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The building I found myself standing in front of was closed. In fact, every building on Zaragoza Air Base within sight of where the bus had dropped me off appeared to be a forgotten remnant from some long-abandoned ghost town. As I stood looking at the brown, treeless landscape reaching out toward every point of the compass, a major with coal-black hair and a face that screamed, *I'm Poncho Villa*, called my name.

“Lieutenant Pearson, you must be Lieutenant Pearson.”

“Yes, sir,” I said as I awoke to the realization that a salute would be in order.

“I’m Frank Mason,” he said. “I’ll be responsible for your care and feeding until we find you a ride north next week. I’m parked around the corner. Grab your bag and I’ll help you with the helmet and flight gear.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m looking forward to a hot shower and a decent meal.”

“Well,” he began, “the *Q* has plenty of soap and hot water and, if you’re up to it, we’ll take a trip downtown to dine at the Hotel Corona de Aragon. You can’t beat the bar, the food or the clientele. How was your trip?”

“I survived two rides in the pit, a thunderstorm, a 150-knot headwind, a 4-hour bus ride and the French,” I complained.

“Welcome to Spain,” he laughed.

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The major led me to a blue Ford sedan that he had been issued by the Air Force. I tossed my belongings into the gaping trunk and collapsed into the front seat.

“Lieutenant,” Major Mason began, “it sounds like your luck has been consistent, if nothing else.”

“That’s for sure! What’s this officer’s club like?” I asked.

“Let’s see,” he replied. “It’s called Zaragoza Air Base Officer’s Open Mess, but the guys affectionately call it *ZABOOM*. The club is across a breezeway from the Q. You can order everything from grits to prime rib to paella and gazpacho soup. You have to be careful of the sangria, however. It packs quite a punch and its alcohol content can escalate out of control. The kids, belonging to one of our young officers whom you’ll meet tonight, got into a pitcher of the stuff last Friday evening and no one at the hospital could figure out why Kool-Aid made them so sick, until they discovered what was in it.”

“I imagine it’s hard to keep your eye on ‘ankle biters’ and ‘rug rats’ when you’re dragging them out of one place and into a new one every time you turn around,” I said.

“It’s been tough on these kids,” he responded. “Their father just returned from Vietnam and adjusting to being a husband and dad again has taken its toll on everyone concerned.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. “Some marriages are difficult under the best circumstances.”

“You don’t know how right you are, Lieutenant,” he replied. “The other squadron that’s deployed here has two crews who flew together in the war last year and asked to fly together as crews in Europe. They’re down for the next 2 weeks with their families. If the schedule holds and we luck out with the weather, they’ll fly their first range mission Monday morning. It’s unusual that they were assigned to the same command, much less the same squadron. USAFE considered breaking them up, but no one could come up with a particularly convincing argument to overcome their insistence on keeping two good teams together.”

"I'm still looking forward to flying the first mission with my assigned *backseater*," I said. "I've met his wife and daughters. They seem like good people. By the way, I have a friend named Brennan Frazier who's supposed to be down here for his in-theater weapons checkout."

"If he's here, you'll run into him soon enough," Mason assured me. "I feel certain Colonel Straup took care of you. He was my flight commander in Nam and I have a lot of respect and admiration for the man."

"Me, too," I said. "I've seen him stand up for the squadron and I've already had a chance to meet him personally."

"You mean the sensitivity training thing," he responded. "You'll never know how lucky you were, Lieutenant. Most of us who've been in this business for a while know who the good guys are and who to keep clear of. We also know what's for general consumption and what's for us. You seem like a quick study. Rule number one is to listen up and shut up when dealing with headquarters types. They live in their own world and they rule that world with an iron fist. The generals use lieutenants to feed their faces and wipe their asses. You'll be better served to concentrate on flying. It's a damn good job. I'll tell you up front, you and I are going to learn a lot about each other before Tuesday."

"This must be the Q and ZABOOM," I said without any intention of asking to have my fate discussed in greater detail.

"You're right. We're here," he replied. "Meet me in the bar at 1800 hours. That'll give you about 45 minutes to get cleaned up. Do you want any help with your gear?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I can manage."

Major Mason walked toward the club and greeted a party of four men and their wives or girlfriends and a gaggle of five or six kids, as near as I could count. They were too far away to get a really good look and were wearing civilian clothes. Some of the kids were being carried by their mothers and some of them were holding onto their dads like some kids hold onto teddy bears and blankets. The whole group gravitated into the club like a cloud

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being blown to the horizon. I tried to look at their faces in an absentminded sort of way. They seemed happy enough.

I lugged my belongings along the covered concrete path. Eventually, I managed to transport my possessions to a spot in front of a long desk inside the double doors at the entrance to the Q. A young female attendant was sitting or leaning on a backroom desk in the small administrative office, listening to Elton John and chewing gum with reckless abandon. She appeared to be in no hurry to respond to my arrival. Her attention was undoubtedly elsewhere.

“Do you work here, by any chance?” I asked.

The young female was more “girl” than “woman” and as reckless in her dress as she was with her gum. She stared at me as if it were her lot in life to memorize every detail of my being. I assumed that life existed within her body, but drew no conclusions as to how brightly or warmly its forces might be glowing. She straightened herself and her clothes and gathered sufficient composure to speak.

“I work here,” she said as if obligated to repeat my exact words.

“May I sign in and pick up a key?” I asked in absolute amazement at the lack of pace and enthusiasm for the transaction of what I perceived to be very ordinary business.

“You can sign in,” she replied.

“Sign where?” I asked.

“There,” she said and pointed as she allowed herself to move in my direction.

“Do you require a copy of my orders?” I asked as a courtesy to expedite the process.

“Yes,” she replied, “two copies.”

The young girl stepped forward to take the copies and I saw that she was no more than 16 or 17 years old. She was in the process of growing up, but was still shy of adulthood and, in a lot of ways, she reminded me of Jenny Kiley, another young lady I’d recently met.

“Do you have a key for me?” I asked in mock frustration.

“Yes,” she replied.

I waited for some overt action on her part that would give an indication the key was forthcoming. Nothing happened.

“May I have it?” I asked matter-of-factly.

“Oh, yes,” she responded and handed me a key from a compartment behind the second desk.

“Are you certain this is for me?” I asked with some trepidation.

“Yes,” she replied. “That key is yours.”

“Would you mind if I asked who you think I am?” I said and pressed for definitive confirmation.

“What?” she asked. “You’re Pearson, aren’t you?”

“I guess I am,” I said with a hint of a smile across my lips.

“Who’s that behind the corner? Is that your friend?”

The girl was stricken with uncertainty and whirled to look into the dimly lit corner. She glared at a young man in the shadows and turned to look back in my direction with much less conviction in her movement.

“Yes,” she replied in a whisper. “That’s my friend... from school.”

“Working on the weekend must be a drag,” I said. “You must get bored.”

“Sometimes,” she replied with hesitation.

“Maybe your friend and you should stay up front,” I suggested. “It’s none of my business, but no one would want to have something unforeseen happen in the Q. Don’t you agree?”

“Nothing happened,” she replied. “Honest.”

“Thanks for the key,” I said. “Take care of yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered as if giving those reassuring words to her father.

Her words impressed me as being as well practiced as they were meaningless. My advice, my cursory and momentary involvement in her experimentation, was no less meaningless.

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I turned away from the girl's world of exile and the familiar clunking of my footsteps echoed carelessly across the gray linoleum tile that preceded me. About halfway to the far end of the long passageway, I came to my room and entered a new home away from home.

I was more than happy to become lost in a tumultuous sea of steam and hot water. I yearned for a return to my lazy college days, but thought better of it at almost the same instant as the imagined universe struggled to embrace me. I had no desire to try my luck a second time and I doubted there would be sufficient courage and initiative to reach the level of achievement I had unaccountably attained on my first try. I would remain in the present, at least until the quiet solitude of darkness allowed me to dream of my Cynthia.

