

Chapter 3: Back in the Saddle

“Halt, turkey! Stay where you are.” That was a laughing Bill Cobb yelling from his table. We were back at the club, our usual haunt. Bill was seated between two of my grinning fellow Tennessee State alum friends, Chuck Guthrie and Lorenzo Pugh. Like Bill, both were F-4 pilots.

Bill pointed and said, “Sit over there.” After a pause, he added, “Humph. You don’t look too good.”

In my best sarcastic voice, I said, “Good morning to you, too.”

“We missed yo’ lil’ turkey ass in the bunker last night.”

Chuck elbowed Bill and said, “After his heroics, didn’t we promote Carl to ‘eagle?’ Man, show some respect.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot. Sorry. Anyway, I heard Bee tell you that yo’ ass was lucky. But, if I were you, I wouldn’t try to stretch my lil’ luck. Next time, it might be ‘Charlie’ who’s lucky enough to send a fuckin’ rocket into our dorm and yo’ lil’ eagle luck jes might be at an end.”

Chuck and Pugh laughed.

Perplexed and frowning, I said. “What the hell are y’all talking about?”

Chuck said, “Bill’s just giving you some good advice. Take it. Get to the bunker next time the rockets hit us.”

I could feel my face fall and shoulders droop. A rocket attack! And I slept through it. I slumped onto a chair two tables away from the boys. I said, “I dreamt there was a rocket attack last night. It sounded real.”

Bill laughed and pounded the table with his fist. “Now, I’ve heard loads of bullshit in my time, but that damn weak-ass tale of yours takes the cake.” Then he pointed at me and without even a hint of a smile he said, “Boy, next time you’d best get yo’ lil’ narrow ass in a bunker.”

I sat holding the sides of my head, elbows on my table. I felt weak and dizzy at the realization that a rocket could have been my end hours ago. ...*live through landing a burning plane to expose myself to rocket fire before dawn the next day...* Deeply troubled, under my breath, I muttered, “What’s wrong with me?”

Bill spoke again. “By the way, turkey, oops, I mean eagle. It ain’t morning anymore. It’s a quarter past one.”

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Many days after landing the burning plane, the video tape in my mind of my near-disaster was still playing on a continuous loop. Tuesday of the next week was another hot day, and for me, a day of deep thought. Unable to sleep that evening, I sat outside my dormitory nursing a beer in the faint silver light of a waning moon, enjoying a gentle sea breeze off the South China Sea. The sounds of a busy airport surrounded me. *Why am I here? How did I get from Madison to Danang, a place I never heard of before, a place where I came within seconds of dying?*

The word ‘dying’ stopped my video. My mind went back to flight school at Laughlin Air Force Base, not far from the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Pecos River, in southwest Texas, and a classmate known as Rex. Robert Alan Rex, unlike most of us newly minted officers, was married and completely serious about his studies and career. He was a reservist, who had returned to school, earned a bachelor’s degree, and entered Officer Training School. Though we were not buddies, my memory of him had not faded, for his diligence earned him the number one position in our class and the Outstanding Pilot Award. The scuttlebutt was that he had earlier been named Outstanding Senior Student at Brigham Young University. Here was a guy to emulate.

Two months after I arrived at Danang, Rex deployed to Thailand, to fly F-105D fighter-bombers. I shook my head at the memory of seeing his name on the *Air Force Times*' "Missing In Action" list in December. Everyone knew that he was gone. His body had not been recovered because the crash site was in territory held by the enemy. A Forward Air Controller flying near Rex's target in Laos around noon that sunny day reported that Rex's plane, in a flight of four F-105s, did not come out of a sixty-degree dive and that his canopy was still in place on impact.

In my fist, I crushed my empty beer can. What of Rex's wife and daughter? What was to be gained in place of their loss? How might our country have benefited from the likes of a studious hardworking diligent Robert Alan Rex living his life and raising a family in his native Utah? Or, others like him? Rex was one of our best and brightest. What a waste... Now, more than ever, my question is still, what am I doing here?

My tape hit the start button.

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Complying with my squadron commander's "request" for an incident report was not a problem, for I remembered far too much detail about my last flight. On the other hand, it *was* a problem, because it sharpened the images on my internal movie reel. The more I relived the experience, the less ready I was to fly again.

