

Rolling Thunder

L. ERIK FLEMING



Rolling Thunder

L. Erik Fleming



Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

Copyright 2012

All rights reserved — L. Erik Fleming

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507

Houston, TX 77065

www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-62212-559-3

Typography and page composition by J. K. Eckert & Company

Contents

CHAPTER 1—FAM FLIGHT?	1
CHAPTER 2—THE BOYS ON THE FRONTIER.....	17
CHAPTER 3—JUST ANOTHER DAY	45
CHAPTER 4—AWESTRUCK.....	71
CHAPTER 5—SOMETIMES SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN	89
CHAPTER 6—A COMMON BOND	105
CHAPTER 7—OPERATION CAST NET	143
CHAPTER 8—THE REVELATIONS OF R&R.....	179
CHAPTER 9—WHEN A DOOR CLOSES.....	197
CHAPTER 10—ANOTHER OPENS ELSEWHERE	219
CHAPTER 11—AROUND THE BEND	235
CHAPTER 12—THE GRASS ISN'T GREENER.....	255
CHAPTER 13—THERE BUT FOR FORTUNE	279
CHAPTER 14—LOVE NEVER DIES.....	317
CHAPTER 15—REDEMPTION IS ONLY TEMPORARY	377
CHAPTER 16—SOMEDAY NEVER COMES	405
CHAPTER 17—LOVE IS STRONGER THAN ENMITY	419

1

FAM FLIGHT?

“*Di vo’i tao*”—Come with me, the young boy beckoned, waving his hand and smiling as he parted the thick, overgrown elephant grass. Overcome with youthful excitement, he moved quickly through stubborn vegetation that would slow anyone not accustomed it, and would lose anyone following. Every once in a while he’d have to stop and wait for the man to catch up and give him a reassuring smile to let him know that he was totally competent and wouldn’t lead him astray. This was the only place the boy had known in his short life, and while he found it unusual that someone else, particularly a foreigner, thought his home was interesting, it made him proud.

The man smiled back. “*Tao se den,*” he said—I’m coming. He was trailing the boy by about ten yards, always reassuring him that he had total confidence in him. The man was sweating profusely from his fight with the tall blades that wrapped around his body and pulled him back, making for a more strenuous workout than he’d prepared himself for, but he continued his steady pace, making sure not to get too far behind. The man was an American in his late thirties and, like his guide, this wasn’t the first time he’d hiked this way. He’d traveled this route countless times a decade earlier. For this American, today was the anniversary of his own personal Armageddon—a day of both a tragic end and a new beginning. He knew that occasionally throughout his life he’d have to revisit this place, whether metaphorically or literally. As always, there were the changes brought about by the passage of over a decade, but some things would remain unaltered, things that brought him here today and would surface in various details throughout his life.

As the American looked ahead, the boy had all but disappeared into the thick foliage ahead of him, leaving only the delicate voice to assure him that his young guide was still there. He followed the resonance of the song and the rustling sounds that filtered through the tall, green blinds and then said with a chuckle, “*Cho mot chut!*”—Wait a minute! He pushed his way through the blades that had momentarily stalled him into a clearing where the boy was waiting.

The boy then spread his hands out in a gathering motion as he said, “*Nhin cai nay kia!*”—Look at this here! He then walked toward the American and held out his hand when he realized the man was pleased, smiling as if to gain further approval.

The American reached into one of his pockets and handed the little boy an American dollar, which was worth about fifteen thousand dong at that morning’s exchange rate.

The boy’s eyes lit up and the smile across his dirty, sweaty face grew wider. He then said with enthusiasm, “*Cam on! Tao di duoc khong ngay?*”—Thanks! May I go now?

The American nodded with a smile and the young boy ran off with his treasure, again disappearing into the thick elephant grass. Alone now, he stared at his surroundings in shocked disbelief. He’d waited a long time to return here—it had taken him over a decade to find a reason and the courage to do so. He closed his eyes for a moment because what greeted his eyes today was far more painful than his memory of the place. Today he stood alone at the edge of a vast pond that was an island in a surrounding sea of rice paddies.

§ § § § § §

Just a mile to the north was a small village, and off to the west sharp peaks rose from the relatively flat terrain. That was how he remembered it over the years. But today the smells and sounds drifting in the thick tropical air were different—harsher, more ragged, with no happy background chatter. He shut out the present-day stimuli and thought about how he remembered this place. He could hear the laughter, smell the food cooking, and feel the comforting welcome of the locals again. It was a time he’d never want to forget.