The cascading warmth of the shower initially refreshed me, but it also allowed me to come down from the exhilarating effects of the adrenaline that had been pumped into my system almost constantly over the last 4 days. I was pretty much dragging myself in the door of the officer's club when Major Mason intercepted me and pointed me in a direction that led us into the evening sun. Not having the opportunity to consume even the slightest amount of alcohol on an empty and bewildered stomach provided me with benefits that were difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend at the time.

Major Mason had changed into civilian clothes and combed every strand of his jet-black hair into a waxy perfection. He walked beside me and attempted to impart a mountain of experience and knowledge, but he was aloof, like a doctor trying to diagnose whether his patient has some fatal illness or has simply imagined some self-imposed distress. Regardless of his intentions, I was in no condition or mood to conquer any mountain of any magnitude. One characteristic of the man that had not changed, however, was his look. He was weathered. Nature had treated him unkindly and his bearing reflected an understanding of how most people perceived him.

“There’s the Spanish bus that runs downtown,” he said. “It’s 10 minutes late, as usual. Let’s make it to the roadside and we’ll be picked up.”

We hustled across an open field that bordered the club. There was no imperative to rush, but we didn’t have the luxury of wasting precious seconds, either.

“We could call a cab,” he said, “but this is just as convenient and less expensive.”

Hearing a major express concern over the difference between the cost of a bus ride and cab fare was curiously strange. I listened to his pronouncements on the state of the world, the Air Force, this deployment and lieutenants. The pace of boarding our Spanish transport led me to believe that the patrons in front of us must have been negotiating their fares or discussing yesterday’s bullfight. My mind wandered and I mused about Mason’s family and what he had been asked or ordered to do with me. I sensed a strangeness in his manner, but nothing that was readily discernible, nothing concrete.

“*Dos hombres por Hotel de Aragon, por favor,*” I heard him explain to the bus driver in words that could have come from a Clint Eastwood movie.

There was an exchange of *pesetas* and we took our seats. At each succeeding corner and intersection, the bus became more crowded with teenage dependents, soldiers and Spanish nationals. The recipe for association and acceptance was dictated more by the order of arrival and remaining space than by preferential selection. It was a good way to meet new people and pick up some rudimentary Spanish. I thought about the old German bus driver I had met before flying out of Ramstein and his tirade about learning German. *Get a German girlfriend*, he had said more than once.

“I forgot to ask,” Major Mason began. “How much money do you have on you?”

I had brought \$100 from Germany, more than a week’s pay, but I wasn’t predisposed to tell Major Mason the specifics of my

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personal financial resources. Unfortunately, everything I had was U.S. dollars.

“A little,” I mumbled.

“You’ll need this,” he said as he handed me a handful of Spanish currency. “Give me 30 American dollars. You probably won’t need all of this, but you can keep whatever you don’t use until you come back.”

I took the Spanish currency and reached into my front pocket. My tender fingers pulled out 2 fives and 2 tens and handed them to Mason. That left me with \$20 in my wallet and \$50 more in my room. I hesitated to contemplate what I’d be using \$30 of Spanish currency for.

“Saturday night is a big night for some of the men to explore the backstreet bars and local establishments that tend to attract soldiers when they’re a long way from home and ready to forget a hard week’s work,” he said. “The Hotel de Aragon is where the night usually begins. It has a great bar for meeting people and shooting the breeze, plus it has an exceptional restaurant, if you don’t mind spending a few dollars of your flight pay.”

“I’m ready to eat anything that doesn’t talk back,” I said. “What’s the deal with all these kids?”

“Oh,” he responded, “some are American dependents who go to school here and others are foreigners in boarding school. They come from all over the country and most of them are in trouble more frequently than they’re in class.”

“I may have already witnessed a couple of kids embarking along that path,” I said.

“It’s not unusual,” he lamented. “Some of these young kids would try to tempt the Pope if they thought they could get away with it.”

“Let’s hope the Pope would prevail,” I said.

Major Mason let the conversation die. He may have been thinking about his own kids. In any event, I was tired and not interested in pursuing further revelations about the habits of Zaragoza’s dependent or boarded youth. We bumped along until

the gravel road from the base intersected the main road leading into town. From that point, the bus accelerated to its maximum speed and was slowed only by the uphill grades that followed each wild dash into the preceding cavernous valley. We swayed around turns of exceptional degree and wound up relying on the speculative permanence of our nearest neighbor for support.

Several of the soldiers paired up with females who hardly met the definition of “adult women,” but neither were they conveniently classified as “girls.” Watching the interaction between males and females in our capsule of society could easily have become a game and there may have been some bets won or lost. Nevertheless, I preferred not to view them as chess pieces being moved by some unseen master. I chose to think of them as having a voice and not merely acting out their roles until arriving at some predetermined destiny.

As we entered the heart of the city, flood lights illuminated Roman monuments and age-old cathedrals. Time rolled more than a thousand years back into history and the great soldiers of the past held up their mighty swords and rode in their horse-drawn chariots with daring abandon. I heard the trumpets announce the arrival of the Emperor and saw his red robes move among his troops and citizen politicians. It was all here, in this city, until the lighted façade of the Hotel de Aragon came into view and returned me to the reality of this time and place.

The side of the hotel shot upward into the dimly lit sky. It was impossible to say how many floors there were, but there were a great many. We walked the short distance from our drop off, ascended the steps along one side of the building and entered into a grand foyer that co-existed with the area housing an imposing bar and mirrored wall. An informal seating arrangement of black couches, interspersed with miniature tables and wooden chairs, consumed an abundant, if not extraordinary, amount of floor space. It was surprisingly inviting. Any space that would have allowed me to collapse into oblivion would have been welcome. I was

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eager to capitulate and hoist the white flag of truce or surrender or whatever brought me closer to food and rest.

Major Mason rejoiced in his element and introduced me to a handful of his fellow flight members. I acknowledged each new face and listened to their chatter and enjoyed their curiosity and their stories. Some faces would be remembered and others would vanish into the vault of unintended forgetfulness. I had pitifully little control over each man's fate once he was sentenced to my poorly catalogued memory banks and scarcely any reason to be concerned about it. They were far more likely to remember tonight's meeting the next time we met than I was.

Two Canadian blended whiskies later found me on the verge of extinction. I found a seat on one of the couches that placed me beside an individual who could carry on a conversation with minimal input from me, or anyone else for that matter. He was cordial, however, and accepting of my lack of enthusiasm. He lectured me on a variety of subjects, sometimes with my eyes open but more often with them closed. Eventually, Major Mason collected me and we feasted on lamb and boar while sipping *agua sin gas* and a full-bodied burgundy wine that left my palate withered but undaunted.

"There's a place you may want to visit," Major Mason said as we neared completion of our meal. "You may find it interesting, even appealing. After we compensate this fine establishment for our meal, I'll round up a cab and we'll take a short ride to the outskirts of the city."

The short ride continued at length and led us into the most rural part of the countryside. Our cab jolted along poorly defined roads that existed solely in various states of disrepair and, upon reaching our destination, deposited us at the dusty gates of a marginally walled and uninviting village, or at least a semblance of a village. I was wholly unimpressed with all that I could see.

"I don't know whether to ask if we've left Spain or Earth," I joked halfheartedly with a hint of mixed sarcasm and concern.

“Don’t judge this place too hastily, Lieutenant,” Major Mason replied. “Come back to this spot and catch a cab to the base when you’ve concluded your business inside. If you’re out of money, tell the driver you’re an American officer and you’ll pay him when you get to the base. Otherwise, the driver won’t take you unless you pay first. You’ll be safe enough inside these walls, in some respects, anyway. If someone approaches you out here, turn and walk away. Don’t be drawn into any fights or you’re liable to be cut up and tossed someplace you don’t want to be found.”

I listened without comment. The message was clear. Stay inside the walled city or leave. The only question I had was why were we here in the first place? I was soon to learn the answer to that question and, again, I would not be impressed.