Days were passing and I was continuing to say to my commanding officer, "Sir, I'm just not ready to fly, yet. I'm still trying to get my head around how close I came to dying in an unarmed low flying slow-ass airplane."

My CO rubbed his chin and appeared for a time to be in deep thought. Finally, he said, "Look. Carl, why don't you take some time off and clear your head?"

Surprised, I said, "Sir?"

"Yes. I'm serious. Be creative. Start with some local outings around Danang. Then, let's think bigger. I'll look into another out-of-country R&R, or ferrying aircraft to maintenance in Taipei."

That got my attention. Smiling, I said, "Sir, do you have all the electronics and cameras you want from Hong Kong?"

He laughed and said, "Come to think of it, I do need a few items. I'll bet others might want to give you a shopping list, too. So, go ahead. Add Hong Kong to your list."

Grinning, I said, "Yes, sir!"

"In the meantime, I want you to know that you're one of my best pilots. I'm sure you won't be surprised that you'll be getting the Distinguished Flying Cross for saving the crew and passengers."

I suppose surprise was written on my face.

He went on to say, "Actually, I think since the plane was destroyed by enemy action and you saved all aboard, you should get a Silver Star." He shrugged. "But the old man decided on the DFC and an Oak Leaf Cluster for another Air Medal."

"Sir, the Silver Star doesn't matter to me. What does matter is that I still have my life."

My CO blinked and his expression changed. Slowly nodding, he said, "Carl, I admire your humility." He stood and continued. "Well, right now, I'm taking you off the flight schedule for a while. But understand, I'm going to need you back for duty as soon as possible."

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Several days later, I took a morning stroll along the gleaming white sands of Danang's oceanfront, known to G.I.'s as China Beach or My Khe, as the locals called it. There, I met a marine corporal recovering from a battle wound. He sat with me and my driver at a very American

picnic table in the shade of palms and short cypress-like trees I had never seen before. The bottom four feet of each tree growing out of the sandy soil was painted white. We were surrounded by airmen, marines, sailors, and soldiers at other picnic tables—all enjoying another day of well-earned R&R at the beach. This in-country R&R center was a part of the United States Marine Corps compound known as the Marble Mountain Air Facility and was located on a prime beach.

For a long while after an initial greeting, we sat in silence, watching shirtless men in fatigues and boots play catch with a softball and oversized mitts. Most wore swim trunks. Some passed an American football back and forth on the water's edge, while others dug starfish out of the wet sand, took photos, caught waves on surf boards, or cruised in power boats. At one of the 'official concessionaires' that looked a lot like a walkup Dairy Queen, I bought beers for my tablemates.

For a time, the sights took my mind off matters that I wanted desperately to avoid. But too soon, my nemesis drifted back. To push it out of mind, I said to the marine, "Are any of your buddies here on R&R with you?"

The corporal took a sip of his beer and said, "No, sir. It's just me. I'm nearing the end of my recuperation at the Naval Hospital across the highway—over there." He pointed west through the trees. "My battalion's up near Quảng Tri City. Where're you fellas from?"

"Danang Air Base. About four straight-line clicks west of your hospital. What happened to you?"

"Oh, in a fire fight, I caught an AK round. Damned thing passed through the fleshy part of my arm, right here below the elbow." He touched his left arm. "But, it's all better now."

"Are you going home?"

He laughed a cruel laugh and said, "Oh, hell no, sir. They're sendin' my ass right back to Quảng Tri in a matter of days."

The corporal was quiet. Rubbing my chin, I reflected on how lucky—actually, how blessed I was. I didn't have a scratch on me, save for my bruised knees. He had an enemy inflicted bullet wound. I studied his face and saw that, at least outwardly, he had accepted that he was on his way back to more danger, combat, the bush, and primitive living. Perhaps, and most likely, he's not willing to go. But go, he will. That's what we do; when duty calls, we salute smartly and go in harm's way.

After lunch, I will be on my way back to my dormitory and air-conditioned comfort. I felt guilty of something I could not yet identify—but what? It nagged at me. The answer seemed close at hand, but still eluded me—it was that close, alas, just beyond reach....