A smile spread across his face as he felt the warmth of his thoughts, just as real as the tropical sun drying the sweat on his face. He remained in this place until a bad memory crossed his mind, forcing him to open his eyes. He then stared blankly out to the horizon, until his urge to explore his surroundings made him walk. He hoped to find something that would bring him back to the place he remembered. He walked around the pond a few meters, then started toward the water’s edge. As he drew to within a meter of the edge, the sole of his shoe scuffed over something hard, catching his attention. He took a step

back and knelt, then dug around the object to free it from the muck it had been buried in for so long. It was obviously metal, but the mud still obscured its identity. When he finally freed the object and examined it closely, a sliver of its metallic luster caught enough sun to glint into his eyes. Curious, he scrubbed and blew on it until the mud was almost all gone, then polished it off with his handkerchief. When he unfolded the hanky, he saw an object that sent a shock radiating through his entire body. He'd come here to find something buried deep within his past somewhere in his thoughts, and he knew there was a chance that he'd stumble upon something like this—although not literally.

Maybe it was for this very chance that he'd come here to begin with. As he looked at the object more closely, his every muscle suddenly quivered and began to seize as a piece of his past rushed forcefully and unexpectedly through his mind. His head lowered to his chest, and from somewhere deep within he heaved uncontrollably. As unstoppable tears followed, he resigned himself to the fact that he'd have to, perhaps needed to, remember some of the things he'd so diligently tried to deny or forget for over a decade. As the tears continued, he unconsciously clenched the object in the palm of his hand so tightly that he drew blood, his knuckles now whiter than the handkerchief he'd used to clean it. He slowly released the object and cautiously turned it over in his hand, his curiosity at odds with the fear of what he expected to find. With the object now inverted, his eyes confirmed what he already knew was there—the tiny letters “N N” etched neatly in the corner. The object was a needle-guide plate from a sewing machine, and he knew exactly who they represented. His tears rained down on the plate and ran down his hand, diluting the blood that now dripped into the soil—and now his memories, good and bad, of this tiny Asian country on the Indochina Peninsula were not only gushing through his mind, but also deep within his soul.

§ § § § § §

“I love you, Val. Hurry back to me. I'll wait until the end of time for you if I have to. Just be careful and return home safely to me—I can't imagine life without you. I could never even think of loving anyone else but you.”

§ § § § § §

Those parting words from his fiancée, Virginia, were etched in his mind. The whole scene that day was the most dismal in his memory, especially that last goodbye underneath the hulking shadow of the USS *Oriskany* at the docks in San Diego.

Everything before that moment was done as if it would be the last time, and even the most trivial things, always unnoticed or ignored before, were now suddenly significant. Ever since he got his orders to ship out, every minute

detail of his life here at home was committed to memory, for while he didn't know what to expect, he had a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that he might need to recall these details some other time, when things might be worse. Some things he wanted to forget, but they too went with him, resurfacing time and again. All these would be melded with memories yet to be formed, and some of the ones he'd want to forget would also go with him. His own mind knew that he'd need all of them to complete the person he was, whether merely basking in good memories or resurrecting bad ones to help educate and moralize himself. One particular memory, the one of that last goodbye, was one that truly depended on the context of his situation at the moment for him to determine if it was good or bad, but it always left him empty, with a feeling of longing. The tears streaming down her face, that sinking feeling in his chest, the last seemingly way too short embrace, that final kiss goodbye—they all seemed to come back to him at the most inconvenient times.

§ § § § § §

He'd only been over here for two days, and now he sat in a sweltering cockpit under the gloom of an overcast sky, waiting for the engine-start-cart to kick in. Captain Valentine E. Jordan wiped the sweat from his face as he watched the gauges for signs of activity. Finally enough current ran through to move the needles, and he turned his attention to his plane captain and twirled his fingers, the engine-start hand signal, trying desperately to shake the images of the last haunting goodbye and get his head where it should be—on the task at hand. Seconds later the whine of spooling turbines filled his ears and blanketed the otherwise quiet Vietnamese countryside. He and his RIO (radar intercept officer), First Lieutenant Nathaniel L. Robinson, went over their respective checklists and BITs (built-in tests) as their great bird came to life. They were just supposed to go on a FAM (area familiarization) flight today, but here they were, going up with their squadron's CO and two other jets on a combat sortie to help a recon team trapped in heavy crossfire on some mountainside. Time was of the essence; the team radioed in that they were almost completely surrounded, and if help didn't arrive within fifteen minutes, not to even bother because they'd surely be overrun. To anyone trapped in a hailstorm of bullets, the whine of friendly jet engines overhead, if they can be heard, is as soothing as a choir of angels. To the opposing forces, it's the sound of the reaper coming for his due.