“Let’s go,” Major Mason said with a pragmatic indifference that elicited visions of a worldly teacher taking his ward out behind the barn for a discussion that is more or less too late to be meaningful for either participant.

I followed his lead and soon discovered a single street that stretched no more than three or four blocks. Bars lined both sides of the street and were separated by buildings that might loosely be referred to as hotels. People of every description walked aimlessly about on the street and on disconnected sections of concrete and dirt sidewalks. Every structure appeared to have been whitewashed years before I was born and most were in dire need of attention. Dust rose from each footstep and attached to every surface and fabric that presented itself. The place was insufferably dirty from one end to the other, but Major Mason walked with uninterrupted purpose until we arrived at the front of the Tejas Cantina.

For reasons known only to him, he paused at the base of a parasitic stoop protruding from the wall and gave me time to survey the stark and decrepit structure that stood before us. Without invitation, we entered through massive doors that hung precariously to a disintegrating framework. Our entry brought us down a single step to a cement floor covered with sawdust and wooden shavings that did nothing to obscure an oppressively damp

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and musty smell. Tables and chairs were scattered about a large room with men and their lady friends engaged in hushed conversations. Smoke filled the poorly ventilated room and the sounds of clanking bottles and glasses rose and fell as the bartender and a number of indistinctly dressed waitresses attended to their customers. A rather large and somewhat elderly woman approached Major Mason. I heard him say, *Dos cervezas*, and he pointed toward a stocky, black-headed woman standing passively against the cracked and peeling plaster of a yellowed wall.

Two beers were delivered from the bar at the Major's expense. The black-haired woman spoke briefly with Mason and he motioned in my direction before walking to the bar and striking up a conversation with a young woman who impressed me more because of her indelicate features than any other attribute I could discern. I tasted the beer and was rewarded with a warm bitterness that nearly turned my stomach and spewed between my clinched teeth. I wiped my face before placing the bottle on an empty table. Mason would have done better to have saved his money for his new companion.

The black-haired woman watched intently while I struggled to recover from the effects of my ill-fated beverage and then approached. She spoke a broken mixture of Spanish and English.

"*Hola,*" she said. "I'm Apache, what I call you?"

I stared intently at her. Her face and nose were wide, with long black bangs reaching imprecisely toward her dark brown eyes. Her hair was straight and cut all around at less than shoulder length. She was, by all appearances, middle aged and showing every year of her existence. She wore a faded red top that failed to reach her generous midsection and a dull black skirt that covered only halfway to her knees. Her feet were clad in toeless black sandals that had never felt the careful stroke of polish or swipe of a brush.

"What name?" she asked again.

"Poncho," I said with laughter. "Call me Poncho."

"You no Poncho!" she exclaimed.

"I know," I said, "but that's good enough."

"I call you *El Nino*," she said, "because you like *mi muchacho*."

"All right," I said. "Call me El Nino, if you like."

"You come with me?" she asked.

"No, no. I can't," I said with insufficient conviction to deter even a mouse that had narrowly missed execution on its first nibble of cheese.

"Yes, you come with me," she repeated and took my arm in her hand.

I saw Mason watching the exchange between Apache and me, and I allowed her to escort me out of the bar rather than refusing to participate in this ceremonial unveiling, this making certain. Apache led me through a darkly lit hallway to a room with a single, uncovered light. The room had the atmosphere of a medieval dungeon. A metal-railed bed sat squarely in its middle and a sink hung on the far wall. There was no window. A single, sturdy chair stood near the foot of the bed and a dresser was pushed against the near wall. An old lady accompanied us into the room and handed me a folded washcloth, a towel and small hand soap, still in its wrapper. Her actions led me to understand that she wished to be paid. I pulled out a handful of pesetas and Apache stopped the old lady from taking more than she was due.

When we were alone, Apache took the washcloth and soap and pushed me toward the sink. She was not lacking in strength.

"We wash," she said and left no uncertainty that I was to be cleansed before she submitted to what she anticipated to be my wishes.

"Wait, wait!" I protested. "I'll pay you and we're finished."

Apache understood immediately. Her English comprehension was significantly more advanced than she had wanted to be known.

"You no take Apache?" she asked. "Man not angry with you?"

"No," I said. "He won't be. I have a girlfriend in Deutschland. I can't take Apache, but I can pay."

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“You want to look?” she asked. “Come, Apache show you.”
She grabbed my arm and forced me to the bed. She slipped off the red top and pulled the skirt to her waist.

“You like *senoritas*?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “I like young ladies very much and, some might say, far too much for my own well being.”

“Good, then you like Apache,” she said.

“O.K.,” I answered. “I like Apache.”

“You want to touch?” she asked.

“No,” I responded emphatically. “I would disappoint my girlfriend and we couldn’t touch again for a long time.”

“That’s O.K.,” Apache said. “Apache keep secret. You have lucky girlfriend.”

“El Nino is the lucky one,” I said. “I’m the lucky one.”

Apache looked into my face and I saw a lost and disavowed human shell, an object to be bought, used and left behind. She probably saw little or nothing of interest in me, except pesetas. A knock came at the door.

“We must go,” she said. “You pay Apache now.”

Apache reassembled her clothing as quickly as she had discarded it and we walked to the large open room together. Major Mason was not among those scattered about the room and I couldn’t identify his recently acquired companion, but I couldn’t say she was missing either. Apache handed my payment to the bartender and walked to a place along the yellowed wall. We were finished and I was no longer of any interest to her.

I left the cantina and moved past faceless human beings who plodded through the street and along the broken and dusty sidewalks. In a matter of minutes, the whole affair was lost in the fading shadows behind me and I stepped outside the walls of the city. The nondescript form of a man approached me, offering to sell watches and small leather goods. The peddler was old or perhaps he was very young. He walked with a cane or carried a stick, maybe for protection or maybe he used it to steal his wares. He was poor and had a family. No, he was just a beggar, making

his rounds before finding another cantina and another beer. I turned quickly and headed for one of two light-filled cabs idling by the side of the road. This man, this peddler, this beggar and I had nothing in common, except the ground we stood on.

“Zaragoza Air Base,” I shouted at the driver.

He looked at me and smiled. He made no demands for money and I didn't ask how much the ride would cost. He could have whatever I had left. It would be a bargain, no matter what the price.

The ride was peaceful. The pain in my fingers had moderated for the first time since the incident in Aviano. I longed for another shower, sleep and welcome dreams. This night, this episode, would be left behind, leaving nothing, not even an unpleasant memory.

Sleep was a welcome visitor when it finally came. Food at the Hotel de Aragon had been excellent, but my stomach had not handled it well. A recurring discomfort had become my nagging companion. Like a tooth sensitive to the bite, the pain erupted and then yielded and was pushed from thought.

Sunday morning had all but vanished when I managed to part with the warm comfort of my bed. Periodically, during the early morning hours, I had become aware of water running, doors banging and conversations and footsteps moving up and down the hallway outside my private cocoon, but those activities had faded from my consciousness and I had persisted in my mindless state. Fortunately, the Sunday buffet at the officer's club combined the best of breakfast and lunch and was served from 1000 hours until 1400 hours. When I finally managed to join humanity, I became reacquainted with people I had met the previous day. They proved to be most attentive and gracious. I responded with sincere enthusiasm, but I was not yet a member of whatever it is you become a member of when you've been accepted. We were recognizable to each other, but strangers, nonetheless.

After brunch, I caught the base bus and rode to the flight line to acquaint myself with the facilities and their layout. I visited the tower and talked my way into the control room where two controllers were happy to have someone help them pass what

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would otherwise have been an exceedingly inactive and tiresome afternoon. The bombing range was closed on Sundays and the squadrons stood down. The flying club and an occasional Spanish F-86 were the only signs of life on the more than 22,000 feet of runway that stretched almost as far as one could see.