Then it hit me. My war was the same as the corporal's, yet different. It was all there in the "b's" bayonets, bullets, bombs, and bullshit. My war was really a delivery service. So was Cobb's. Directly to the enemy, I delivered bullshit; Cobb delivered bombs. Unlike the quiet corporal, we didn't see individual enemy soldiers, much less fix bayonets and personally confront an enemy eye-to-eye who was determined to kill you before you could kill him. Yet, my war and Cobb's war supported the same American national policy as the corporal's war. That policy still made no sense to me.

Like Cobb, I will renew my determination not to die in this God-forsaken country.

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"Why don't you try poker? Now, there's a game where paying attention is a must. It'll for certain make you focus, or you'll soon be broke." Alex laughed and continued shuffling a deck.

Picking up the dice from the table under Alex's hands, I said, "Poker looks like a longer learning curve than dice. Am I right?"

Alex twisted his mouth in a frown and then said, “Hmm. I don’t know. The stuff you’ll need to learn may be different, but could take close to the same amount of time.”

“Huh? What’s to learn? How many different ways are there to throw dice?”

Alex threw his head back in a hearty laugh. “That’s what I mean. You shoot dice; you do not throw dice.” Momentarily, he said, “In two words, you need to know ‘etiquette and language.’”

“What?”

“You heard me, turkey. Oh, that’s right you’re an eagle, now. Humph. I think turkey sounds better. Always did. Always will. Who the hell’s going to laugh at an eagle?”

In spite of myself, I laughed with Alex.

We were sitting at a table near the center of the club. Alex took the dice from me and began my first craps lesson. He held up a small white cube and said, “You will hear some call this a ‘die’ and a pair, ‘dice.’ Others call either one or two by the same word—‘dice’...”

My friend, Jack Daniels, was failing me. Jack had been my close companion and nurse for many days and nights at the club—for free. The boys were still buying drinks for me. The smell of fluoroprotein foam had worn away, but my video tape had not faded at all—no matter whether I was stone sober or inebriated. I had come to understand Jack’s sedation limitations. Further, Jack could not stop my video, nor did he help me determine if I was as tough as I thought I was from the fights I started at elementary school, or what was now keeping me out of the cockpit. Jack offered no answers and was a rapidly diminishing temporary distraction.

After learning some craps stuff from ‘snake eyes’ to ‘boxcars’ to ‘pass/don’t pass bets,’ I found out that Jack also helped me lose money—fast. When Jack was “helping me” I was so bad at craps that several mornings, Bee would stop by my room and put money in my hand.

The first morning, I said, “G’moanin’, Bee. What’s this for?”

“That’s the money I took from your pockets last night before you could lose it shootin’ craps—or, tryin’ to shoot.” He grinned and walked away while I gaped at the money in my hand.

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By Saturday night of the next week, I decided I needed real help. Sometime after midnight, I awoke in a sweat from a dream—my weekly nightmare. In the dream, *I had landed and brought the burning airplane to a stop on the runway. As I scampered out of the captain’s seat of my C-47, an explosion ripped through the left wing. The blast hurled me against the right sidewall of the fuselage and I slid to all-fours. I felt an oily liquid on my fingers. There was a violent “whoosh” and my hands and flight suit were set alight. In a blinding flash, the auxiliary fuel tank detonated and added to the ensuing conflagration. My screams mingled with those of my crew in agony from our burning flesh. All of us perished in a billowing firestorm.* As usual, I awoke in a panic and bolted upright in bed. I frantically rubbed my hands. My breathing and heart rate slowed when I realized that my hands were fine and that it was only a dream—again. I sat alone in the darkness as my troubled mind gradually downshifted to near normal.

The following morning, Sunday, still hung over, I stood in front of the base chapel. Mass goes streamed from the building and filed past me on both sides.

As the sea gull flies, the chapel may have been as close as half a football field to my dorm. Looking up at the soaring A-line roof, I was reminded of the photographs I had seen of the recently completed United States Air Force Academy Cadet Chapel. My base chapel did not have seventeen spires like the academy’s chapel, but the modern architecture of the roof line also reminded me of a delta-winged F-106 Delta Dart in vertical flight. And, instead of the gleaming aluminum tetrahedrons of the academy chapel, the roof of Danang’s chapel was supported by rows of large square wooden beams that formed isosceles triangles if one included the ground as their

base. The same thick beams extended below the top of the exterior walls all the way to the ground as flying buttresses. The entire structure was a soothing brown, reminiscent of African mahogany.

