then he spots his picture and the pictures of Mark, Glen, Russ and Joel, all in military uniforms and to the right of the names in parenthesis their call signs with a brief history explaining what they had done to become heroes.

Mike's picture was larger and in the center of all of them, as it was when he came here on his way to Fort Irwin those many years ago.

Looking at his picture, Mike couldn't believe how much he had change, because his likeness no longer resembles what was in the photograph, and then begins dreaming back to his time here.

"Can I be of assistance?"

Startled, Mike returns to the present, turns and looks at the young man of twenty or so with a green and yellow armband with the words, 'HALL MONITOR' in big red letters.

"No—but thanks anyway," Mike tells him, "I was just reminiscing and was about to leave," pointing to the trophy case.

"Reminiscing, huh. You know some of those guys?" The Hall monitor asked.

"Yeah—as matter-of-fact several," replied Mike pointing to Russ, Glen, Mark and Joel's pictures.

"Are you a alumni?" Inquired the Hall Monitor; Mike nods and replies with a sigh, "That was a long time ago."

"Yeah, old man, it was," remarked the Hall Monitor, "those guys are probably long gone by now—like all the other famous people we read about in the history books."

"No—as a mater-of-fact most of em' are still around," Mike declared.

"Old man—the bell is about to ring," appraised the Hall Monitor looking at his watch; Mike glances up to the big clock on the wall, "unless you want to get run over I suggest that you move—I don't have time to look

after you.”

Mike looks at him with an etched expression and rebuffs, “You don’t have ta’ look after me, thank you, --I’m fully capable of looking after myself, and for your information, I stood here an hour ago when the bell rang and I was just fine.”

“Ok—have it your way—I’ve got a job to do—good luck old man,” said the Hall Monitor in an obnoxious tone, and then he started down the hallway; Mike started for the main door.

As Mike walked out the door, the Principal came out of the office and sees Mike leave, and then as he passes the Hall Monitor, he remarks, “Been visiting with Colonel Troff I see. Did Pegasus tell you anything interesting?”

The Hall Monitor abruptly halts with large eyes, and then he turns and hurries to catch up to the Principal, calling, “Principal Thompson—Principal Thompson.”

Principal Thompson halts and turns, and then the Hall Monitor bluntly asked, “Did I hear you correctly—that old man was Pegasus?”

“Yes, you heard correctly,” replied Principal Thompson nodding.

“I thought he and the rest of those old war heroes were dead,” declared the Hall Monitor.

“Whatever gave you that notion,” countered Principal Thompson, “he’s only in his mid-seventies,” the Hall Monitor glancing to the main door where Mike had departed.

Then the bell rang sounding the end of the period, and a few seconds later, students filed out of the classrooms filling the hall with a loud cacophonous sounds of many voices and steel wall locker doors opening and closing.

After lunch on Sunday, Mike relaxed with a glass of cold beer in front of his TV when Chris arrives with his Wife and two kids.

They entered the living room with Chris greeting, “Hi Dad, how are you?”

“I’m just fine, and you,” Mike replies, and then asks, “how’s that new job?” Picks up the remote and turns the volume down on the TV, and then he takes a swig from the glass of beer.

Chris sits down in the chair to the left of Mike.

Then the two boys come running in from the kitchen where Pam had given each a cookie.

Jerry, the older of the two at eight and being the precocious one, stops in front of Mike and boldly asks, “I read in school that you’re a war hero, Grandpa.”

“And was a Ninja too—is that true?” Questioned the other younger boy, Ed, piping up.

“Now, now, let’s not bother Grandpa,” scolded Chris.

“It’s Ok Son,” says Mike giggling.

Then as the two boys stood in front of Mike looking at him with excited anticipation in their eyes, Mike tells them, “I don’t think I was a Ninja, but I did receive a few medals and I’ll show them to you sometime, but not today.”

“Ah, shucks, Grandpa—we want to see them now,” requested Jerry with disappointment.

“Yeah, we want to see them—please Grandpa,” pleaded Ed.

“Sorry boys, but they’re stored away and I don’t remember where they are,” replied Mike, “I’ll have ta’ search for them before I can show them to you, and I’m just too tired to do it now.”

“Boys don’t bother your Grandpa—don’t you see he’s too tired to go digging for medals,” scolded Chris, “now why don’t you two go and play video games in the game room.”

Then Chris turns to Mike and recommends, “You know Dad--you should display those medals instead of hiding them away.”

“You know how I feel about displaying those things—it makes me feel uncomfortable, and besides, I don’t feel like I really did anything that great to earn them,” explained Mike.

Then as the boys were heading to the game room, Mike called, “How would you boys like to hear about when I was in India, and had a very big beautiful Tiger for a comrade.”

The boys stopped, their eyes lit up, they both nodded and came rushing back, and then Mike said, “Alright.”

As the two boys sat down on the floor in front of Mike, he takes a deep breath and begins, “It was a very long time ago during the Great War. I was stationed in India at the time and the fighting was fierce. We were out on a mission that went very bad—I was the only survivor and was in the jungle trying to complete the mission alone, and that’s when I came across the Tiger, her name was Sheila and....”