The controllers informed me how difficult operations were when weather hampered scheduled flying activities. This base was strictly *VFR* and followed visual flight rules and procedures. There was no radar control to vector planes through safe corridors and ensure the necessary spacing to return each bird to the roost when visibility decreased below minimums. Unfortunately, bad weather had been a frequent visitor to Zaragoza over the past 2 weeks and the new week promised to bring more of the same. I envisioned my being a part of the base population for more days than I cared to consider. Life moved at a snail's pace when you had other priorities, that is, until you blinked and part of your life was gone.

Before the afternoon completely evaporated, I said good-bye to the two men who would clear me onto the runway for takeoff tomorrow morning and left to visit several of the buildings that housed the deployed squadrons' operations. The first was locked tighter than San Quinton, but the second was open and a number of new arrivals were preparing for tomorrow's mission.

As soon as I heard his voice, I knew one of the men was Brennan Frazier. Even though I hadn't seen him for more than a year, he appeared more cocksure of himself than ever. We embraced in a back-slapping bear hug and our year of separation vanished.

"You have to join my wife and me for dinner tomorrow evening," he said. "She's down here with our kids. My backseater and his wife will be there, too. It'll be great. If you have someone down here, they're invited too. You have to come. Don't give me any of your lame-duck excuses."

"I guess your wife will have to put up with fighter pilot talk," I replied. "My girl, C.Y., is in Landstuhl, but I'd love to meet your

family. I heard there were a couple of crews who just came in from Vietnam.”

“That’s us,” Brennan joked, “best crew in Europe.”

Brennan was more than accommodative in his assistance and I soon accomplished what would have taken days for me to ferret out on my own. After several hours of study and what seemed a never-ending investigation into the workings of the crew lounge, we came up with a key to the refrigerator housing the squadron’s supply of cold beer and snacks and rewarded ourselves for our diligent efforts. I relaxed, enjoyed the company and took a lot of kidding for the condition of my fingers. Prior to calling it quits for the day and heading to the Q, the specifics of a small wager on the results of tomorrow’s range missions were finalized and we each counted our anticipated winnings.

I napped through most of the evening and went to the club for supper well in advance of a promised call from my flight commander. The young girl who had handed me my key upon my arrival was working the night shift and provided me with as hostile a glare as I had received in some time. For whatever reason, I decided nothing could be gained on either of our parts by airing our differences and I didn’t care to jeopardize the good vibes that had remained with me since the spontaneous festivities that had transpired on the flight line. In a matter of moments, I was safely in the custody of one of the club’s waitresses and more than ready to enjoy a relaxing meal.

The club impressed me as being a confederation of loosely united rooms. The reception area, lounge and restaurant were unrestricted areas that catered to families as much as they did to crews. The gaming area and the bar, however, were for crewmembers only, with the possible exception of single females or wives who didn’t blush at every indiscretion, no matter how blatant or unsavory. In these areas there were few, if any, apologies, although fisticuffs were officially discouraged. Wives and girlfriends pretty much dominated the pool area. There were even some pictures, posted behind glass on the club’s message

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board, of three lovely ladies who had been captured preparing to vacation on the French Riviera. No names or telephone numbers were provided. Rumor had it that once discovered, they had adjourned to the roof of the Q and the nearby water tower had become the most sought after piece of real estate on base.

After finishing my meal, I retreated to the Q with a copy of *Stars and Stripes* and waited on Captain Schroeder's call. About 1945 hours, the phone in my hallway rang and I decided to save the guy who had been unfortunate enough to be bunked next to it a trip to summon me.

"Lieutenant Pearson," I said.

The reply to my brief announcement confused me. I had anticipated the caller would be Captain Schroeder. I had not expected anyone else, but I couldn't have been more surprised or more wrong.

"Lieutenant Pearson... how's life in Zaragoza?" the caller asked.

"Fine," I responded. "Who is this?"

"Airman Joyce, this is Airman Joyce from the simulator in Landstuhl."

"Hi! Airman Joyce," I responded. "What on earth are you up to on this glorious Sunday evening? I trust some new lieutenant hasn't talked you into spending your weekend at the simulator."

"Well, sir," Airman Joyce continued, "things aren't so fine up here right now. The weather has turned really messy and the roads are covered with ice. Two of the squadron's crew chiefs tangled with that railroad trestle over by the town of Ramstein last night. They lost control of their motorcycles and plowed right into it. They were lucky they weren't killed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I don't know whether I'd know them or not. I haven't met too many of our guys yet."

"That's not really important," Airman Joyce said. "I mean, that's not what I called about."

"Well, I know you didn't call me to talk about the weather," I said. "So, what's on your mind?"

“It’s C.Y., sir,” he blurted out.

My heart stopped. My world and everything in it stopped. My chest seized and no hope or wish could command my lungs to accept a new breath or expel the old one. I sank against the wall and my mind abandoned thought. Time was suspended.

“It’s C.Y.,” he repeated. “She’s been in an accident.”

I didn’t want to hear anything more. I regretted knowing and hearing the few words that had already been spoken.

“What happened?” I asked and overruled every instinct in my body.

The two words came from somewhere beyond my comprehension. I heard them at the same instant as the caller. It wasn’t clear to me that I was the one who had uttered them.

“I don’t have many details,” Airman Joyce began. “The accident occurred when she was leaving her duty station at the radar bunker, around 0100 hours this morning. Some of the maintenance crew said the air police had approved parking a flatbed truck with new engine test stands loaded on it alongside of the road running past the bunker.”

“You can’t have a wreck with a parked truck, for heaven’s sake,” I snapped.

I was anxious and frustrated. I immediately thought better of my comment and wished that I hadn’t allowed the words to slip past my lips. I wanted to recall them, but it was too late. The impulse to condemn something and someone was too great. I had not meant to condemn Cynthia.

“Please, Lieutenant,” Airman Joyce said, “let me tell you what I know. I don’t have long. I had to stretch the truth to find you and you know how difficult it is to get a line in the evening.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I spoke too hastily, out of concern. I didn’t think and I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Airman Joyce said. “I feel the same as you. All I know is that C.Y. came scooting out of that drive leading from the bunker and didn’t make the turn. That old gray

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VW of hers just slid on the ice and went right into the back of that flatbed truck.”

“Jesus!” I cried. “How long did it take for help to reach her?”

I wanted her to be alive. I wanted her to have walked away.

“No one who knows will tell me,” Airman Joyce said.

“They’ve moved the truck and hauled her car off. I tried to find her sister and she’s nowhere to be found. I wouldn’t even know this much except C.Y. didn’t show up for lunch and I started asking around. The *Polizei* are involved somehow, too. It’s strange.”

“I don’t know what to say, what to ask,” I said.

“I’m sorry I don’t have more,” Airman Joyce said. “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “You’ve done more than I could ask of anyone. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Lieutenant,” he said. “She may be twisting some doctor around her little finger right now, but I had this feeling that you needed to know about the accident.”

“I tell you what, Airman Joyce,” I said, “Captain Schroeder is going to call me in 5 or 10 minutes, so why don’t you give me a number where I can reach you and, if I find out anything, I’ll call you back.”

We exchanged numbers so that it would be easier for Banghouse to make the connection. It was less likely for the command post to become suspicious of a connection than a person-to-person call. Before I could fashion any more questions that may have lessened my concerns for Cynthia, the line went dead and we were cut off. Personal calls had no priority over military business and Banghouse didn’t ask permission to use their authority to appropriate a line.

I plodded to my room, not fully grasping or comprehending all that I’d heard. I couldn’t accept that Cynthia had been hurt. The whole thing was so unnecessary and so wrong. My mental faculties locked in a loop that replayed every detail of the call without pausing to consider the possible outcomes. My assumptions were invariably as distasteful as the warm beer I’d been served at the

cantina. I counted back the hours to determine where I'd been at 0100 hours and the result was as unacceptable as the thought of Cynthia being unjustly harmed. I searched for something or someone to blame and found nothing and no one but myself.

I heard nothing of the phone ringing and ringing, but a knock at my door jolted me and returned me to the center of the four walls that held my bed and the small dresser that was pushed to one corner. No light was coming through the single window that overlooked the room and the overhead light no longer showered me with its illumination.