Inside, I craned my neck to follow the vertex of the high ceiling from the front door to the opposite end of the chapel. The interior color was the same brown as the exterior.

A Catholic chaplain startled me. "Good morning, captain." He was cheerful. Moving past me, he read my name tag. He said, "Captain Gamble, may I help you in some way?"

I thought, *I can read a name tag, too.* I focused and spoke slowly. I was determined to pronounce ending "g's" and avoid slurring my words. "Good morning, Chaplain Balducci. I'm just looking for a quiet place to think." As an afterthought, I added, "And pray."

Though I was nearly an hour early for protestant services, Chaplain Balducci left me with my thoughts and prayers on the first pew. I bowed my head before the altar and thanked God again for my life. I repeated the 'Lord's Prayer' several times. And then, I prayed, *Almighty God, I need big help. Please guide me out of my web of tangled thoughts. Thank You again for delivering me physically from the plane. Now, please deliver me from my nightmares and my mind's movie reel repeating falsely that all perished at flight's end. Please grant me guidance. Thank You for Your divine deliverance. Amen.*

Chaplain Bates noticed that I did not leave my pew at the close of the Protestant service and sat beside me. His voice was warm and kind. He said, "Son, do you want to talk about it?"

Was the guidance I prayed for forthcoming already? "Yes, sir."

An hour passed quickly. When Chaplain Bates had heard my story, he said, "Captain Gamble, it has been my pleasure to meet you. Your reputation as a pilot has preceded you. What you accomplished, in the face of great danger, was extraordinary. I salute your courage and skill."

"Thank you, Major Bates, sir."

"Son, hold your head up. Even men of courage have a natural reaction to danger. If a man tells you that he never has fear, he's lying. Our brains are wired for survival above all else. You've, no doubt, heard of 'fight or flight', yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that applies to brave pilots, too. I think imagining what would have happened had you not escaped the plane once on the ground is something I would do, too. Your dreams further complicate your state of mind. My guess is, in time, you'll get past what *could* have happened, but, by God's grace, *didn't* happen.

"This brings to mind a baseball story we can discuss now and a football story I'll tell you later. When both of us were lads, Ted Williams landed a burning plane during the Korean War.

I frowned. "Do you mean the Boston Red Sox slugger?"

"Yes, he is the very same. Though Ted had no passengers, he may have had the same thoughts as you."

"How long before he flew again?"

"Ted flew the next day. Come by and see me during the week and let's talk again."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much."

Leaving Chaplain Bates, I felt hopeful. His words about Ted Williams reminded me of a forgotten conversation from a warm fall Saturday afternoon among men sitting on wooden milk and Coca-Cola crates under a dome-shaped chinaberry tree next to Mr. Archie's store in Madison. Weeks later, John F. Kennedy would be elected president. In the fading sunlight, Uncle George and his friend, Mr. Jimmy, played checkers on a homemade board resting on an upside-down milk crate. They were engaged in their usual heated arguments about baseball and war, with the men sitting around them waiting for a turn on the board.

Uncle George said, “I’ma tell ya agin. War messes a man up on the inside. He might, then agin, he might not have scars on the outside. Ya won’t never see the scars I’m talkin’ ‘bout—‘cause they be inside.”

Someone said, “Aw, how can a man have a scar nobody kin see?”

Mr. Jimmy said, “Listen to George. Y’all know he fit in World War One—back when they called it ‘shell-shocked.’ He done been whar y’all ain’t and best hope to never go. Nigh, George, he a fine Christian man and ain’t gone say but so much.”

Mr. Jimmy held a checker piece, which was a soda bottle cap, between his fingers as he pointed in the man’s face. “Lemme tell y’all muthafuckas straight from the shoulder. George, always talk right nice in his Christian way. What he meant was what a man sees in war fucks wid a man’s mind. In my war, ‘WW2,’ dey called it ‘battle fatigue.’ Could be, a fella saw his best buddy wid’im in same foxhole hit in the face wid a damn big ass piece o’ hot shrapnel and lose half his head. The man *not* hit could be all fucked up inside from seein’ his buddy’s life knocked outta’im in a damn instant. Would he think it coulda been him? You damn right! He’ll think for years, ‘Muthafucka, dat shit coulda kilt me ‘stead o’ him.’ Nigh on top a dat, he still grievin’ de loss o’ his friend. You sombitches dat ain’t never been no whar but Madison County oughta keep ya damn moufs off’n whatcha don’t know nothin’ ‘bout.”

The man said, “Is that what you saw?”

Mr. Jimmy’s nostrils flared. He leapt from his seat and the bottle cap checker pieces went askew. Ignoring the sliding bottle caps, Uncle George made up and down motions with his hands. “Now, Jimmy, jes calm down and rest yo’ feets. He ain’t knowed not to ask old soljers lak us ‘bout what we done seed. But I will say this much ‘bout it. Jes lak outside scars, inside scars be de same way. Everybody don’t get’em. Won’t call no names from here ‘bouts, but jes look at dese two fine ball players. Atter Korea, Bobby Brown returned to the Yankees a shadow of his ol’ self. I don’t know what dat boy saw, but war did’im no good. Now, take dat Ted Williams, he landed a burning plane in Korea dat done been hit by enemy fire. But I bet the Red Sox wuz sho’ happy ol’ Ted came back playin’ lak he wuz tryin’ a make up for lost time. Why, don’t you know, ol’ Ted jes finished up his playin’ days wid a homer in his last at bat! Lak I said, some get scarred; some don’t.”

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In the Twenty-first Century, the United States Department of Health and Human Services’ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) uses the term “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD” for what Uncle George and Mr. Jimmy called “shell-shocked” and “battle fatigue.” NIMH lists the number one symptom of PTSD as “flashbacks—reliving the trauma over and over.”

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A few days later, I made my first arrival in Hong Kong as the copilot of an Air Force C-47 we were ferrying from Nha Trang to Taipei for maintenance. This was also my first time back in the cockpit and we flew over twenty-five hundred miles in seven days. In my pockets were shopping lists from my CO and several of the boys for electronics and cameras. I was looking forward to three days in Hong Kong before our onward journey to Taipei.

During final approach at Hong Kong, my pilot made a sudden sharp and surprising turn while descending from an altitude of less than six hundred feet. Involuntarily, I held my breath. My heart pounded until I saw his calm demeanor and heard his responses to the tower in an unexcited voice. So, I exhaled. At first, it felt like we were maneuvering for a place in Kowloon’s street traffic. We were at the end of over five hours in the cockpit and cruising at about 150 miles per hour in an uneventful flight—so far.

On the ground, I learned that the low altitude forty-seven degree right turn over Western Kowloon to land on Kai Tak Airport's runway 13 was necessary and the stuff of legend. I had no idea that when the turn was completed, the plane's altitude was to be only one hundred forty feet! I was told that veteran pilots called it the 'Hong Kong Turn' and passengers called it the Kai Tak Heart Attack.' I thought, *how can 'fight or flight' apply here? Hmm...flight...?*

The chief attraction for me at the airport was the presence of the many Boeing 707s sporting the logos and colors of the world's major airlines. I smiled at the memory of having been offered and taking the controls of an airborne KC-135, the 707's near twin, when I was in Air Force ROTC Summer Camp. After the Aircraft Commander directed me to make several turns, he told me my flying performance revealed excellent skills. *Perhaps, someday I'll fly one of these babies.* The talk I had with Chaplain Bates and my periods of introspection alone in my dorm room helped turn my attention to connecting my past with a future. This felt useful, though, from time to time, the flaming images and dreams returned. The 707s were a reason to connect the future to my tangled web of thoughts. Those sleek 707s hit the pause button on my video tape.

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It was like television. At a Kowloon night club, the proprietor marched them in like the lineups I remember from the TV series, *Dragnet*. When the line stopped, just like on *Dragnet*, he had them turn and face the men waiting to identify their choice. They were not burglary or murder suspects. They were attractive young women who were 'owned' by the proprietor of the club. By taste and fancy, a man could choose one of the women as his escort for an evening of drinks, chat, and sex—all for a price paid to her "owner."