"Pearson, telephone call," a voice informed me.

"Thanks, I'll get it," I replied to the unseen messenger.

I saw a thin line of light filtering under the door, but precious moments passed before I could orient myself to the room and its contents. Once I was certain nothing existed between the thin line of luminescence and me, I stepped cautiously toward the mark that offered escape from the darkness. The hallway lights assaulted my eyes and I squinted at the gray linoleum and stumbled forward.

"Lieutenant Pearson," I said.

"You've got to be the slowest man on this planet," Captain Schroeder chuckled. "What in the world took you so long?"

I was in no mood for jokes and I had no intention of defending whatever number of seconds it took me to travel to the phone. In any case, I had insufficient knowledge or awareness to speak convincingly or with any coherence.

"The light in my room must have burned out and I guess I dozed," I said. "Major Mason kept me up past my bedtime last night."

"You know there's an old saying that if you're going to stay up and party with the boys, you've got to be prepared to get up and go to work with the men," Captain Schroeder informed me.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'm vaguely familiar with something like that."

"You're flying in the number four slot of the second four-ship tomorrow," he said. "That's Major Mason's flight. He and I

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talked this afternoon and he's interested in seeing how you handle yourself."

"I thought we filled that square last night," I said.

"Would you listen to this," he laughed. "What's done is done and forgotten. It's time to move on to more important things."

"Where do I report and what time should I be there for the briefing?" I asked.

"Be at Building 212 by 0530 hours," he replied. "Your flight will launch at 0745 hours and be on the range at 0815. Did your flight gear survive the bus ride?"

"Better than I did," I quipped. "I'll have the oxygen mask swabbed and check the mike before I go out. Everything should be fine. Who'll be flying with me?"

"Frank will point you in the right direction," he said. "We have some concerns about the weather, but we'll see how it goes."

"They probably had to force the *WSOs* to draw straws," I remarked. "I guess we'll know who drew the short one when the lineup cards are filled out."

"Hang in there, Lieutenant," he said. "Don't let Mason talk you into betting on each bomb. Those birds are going to be loaded with two *SUU-21s* with six bombs each and don't bet on how many hits you tally on strafing. Mason can easily put 60 or more rounds through the rag and you can break the bank before you know what hit you. If you're smart, you'll tell him you'll bet a dollar on each event and catch him on the rest after you're checked out. Remember these two things if you remember nothing else. Frank plays for keeps and he collects on his bets."

"I think I've learned those lessons," I said without bothering to mention the wagers I had already put on the table with the two pilots from Nam.

"You better hit the sack," he said. "Be sure and eat a good breakfast. The club opens the cafeteria at 0400 hours."

"I heard that one of our approach controllers might have been injured in a car accident early this morning," I said with some

concern as to how I would explain my interest. "Has there been any news about that?"

"I haven't been made aware of any of our personnel being involved in an accident," he said. "I'll check with Nick Remlinger over in the flight surgeon's office and see if I can find out what he knows."

"Thanks," I said. "I understand that two crew chiefs lost control of their cycles and slammed into a railroad trestle near Ramstein last night, as well."

"How do you know all this?" Schroeder asked.

"I made friends with one of the sim operators the second day I was on base and he mentioned a few things this afternoon when he called to see if I'd survived my first cross-country," I replied.

My misrepresentations were coming closer to fact than fiction with each difficult question. I no longer cringed when I had to conjure up another partial truth, if such a thing existed.

"Is there a name associated with the scope dope in question?" Schroeder asked.

I sensed that Captain Schroeder was purposefully trying to get a rise out of me. He had no reason to refer to one of our controllers, especially one who could be injured, in those terms. It was totally out of character for him. I considered my options and decided I had to find out how Cynthia was, no matter the potential difficulty for me. For whatever reason, I believed Captain Schroeder would keep my confidence until it became clear, if or when, I had crossed the line.

"Airman York," I said. "The name is Airman York."

I was relieved when Captain Schroeder responded without crucifying me for somehow being involved with an airman. He probably didn't want to know any more about my personal affairs and he didn't immediately remember or tie "York" to K-Town.

"I'll find out and let you know," he said. "If there's a problem, I'll make sure it's being handled by the best people available. Your job is to fly a range mission tomorrow and you

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can't be preoccupied with anything but that. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, sir, completely," I said. "I appreciate your concern and the mission will have my full attention."

"Make certain of it," he replied. "The guy sitting behind you will be counting on it and so will his wife and kids."

Our conversation concluded cordially. I had put more on the table than I had intended, but I had also been rewarded by Captain Schroeder's commitment to investigate the issue with Remlinger. Knowing that something was being done relieved some of the uncertainty.

I placed my name on the Q's list for a wakeup call and trusted that my less-than-adoring, youthful attendant had long since been retired. Hopefully, her bedtime had arrived before mine. I grappled with my lack of regard for the girl and her situation, but could find scarce sympathy to spare. The thought was alive, but the effort was futile and without conviction.

My wakeup call came by way of a knock at the door and a flashlight in the eyes. It was accompanied by an unsympathetic promise that it wouldn't come again. I concluded that sleep was at best an ephemeral state that could only vaguely be enjoyed just before entry and while struggling to depart. I was equally certain that my eyes hadn't completely closed before I had to ask them to open and remain open for the duration of whatever lay ahead.

The room adjacent to mine proved to be empty so I had the bathroom to myself. I left the door open and the light above the mirror on in order to provide light to dress by. My efforts to don the green bag and flight boots brought me to the dresser. After a pause to confirm that I was indeed awake, I became aware of a floor lamp occupying a place in the corner of the room. I flipped on its switch and the resulting glow gave more purpose to my sight and less to my sense of touch, no matter how tender its use might have been.

The club was bustling when I arrived for breakfast. I looked across the crowd but didn't see anyone resembling Frazier. Some

of the wives who had been able to make the trip to Zaragoza had made the effort to accompany their husbands and steal a few almost private moments before their men were off to spend the day with the other love of their lives. A couple of women carried their babies, but none of the families with older kids had dragged them out of bed at this hour of the morning. Those wives were probably thankful for whatever peace and quiet the good Lord blessed them with and were more than grateful for a good-bye kiss and someone to turn the light off.

The cafeteria line moved quickly and I finished eating in time to grab a toothbrush and take care of my normal routine. I also remembered my flight gear before rushing to catch the early-bird bus and being delivered to Building 212 in time to give my equipment to the *P.E.* room and make out my lineup card. The slot beside my name where the WSO normally appeared was conspicuously blank.

I'd made out a generic weapons delivery card with Frazier's assistance yesterday afternoon. As Schroeder had informed me, the other squadron would be flying in the first launch of the morning so I'd see Frazier's takeoff and departure. He'd left no question that flying on a controlled range was going to be a cakewalk.

His briefing was about ready to begin and I could hear him and his WSO laughing and joking about dodging tracers flying down the chute. They were hollering and goading their flight lead and challenging him and his other wingman to take them on for every conceivable bet you could imagine. They brought more energy to the room than any two mere mortals could possibly engender, far beyond anything I had ever witnessed. It was as if surviving the war had liberated them and freed them from their inhibitions.

Several of the majors and a lieutenant colonel left the operations' room and walked outside to stare at the sky. It was pitch black and the fact that no moon and no stars were anywhere to be seen was not lost on them. One of the men in the group had a weather sheet in his hand and I was reasonably confident that he

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was the Supervisor of Flying for the morning launch. Being SOF on a bad weather day was a miserable experience and, at Zaragoza, it could alter the course of your career. Without area radar control facilities to bail you out if the weather unexpectedly took the base below VFR and shut the overhead pattern down, you could run out of options and ideas in a heartbeat.

“We’re briefing in room two,” Major Mason informed me without saying *good morning* or *how are you*. Then he added, “Would you care to join us?”

“Sure,” I replied before the thought of saying *yes, sir*, came into my preoccupied mind.