During my second visit to this Kowloon club, which was only two white-roofed red Mercedes taxis and a big green and white double decker ferry ride away from my hotel in central Hong Kong, I met a marine sergeant who was in his last evening of R&R. I first saw him through the blue haze of cigarette smoke hanging in the air. His long face and contemplative mood caught my attention.

I stood by his table and said, "You look like a fella in exactly what I'm avoidin'—deep thought."

The marine stopped stirring the dregs of his drink, took a long look at me, and above the music said, "You look like a pretty serious fella yourself." He pushed a chair toward me. "Join me. We can drown our deep thoughts together."

I grinned. "Drownin' em sounds good. And while we're at it, let's weight'em and sink'em deep. Lemme buy you a drink."

He displayed a fleeting smile. "Thank you."

(I do not remember his name. So, I will call him Ken.)

In a short time, my new acquaintance, Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Kenneth Phillips, was describing the siege of Khe Sanh by North Vietnamese Army Regulars. He was at Khe Sanh until last August and after only three months back in the States; he was here for a second tour. I didn't ask, because Khe Sanh was heavy on his mind.

Ken was saying, "Yeah. That's TV news, alright. My wife had the same idea as you until I explained that Khe Sanh Combat Base was not on a mountaintop. Actually, it was on relatively flat ground—a plateau. It even had an airstrip."

"But, what about the photos showing the rugged rocky top of a mountain where there was definitely no place to build an airstrip?"

"Those were really several hilltops in the photos and footage you saw, not just one. That's where we setup listening posts on high ground. We wanted the high ground so we could defend KSCB. Funny thing about the high ground, everybody wants it—you and your enemy. If NVA

troops held the hills above KSCB, as bad as things were with them farther away, it would've quickly turned into a turkey shoot. It would've been over real quick—not taken months.”

Puzzled and still remembering TV news footage from when I was in Texas, I found myself frowning and nodding. “So, what about our patrols that I heard were surrounded by NVA troops?”

“Patrols went out regularly to probe the NVA positions. What made the news is when one got into trouble. No offense, sir. But, Captain, what I've got to say ain't nothing against officers.”

I shook my head. “No offense will be taken. Go ahead. Talk plain.”

“Well, here's a real example. There was this green-ass second lieutenant who took his platoon out on patrol and spotted three NVA soldiers. The NVA guys ran. The lieutenant ordered his men to join him in an attempt to capture the three men. These fellas were decoys and led that platoon straight into a perfect ambush. The NVA company commander had correctly anticipated the route our patrol would take.”

“Hmm. Eh, how'd the enemy commander do that?”

“No magic. This is elementary infantry stuff that both sides know. It's all about reading the terrain and asking yourself, if I'm the bad guy looking to kill me, what're his options given this landscape?”

“Oh.”

“You can guess the end of the story. Yes, only a handful of men from that platoon made it back to their hilltop stronghold. And if they were wounded, *and* they made it back, there was low probability of being medevac'd out.”

“So, that was because the enemy had the hills surrounded?”

“Yes. That and the weather.

“But let me be sure you understand. The entire KSCB was surrounded, not just our hilltops. During the battle for KSCB, about five thousand of us lived in mud, returned fire, and slept in the rain. The monsoon was on. It rained every day. On a good day, the clouds would lift by midday so we could get 'copters and 130's in to drop stuff on the airstrip—not land and offload. But the hilltops were shrouded most of the time.”

Ken tapped the table with his forefinger. “Now, add this to the picture. We were under rocket and artillery fire day and night—but especially intense fire when aircraft showed up.”

“What happened to the wounded?”

Ken shrugged. “Some bled out.”

“Damn.”

More drinks arrived. We were silent for a time, each man alone with his memories and demons. Here was another marine who did his job no matter the enemy's shelling or the weather. Why was I not already back doing my job?

Still turning my drink glass in its water track on my coaster, I broke the silence. “Say, Ken, did your guys get most of the supplies we dropped at KSCB?”

“Oh, that reminds me to thank you. You Air Force guys really know your shit when it comes to air delivery—whether bombs or supplies. To answer your question, we got most of it—nearly all the Air Force dropped. Marines can fly 130s, but they aren't nearly as good at putting supplies where we could get'em as your guys are.”

“Thanks. I'll pass it on. News footage didn't say whose C-130s dropped stuff that the VC got.

“What'd the Air Force do different?”

“Your guys adapted to the situation and instead of landing to off-load, they flew over the airstrip and did a 'touch-and-go'. Between the 'touch' and the 'go,' moving at a bit more than one hundred miles per hour, they deployed an extraction 'chute that pulled a cargo pallet out the rear

of the airplane. That took brains and balls! With great skill, they did all this under intense fire. The first time we saw this done, all the ground-pounding marines like me cheered and applauded.”

“Wow!”

“Lemme take you back to the thought I was turning over in my head when you showed up. The thing that galls the hell outta me is, I no longer understand what the hell we’re fighting for.”

“Well, don’t look at me. I don’t know, either. Understanding our purpose here is well above my pay grade.”

“Going on nine years now, I’ve been a marine—an infantryman. That’s all I know. That’s what I do—and, even if I say so myself, I’m damn good at it. But, that’s all over now. The bastards have worn me down. I’m done. Soons I reach Pendleton, I’m fuckin’ out.”

Turning in my chair to look squarely into Ken’s face, I said, “Are you ready to give up your investment of time and energy in the Corps?”

“While I was home for those three months, I thought about it a lot. Yes, I’ve decided. There’s a big-ass construction project starting this year to build a huge new airport for my hometown, Dallas, and Fort Worth. I’ll try my hand at construction.”

“Was it Khe Sanh?”

“In part, it was. The thing is, I noticed stuff I couldn’t have imaged in the old days—like squabbles between generals that hit the press. Generals fought over whether we should even be at KSCB or not, and then who should own the planes that supported KSCB and worse. The first of two worse things was giving up KSCB after we had soaked the ground with American blood. You know, just like that.” Ken snapped his fingers. “We just packed up and left. The second was when the NVA, using tanks, artillery, and infantry, overran the Army Special Forces compound at nearby Lang Vei. A chicken-shit marine regimental commander refused to send a relief mission to bring the survivors to KSCB. I couldn’t believe it. A *marine* refusing to rescue fellow Americans... This ain’t the Corps my dad joined in World War II. What the hell ever happened to ‘leave no man behind’?”

Ken’s long face was back. He was quiet again. No appropriate words came to my mind, so I said nothing. I was hesitant, but I reached out and patted his forearm. It felt odd to comfort a white man—especially to touch him.

I stood to leave. We shook hands and I said, “Good luck in Dallas. Semper Fi.”

The marine blinked back tears.

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Shortly after my return to Danang, my CO called me. When I arrived in his office, he greeted me with a big grin, leaned back in his chair, and said, “Carl, did I hear you say some time back that you have a friend in Bangkok?”

Puzzled and frowning, I answered, “Yes, sir. Did something happen to him?”

“No, no. Hold on.” He fished a paper from a stack on his desk and shoved it toward me. “Take this and why don’t you go on over there and see how he’s faring.”

The paper was authorization for my second out-of-country R&R—an unusual thing. This time it was to Bangkok, Thailand.

It was my turn to grin. “Yes, sir! I’ll consider that an order!”

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My friend, Bob, met me at the Bangkok Airport. That was his first act of kindness as a gracious host. At his home, a bungalow where several walls were glass, he introduced me to his household—first to his sweetheart or ‘telock,’ then his maid, and finally, his interpreter—three women! An old

guy expression that I thought I understood suddenly became very clear with new meaning: “Don’t take me to the Promised Land; take me to Thailand!”

In his home and about the city, Bob wined and dined me. He was a great host. Bob, an AT&T engineer whom I had met on one of his occasional trips to Danang, shared his munificent living with me—something residing in Rocket City can soon make one forget. I thought, *While I’m here, I’ll enjoy and remember every moment.*

Too soon, it was time to return to Danang. My three days in Bangkok were like a slow curveball—a hitter’s delight. The relaxed time and leisurely pace of life made me a wee bit envious of Bob. While I wished him well, Bob’s life was the opposite of the tensions I sensed in Danang where actual attacks and the constant threat of rocket attacks felt like head-high fastballs—coming in tight.