Mason let the oversight pass without comment and looked at me as if waiting for me to exhibit some sign that I was prepared to move in the direction of the briefing room. I contemplated for a second on whether a lieutenant could ruin his entire day this early in the morning and decided that it was highly unlikely.

“Do I have a backseater?” I asked.

“We’ll talk about that in the briefing,” he replied. “Go on. Drag your butt in there with the rest of the men and we’ll start.”

This time there was no hesitation on my part to say *yes, sir*, or to expedite my entry into the briefing room.

“Gentlemen, this is Lieutenant Pearson,” Mason said. “He’s one of Captain Schroeder’s warriors, but he’ll be flying with us this morning on his virgin, make that his maiden, range ride on *Bardenas Reales*.”

A loud roar of laughter erupted and numerous hearty slaps on the back and aggressive handshakes were tendered as I made progress toward the only empty chair other than the one at the head of the table, which I was reasonably certain was reserved for Major Mason. The slaps on the back were easily tolerated, but the handshakes nearly sent me into irrecoverable shock. The fingers, even on my right hand, had not healed sufficiently to endure such treatment without complaint.

“Because the lieutenant is on his maiden voyage, a couple of things will have to change. I’ll cover those and then we’ll confirm a time-hack and continue with the normal briefing.”

A chorus of *boos* resounded through the room in advance of the unwelcome changes to normal flight procedures. I anticipated that these guys would have no mercy and no reservations about giving me the full new guy welcome, or treatment, as the case might be.

“Aircrews who have not previously delivered ordnance on a given range must make the first pass of each event on that range *dry*. Because Lieutenant Pearson falls into that category, we will all make the first pass of each event dry in order to sustain some semblance of continuity....”

A louder chorus of *boos* erupted. Everyone around the table gave me unequivocal thumbs down.

“... Unless,” he continued, “we determine that this pansy needs to be chaperoned by an instructor pilot in his *pit*.”

A chorus of *cheers* erupted in unanimous approval for assigning me an instructor. My guess is that Mason had decided well in advance of the briefing that he wanted an instructor in my pit in the event that the weather fell below my personal minimums. This decision was full of contradictions, however, in that my weather category was less restrictive than the requirement for crews at Zaragoza to operate in VFR conditions at all times.

Weather at the range was required to meet even more stringent requirements. Visibility had to be at least 5 miles. In no case were aircrews permitted to penetrate an overcast ceiling during any portion of a weapons delivery. If I needed an instructor, someone was concerned about my flying or afraid the weather would deteriorate significantly beyond specified parameters.

“I want to remind each crew,” Major Mason continued, “that all WSO stick time will be accomplished above 10,000 feet *AGL* with no more than 30 degrees of pitch and bank and no close formation. Is that clear to all you *GIBs*?”

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Another chorus of *boos* rose up from the three WSOs in the room, but the dissenting opinions quickly faded and the briefing proceeded.

“Pearson,” Major Mason barked, “we have a 10,000-foot runway and a 12,000-foot runway. We don’t need and we don’t use drag chutes to stop fighter aircraft on these runways. I’ll be very disappointed if my number-four man shows up at the far end of the runway after landing and displays a chute sailing majestically from the tail of his airplane. Do you understand that concept?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered with prayerful conviction.

“If that should occur,” Major Mason warned, “the idiot who’s responsible, and 99 percent of the time that would be the pilot, will be escorted to the maintenance area to repack the offending chute and will be returned to the club by 2000 hours to buy his fellow flight members a round of their favorite beverages as compensation for the dishonor he’s brought upon himself and his fellow officers. Enough said.”

Briefings for air-to-ground missions were anything but ordinary for air superiority squadrons. Of course, there were the usual ground procedures, line up requirements and pre- and post-takeoff procedures as well as weather factors, but specific mission briefing data held everyone’s attention. Information on range entry, target locations, sequence of events, delivery parameters and especially switch positioning were critical. Tactical considerations were almost meaningless if a weapon failed to release or a normally permanent part of the plane was jettisoned on a target.

“Are there any questions about target fixation or foul procedures?” Mason asked near the conclusion of his briefing. “There being none, I must remind you that I expect a good show for the range officer. Put your ordnance on target, give crisp, clear radio communications and keep your spacing tight. ‘Start engines’ is in 25 minutes. Get your business taken care of and I’ll meet you on operations’ frequency before going to *ground control* for start engines.”

There was still the question of my backseater. Besides Major Mason and myself, there were three other pilots in the briefing. One of them had obviously drawn the short straw. When the room cleared, Mason introduced me to Peter "The Terrible" Mackinaw. This guy didn't beat around the bush on crew procedures.

"It's your plane until you screw up mate and then it's mine," he said without any prompting. "I'll handle the radios, if you like, read in-flight and weapons' checklists and call altitudes. If I become a bother, just tell me to cool it and you won't hear another peep. How do you want the *T-handle* set?"

I would learn later that Mackinaw had flown with the British on an exchange tour for 2 years. He turned out to be one heck-of-a nice guy and could tell as many jokes as Airman Joyce. I covered what I thought he needed to know and we headed toward the P.E. room to find our equipment and then made sure we wouldn't have bladder problems anytime soon. I never drank coffee on days I was scheduled to fly.

My nervous system was beginning to pump a rush of adrenaline into my veins. I was relieved to know I had some left. My first glimpse of the sky more than doubled the dose my system had already received and nearly convinced me there was no possibility we would ever lift off the ground. Clouds appeared to be rolling across the sky at 300 feet and we needed 1,500 feet for takeoff. Granted, there were breaks in the ceiling here and there, but blue sky was at a premium. Pete was a captain and he chattered constantly. He refused to accept the fact that I had never flown operationally and was fresh out of the fighter upgrade program.

"Just my rotten luck," he complained good-naturedly. "I lose my front seat ride and then I'm saddled with a knock-kneed virgin."

"I wouldn't go quite that far," I retorted. "Do you know how to preflight these bomb dispensers?"

Mackinaw looked at me for a moment and then laughed. He had come to the verge of letting his macho guard be broken.

"Not on your life," he said. "That's your job."

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Mackinaw walked quickly around the plane, checking whatever attracted his attention and then climbed into the backseat. I checked my watch and went through the aircraft's AF Forms 781 with the crew chief. The 20mm cannon had been bore-sighted within the past week and had performed well on its last two missions. I probably went through every checklist item twice and would have gone through the list a third time if I hadn't been forced to climb into the cockpit to meet our start-engine time.

The progression of events moved smoothly from check-in through taxi-out, but the weather became more and more ominous. The number-four bird in the previous flight had been delayed so our flight fell in line behind him and allowed him to join his waiting comrades in the *arm* area. Frazier was number 3 in that flight. The sight of eight birds in a row with exhaust vapors trailing behind and the high-pitched whine of the engines was enough to light everybody's fire.

The flight lead of Beacon Flight nodded his head and four canopies lowered in unison. Ground control cleared them to tower frequency for takeoff, but the SOF came up on frequency and countermanded their clearance. Moments later, they were cleared again but with 10-second spacing on takeoff and their lead called them to tower frequency before anyone could decide to change his mind a second time.

As the ground crew began pulling the safety pins from our cannons and SUU-21s, I watched Beacon Lead and his number-two man takeoff with no more than 5-second spacing. Lead held his plane on the deck until Beacon 2 screamed into his 6-o'clock position before rejoining on the wing and the two of them must have disappeared into the clouds at no more than 400 or 500 feet. Frazier took the full 10 seconds, but Beacon 4 was after him almost as soon as Frazier released brakes. The same hair-raising rejoin took place within 300 feet of the runway and then the two of them disappeared from sight.

"This looks like it's going to be a lot of fun," I joked with Mackinaw.

“Don’t let your blood pressure boil over, Lieutenant,” he responded. “All you have to do is light the burners and release the brakes. The Phantom will do the rest.”

I began humming a couple of lines from *Delta Dawn*. Before I realized it, Mackinaw was humming with me.

“Do you enjoy country music?” he asked.

“I use that song to determine when to begin my pullout in 45-degree dive bombing,” I replied.

“You’re joking!” he exclaimed.

“No,” I explained. “Most country music is written and sung in 4/4 time, that is, it has four beats to a measure and a quarter note gets one beat. It works every time. Of course, sometimes I sing a little faster than others.”

“You’re nuts,” he replied. “If I’d known I ‘was’ flying with Beethoven, I would have told Mason to find another conductor.”

The ground crew took about 10 minutes to pull our pins and the SOF held us 5 more minutes until we approached our scheduled takeoff time. Major Mason went off frequency and had a lengthy conversation with some of the powers who controlled our fate and, when he returned to ground frequency, he looked over and gave the thumbs up. I glanced at the sky and shook my head.

“Do you have a problem, Lieutenant?” Captain Mackinaw asked.

“Would you say we are VFR or IFR?” I asked.

“The range must be workable,” he replied. “We wouldn’t be flying if we couldn’t complete the mission.”

“I hope you have a magic wand to bring us through these clouds for landing,” I said.

“Maybe the weather guru has promised that the clouds will breakup,” he answered. “Don’t get too concerned about that now. Mason is looking at us.”

Major Mason tapped his helmet and two heads turned to look in my direction. I gave them thumbs up and they swung around toward Mason. With a nod of his head, four front-seat canopies

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came down as one. I checked the line on the canopy rail to make certain it aligned in the locked position.

“Canopy is down and locked, stripe’s aligned,” I said.

“Canopy down and locked in the back,” Mackinaw responded.

“I want you to get a radar lock on Lighthouse 3 as soon as you can and call overtake or closure rate until we join up,” I said. “If you can’t lock on, tell me and I’ll get a hack in bore-sight before I lose him, in case he goes into the clouds. I don’t want to kill us on the rejoin.”

“If I have a vote,” he replied, “I vote not to be killed on rejoin, also. That might have the potential to ruin the rest of my day.”

“Is there anything you would like to remind me of before we’re off?” I asked.

“Don’t forget to raise the gear and flaps, preferably after liftoff,” he replied with a laugh that threatened to burst my eardrums.

I smiled, but I felt like a condemned man waiting for the SOF to commute my sentence. This weather stunk and there was no other way to describe it.

“Lighthouse is cleared onto Runway three zero left, to hold,” ground control called. “Contact tower on two five seven point eight.”

“Lighthouse, Roger, cleared on to hold. Lighthouse go two five seven point eight.”

“Toop,”

“Threep,”

“Fow-erp...”

“Lighthouse check,” Lead called after the new frequency pinged in.

“Toop,”

“Threep,”

“Fow-erp...”

“Zaragoza Tower, Lighthouse is ready for takeoff.”

“Lighthouse, Roger. The SOF requests that you give him a call on two niner niner point four when VFR on top. Lighthouse is cleared for takeoff... altimeter two niner eight zero.”

“Lighthouse, Roger, cleared for takeoff... altimeter two niner eight zero.”

Major Mason held up five fingers and Lighthouse 3 passed it on to me. I acknowledged with a reluctant thumbs up. I had never tried flying instruments on a range mission, but there was a time and place for everything.

“He wants 5 seconds on the spacing,” I told Mackinaw. “If memory serves me, we’re supposed to take 10 seconds VFR or 20 seconds IFR.”

“Yes, that’s by the book and the book says we’re supposed to have a 1,500-foot ceiling and 3 miles of visibility,” he replied.

“Unfortunately, we have a schedule, we’re behind and the weather’s not cooperating. Uncle Sam isn’t going to give us any more money so we either fly or we fold our tents and go home. What do you think?”

“I think he wants us joined up before we hit the clouds,” I said.

“That would be my guess,” Mackinaw replied sarcastically.

Major Mason had given us the run-up signal and Mackinaw had read me all of our checklist items when Mason released brakes and was gone. Number *Two* didn’t waste time counting and *Three* was after him before I could ask my guardian angel to look after old ladies, small babies and fighter pilots with balls as big as elephants’ jewels. I slammed the throttles into afterburner and released brakes. By the time the gear cleared the runway, Mackinaw had a lock-on and was calling overtake. The only problem was that our closure rate was negative.

I figured Lighthouse 2 had almost joined on Lead or had no more than 50 knots overtake. *Three* probably had about 100 knots overtake on *Two* and would have to be coming back on the throttles within 15 or 20 seconds. I left the burners in until we reached 450 knots. When Lighthouse 3 caught Lead, he’d be

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coming to idle and throwing out his speed brakes or whatever it took to keep from overshooting and I'd be left eating 150 knots of overtake in one bite. This was ridiculous.

I saw Lighthouse 3 bank wildly to the left and figured he must be overshooting Lead. As soon as Lead recognized what was occurring, he took his plane and his number-two man up into the clouds and *Three* gave a couple of clicks on the mike button rather than calling that he'd executed lost wingman procedures. You couldn't very well justify being a lost wingman in VFR conditions.

"Lead's flown into the clouds with *Two* on his right wing and *Three* is probably tooling around in the clouds trying to find his instruments before he finds a rock," I told Mackinaw.

"This is not good," he replied calmly. "We'll stay locked on to *Three*. Take us up on top before we hit a falcon or something really useless like a weather balloon."

"What's our spacing on *Three*?" I asked and worked to start a crosscheck on the instruments before pulling the nose up and entering the dark, moisture-laden clouds.

"We're at 6,000 feet in trail, but a lot of that is altitude," he said.

We popped in and out of layers of clouds for 7,000 or 8,000 feet of altitude. Some of the layers were like cirrus, but others were more like your standard cumulus clouds. The tops were ragged and I continued climbing until I reached an altitude of 10,000 feet.

"*Three* should be on your nose 1,500 feet ahead, probably low. Lead may be below us, also."

I cracked the speed brakes to dissipate some of our closing speed until I realized that the climb had bled our overtake rate to a manageable level. *Three* had Lead about 500 feet off his right wing and slightly above him. I waited for him to complete his rejoin and then pulled up on his left wing.

"Lighthouse check," Lead called after I joined the formation.

"Toop,"

"Threep,"

"Fow-erp..."

That was all Major Mason ever said. He had his *chicks* and, after he left us to call the SOF and returned, we headed for the range. I could only imagine what words he had for the Supervisor of Flying.

The sky over Bardenas Reales Range was layered with scattered clouds, but we could see enough of the ground to establish a pattern and the range officer cleared us in for a full sequence of deliveries. Beacon Flight had completed its mission and departed. I hadn't heard any of their chatter and had no idea how much money they might take out of my pocket. In any event, it was my turn now.

We set up our switches for 45-degree dive bomb passes and Major Mason called for the first pass to be dry. After our experience on takeoff, I think he wanted to determine if the clouds would be a problem. The range officer acknowledged and cleared us in dry. As I rolled in from nearly 12,000 feet on my first pass, Mackinaw began cursing like a drunken sailor.

"What the hell are you doing?" he screamed over the intercom.

"Standby," I replied forcefully as I completed the dive and began pulling about 5½ Gs to initiate our recovery after descending through 4,500 feet. We bottomed out in the recovery at about 1,500 feet. That's not much margin for error, considering the plane is traveling about 700 feet per second.

I heard Mackinaw grunting as I pulled the nose above the horizon and Major Mason called that he was rolling in hot behind us. The range officer cleared him in hot and I flipped the weapons switch to *arm*. I was ready to drop bombs.

"I roll inverted and pull the nose through the target," I told Mackinaw. "That's the way I fly 45-degree dive bomb runs."

"Who in tarnation taught you that?" he demanded.

Two called in hot as Lead was pulling off target and *Three* called turning base in front of me. The pattern was tight and I had everyone in sight. The range officer was having trouble keeping a tally on the planes coming off target and turning downwind,

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however, because of clouds scattered in that area. It was a problem and a good way to have a mid-air collision. The problem would be lessened when we began the low-altitude deliveries, but bomb scores indicated that Mason and his number-two wingman weren't having any problem seeing the target. My wallet felt thinner already.