On our way to the airport, I remembered a conversation with Alex during our R&R in Sydney, Australia. At breakfast on our next to last day in Sydney, Alex and I agreed that the warm welcome we received from Australian women was one more reason for the stories we’d heard about G.I.s deserting and remaining in Australia. The combination of willing women, the absence of rocket fire, and lack of anti-African-Americanism in Sydney was tempting. Though we debated the matter for a while, in our heart of hearts, we knew we would return to Danang on time and complete our tours of duty with dignity. Bangkok was even more tempting than Sydney. I didn’t say so, but in Sydney, as now in Bangkok, Mama’s voice spoke inside my head, “Son, remember, your word is your bond.”

* * *

Later the same week, I was alone again in the chapel for prayer. On my mind was the plight of the marine corporal whose name I couldn’t remember, Bill Cobb’s often avowed determination to live, Chaplain Bates’ counsel, Ken’s imminent departure from the Marine Corps, and the possibility of flying Boeing 707s. So was Mama.

Chaplain Bates revived my memory of a forgotten conversation between Uncle George and Mr. Jimmy about shell-shock and battle fatigue. So, Ted Williams flew again the next day and in due time, resumed his Hall of Fame baseball career. Chaplain Bates told me later that his football coach’s habit was on the next play after a fumble, give the ball to the guy who fumbled.

Perhaps, there’s a simple lesson here for me. The longer I wait to fly combat missions, the more difficult it will be. That was already the case and it would only get worse as time passed. I want flying in my future, but I don’t have to always fly for the Air Force. For now, I will do my duty. Sitting in the chapel, I resolved several matters and set a new heading for myself.

I realized that the officer’s club and Jack Daniels were not helping me. When I had my fill of Jack, strangely, I felt sorry for myself. How could that be? With God’s help, I had landed a burning airplane and saved the lives aboard. So, I decided to keep Jack away from my tangled web.

Next, I promised myself I’d spend regular time in the chapel, just like I did back home at Little Shiloh Baptist Church. Further, because I was so thankful to God for my life and now realized that no day is guaranteed to anyone, I committed that I would tell Mama and my siblings that I love them in every letter. I even did my best to give up hating my enemies.

I knew Mama would agree with my new heading. So would my hometown pastor, Reverend Betts. I had made a commitment to the Air Force. *I will keep my word; I will do my duty.* Forthwith, I will resume flying combat missions. Yes, I’m sure Mama would approve—actually, she would insist that I keep my word.

* * *

A few days later, I was in the crew room listening to the familiar preflight briefing as I prepared for my first combat mission since the burning airplane. The previous evening, my nightmare returned vivid and terrifying. But I had found a place of solace to help steel my splintered nerves. I recited a simple prayer; over and over. *“God, please help me remember I have nothing to fear for, you are with me.”* I would not be deterred by a dream. When morning broke, I focused on my love of flying and a repeat of Mama’s words to get me to the crew room.

Seated beside me was a senior pilot, an aviator in whose skills I had supreme confidence. My squadron commander had agreed to pair me with an experienced pilot who could take control if the need arose. To my surprise, all the squadron’s pilots and support personnel were there to wish me well and see me off.

My nerves reminded me of the hour before my first solo flight—a mild case of butterflies. There was a great difference in how I felt climbing into the cockpit for my first sortie in a while over enemy territory, compared to shuttling a C-47 from the coast of Vietnam to Taipei by way of Hong Kong. It was then that my case of butterflies went from mild to severe, for my video of the burning plane hit the start button—again. In anticipation of enemy ground fire, that blasted tape sent my angst from high to higher. Thankfully, by the time we were halfway through the preflight checklist; I had calmed down and was feeling at home again in the cockpit.

Taxiing the C-47 toward runway 17R for my first post-disaster combat mission and hearing the staccato rhythm of her engines, I found myself nodding my head. I had just confirmed for myself that flying would indeed remain my life’s work. There was a familiar tingle of anticipation in my spine when in my headphones I heard the tower say: “Paper Tiger Two-One, you’re cleared for takeoff on one-seven Romeo.”