"I did," I replied. "That's the way I do it. It keeps G on the aircraft, puts me on and off target quickly and it works well for tactical deliveries."

"Is there anything else I should know?" he asked. "Do you strafe upside down, as well?"

"Lighthouse 4's in hot," I called.

"*Four's* cleared hot," the range officer replied.

Mackinaw settled in to being a GIB and we dodged clouds well enough to drop four bombs in 45-degree dive, four in low angle and four in skip bombing. We reset our switches and the last two hot passes were strafing runs. I hit all four bombs in skip bombing and put more than 60 rounds through the rag in strafing. Mason waxed me in 45-degree dive and low angle was up for grabs by one of the other guys.

"Hot damn," Mackinaw was singing as we left the range to rejoin and set our switches to safe. "We won a few coins this morning."

All of our bombs had marked so we closed our SUU-21 doors. I still couldn't believe we had even been cleared on the range.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I replied. "You wouldn't happen to have any idea how Major Mason intends to get us through those clouds covering the base, would you?"

Just then Major Mason called us to depart the range frequency and we went to two niner niner point four. Before we could check in, a call came through on guard frequency.

"Two planes down. I repeat... two planes down."

No call sign or location or anything was given. A cold chill ran up my spine and my forehead and cheeks tingled with

electricity. I had never been this close to this kind of unspeakable disaster.

“They can’t mean that,” Mackinaw said. “In God’s name, they can’t mean that, but where are the emergency radio signals?”

I had no reply. There was nothing I could say. I was wholly unprepared to accept what the call on guard had informed us of.

“Lighthouse check,” Lead called when the chatter had subsided.

“Toop, Threep, Fow-erp,” the replies came loud and clear.

Beacon Lead was on the SOF’s frequency, talking at one moment in a clear, concise tone and the next in near panic. From the way the conversation was playing out, it became clear that Beacon Lead had attempted to return to base by descending under the clouds some 25 miles out and had flown into a valley. When reduced visibility had forced him to turn and retrace his flight path, he had flown into a lower layer of clouds and his number-three and number-four wingmen had lost sight of him. Beacon 3 had called lost wingman and that was the last communication anyone had received. Beacon Lead had evidently climbed to VFR on top of the cloud layers and had been loitering over the area. He had identified his coordinates for a rescue effort, but he and his number-two man were well past bingo fuel.

The SOF was focused on how to bring Beacon Lead and his wingman in for landing before they flamed out and we lost two more aircraft. I could tell from his voice that everything other than finding a solution to bringing the remaining *birds* home safely was secondary. The fourth launch of the day had been scrubbed. The third launch was being diverted to Torrejon, but everyone knew without asking that Lighthouse didn’t have enough fuel to divert.

The weather guru had suggested that a point about 10 miles east of the approach end of the runway might permit the planes to descend to VFR below the clouds and safely maneuver to base. The SOF gave the coordinates of the let-down point to Beacon and requested us to set up a holding pattern above Beacon until the *birds* could be brought in one at a time.

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“This day has turned very ugly,” I told Mackinaw, “and it’s giving every indication that it intends to get worse. Do you think there’s any way someone got to an ejection handle? Surely, somebody ejected... anybody!”

“Those poor bastards flew into a mountain they never saw,” he replied. “Four men... gone... just like that. There won’t be anything left to identify, nothing to say they were ever here.”

“Did you know them?” I asked.

I wanted to tell Mackinaw that Beacon 3 was a friend. I wanted to say that both of those guys had names. I wanted to say that names and faces and friendships can’t just vanish. There had to be something to hold onto. I needed... something.

“Beacon 3 and 4 were the two crews who came in together from Vietnam,” he replied. “They have their wives here... and their kids.”

The chatter on guard channel and our frequency was continuous. It was at the same time maddening and controlled. Activity was furious, but the scramble to regain some semblance of order and bring us home could be tuned out with a knob. I was only a wingman. I had no decisions to make and no responsibility for anyone other than the two people in my plane’s cockpits. I heard the steady spinning whine of the engines and watched the clouds glide smoothly and effortlessly beneath our wings. Our existence was surreal. The context of events had become disarranged and irrational. To be worried about landing after four men might have died was fickle, unnatural. The world was already leaving them behind. I had seen them only yesterday. They had helped me and today I could be leaving them forever.

“I imagine USAFE will pull the squadron out immediately,” I said.

“As soon as the Accident Investigation Team interviews them,” he lamented. “What a mess. We’ll be shut down for a month of Sundays.”

“Is there a Chaplain on base?” I asked.

“I’m confident the squadron has someone in his office as we speak,” he said. “Tonight will probably be the most difficult night of his life.”

Major Mason had fallen in trail with Beacon Lead and his number-two man. We were seeing more and more breaks in the clouds as we approached the coordinates the SOF had given us.

“Lighthouse 4 is bingo,” I called.

“Lighthouse 2 is bingo.”

“Lighthouse 3 is the same.”

“Lighthouse Lead copies all chicks are bingo fuel.”

The SOF came on frequency and confirmed that he copied, as well. He assured us that the weather should permit everyone to return to base safely. Both flights were sent to tower frequency. As soon as we checked in, Major Mason requested to tower that we be cleared for two-ship formation, full-stop landings, but the SOF was in the tower and he denied that request. Formation full stops had not been briefed and circumstances dictated that they not be flown. Circumstances clearly referred to the weather conditions we were in the process of exploring.

Beacon 2 departed the makeshift holding point first, followed by Beacon Lead. We were cleared with 1-mile spacing and given monitoring by approach control once on final, but fuel considerations dictated that we cut spacing between planes to the minimum. As each ship penetrated the broken clouds and headed for the approach end of Runway three zero right, the chatter on tower frequency faded into oblivion. Unspoken thoughts were on the four men who almost certainly had been lost, even though official confirmation of their crash from the rescue, or recovery, team was conservatively hours away.

Major Mason sent Mackinaw and me out of the holding pattern first and we headed inbound to the TACAN. This was one of the few bases in the Air Force that had no approved TACAN instrument approaches because of the location of the transmitter. I primarily flew my cockpit instruments, with an occasional glance outside to keep track of the aircraft in front of me, as well as the

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intermittently visible ground. Mackinaw monitored Beacon Lead on the radar, which also painted the runways during our approach. Clouds were hanging everywhere, but I caught sight of the runway about 3 miles out and well before I reached the minimum altitude I had established for myself. When the tires kissed the runway, I took an enormous breath and said a short prayer of thanks.

Captain Mackinaw reminded me not to pull the drag chute handle and I'll never know how he remembered that obscure detail after all that had transpired since Major Mason had concluded his briefing. We waited in the de-arm area until all four *birds* had landed and we taxied in as a flight. Our crew chiefs were waiting for us and, after the tires were chalked, Lighthouse Lead gave us the cut sign and eight General Electric J-79 engines faded into complete silence.

The crew chiefs of Beacon Flight had cordoned off the parking slots for the missing planes and two of them stood at attention where the nose wheels would have rested. They gave no indication that they intended to leave their posts before their planes and crews returned. When I climbed down the ladder and touched the welcome firmness of the good earth, my crew chief saluted and thanked me for bringing *his bird* home safely. I understood what he meant.

Major Mason debriefed our flight behind closed doors. Before we finished, Colonel Straup called and talked with all of the squadron members over one of the command post's secure lines. He assured each man that his wife or loved one would be contacted so that no one would worry about who was involved in the accident. Within the hour, Colonel Johnson, the wing commander, and Major General Baker, 17th Air Force Commander, had called to express their concern and their confidence in our mission readiness. General Mitchell, Commander-in-Chief of United States Air Forces in Europe, was said to be in the States, but was being made aware of Zaragoza's loss. The only ones who didn't know the extent of the tragedy were the wives on Zaragoza Air Base.

SHEPPARD'S GATE