§ § § § § §

A nudge on the throttles and the flight of four were taxiing their F-4J Phantom IIs to runway 28 with priority over everyone, even an aircraft on short

final. The squadron's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Earl J. Driskell—call-sign "Papa"—was the flight leader on this sortie—and a living aviation legend. He was a two-time double ace, with fourteen kills in WWII and twelve in Korea, and was highly respected by everyone. Papa and his wingman, executive officer Major Chapman—call-sign "Chappie"—taxied into a staggered section departure on the runway, throttled up to military thrust, and held the brakes. When the control tower light turned steady green, they released the brakes, selected afterburner, and they went roaring down the runway. Val and his wingman taxied into position behind them and followed suit. They spooled their twin General Electric J79-GE-17 engines up to military power as they applied the brakes, the jets groaning in protest under the strain. When the light gun shined green at them, they released the brakes and selected afterburner, and the planes slammed forward down the runway. Even under a heavy bomb load, the planes accelerated moderately. About ten seconds later each pilot pulled aft on his control stick and the massive fighters leapt into the sky, with gear and flaps up. The planes continued accelerating and pitched up thirty, then forty-five degrees, disappearing into the gray veil of clouds. They were underway.

"Panama, Rhino Flight airborne. Flight of four Fox-4s with ten 500-pounders each and twenty mike-mike. We're at angels two-zero for base plus six on the Linh Thu two-two-zero for twenty -five." Papa's southern accent was smooth and unmistakable as he reported the position of the flight in compass azimuth and distance from Linh Thu, along with their altitude, to Panama, sometimes called Strike, which was the DASC (direct airborne strike control), similar to an air traffic control center in the states.

"Roger Rhino Flight. Radar contact. Contact the FACA (forward air controller airborne) on button blue, call-sign Watchdog Tango."

"Roger," the CO replied as he switched frequencies. The F-4 had twenty-four pre-programmed frequencies so that a pilot wouldn't have to fumble with the radio in an emergency or while maneuvering in combat. They were identified by stating the word "button" followed by a color: "Watchdog Tango, Rhino Flight on button blue, ready to copy mission."

"Roger, Rhino Flight." Watchdog Tango was a Marine OV-10 Bronco forward air control/reconnaissance aircraft. The "Tango" in his call-sign was the letter assigned to a particular pilot of that aircraft, which was changed monthly. "We have enemy troops hiding in two tree lines, one to the north and one to the south of some friendlies pinned down in an open grassy bald near the top of the mountain. Friendlies are taking heavy mortar fire from the south line and heavy machine gun fire from both lines. Both lines run east to west for approximately one hundred meters. I'll mark each with a Willie Pete. Drop four bombs each on the first run. Let's have a zero-five-zero run in with a

right pullout at two thousand. Caution for low cloud bases and steep surrounding terrain, broken to overcast layer at four thousand, terrain peaks are about five thousand. Five second interval between runs. Call rolling in hot. Read back.”

Papa read back the mission. “All right, gents—let’s descend for a left-hand orbit at niner thousand. We’re gonna earn our pay today, set for five hundred mils. We’ll be flying a hi-lo-hi approach, on the deck and looking those bastards in the eye. Time to get down and dirty.”

All four aircraft dove and leveled off at nine thousand feet AGL (above ground level) and began their orbit.

The peaks of the surrounding terrain poked through the low cloud layer in several places, and there were some breaks in the layer that allowed for visual contact with the ground, but for the most part the clouds obscured the target area.

“Watchdog Tango, Rhino 1. We are at angels nine, have limited visual on target area, no joy on you,” Papa reported as all the RIOs checked their scopes for the FACA echo.

Watchdog Tango looked skyward and happened to catch a glimpse of a fast-moving dark speck through one of the breaks in the clouds. “Rhino Flight, I have you in sight. I’m beginning my run from the south; I’m now at your four o’clock.” With that Watchdog Tango dropped to one thousand feet AGL, then sighted the south line by the mortar rounds being fired and fired a fan of Willie Petes at it. He then pulled up and performed a hard right wing-over, after he had overflown the northern line and fired a second fan of Willie Petes along the length of it. “Rhino 1, do you have my smoke in sight?” Watchdog Tango asked. He knew that the jets most likely didn’t, but he hoped they might get lucky and spot it through one of the breaks in the cloud deck.

All of the phantom pilots and RIOs began scanning the clouds below, searching in vain for the most part for any rising columns of smoke. “Negative, Watchdog Tango, but we’ll see it once we punch through this shit,” Papa said with a hint of resignation in his voice.

Watchdog Tango hesitated, not sure if it was a good idea for the jets to try that without a visual on the area yet, but he knew that the team on the ground couldn’t hold out much longer. “Roger, Rhino 1. Make your drops behind and between smoke columns on both lines, moving northerly on the south line and southerly on the north line. You are cleared to attack, call rolling in hot.” Watchdog Tango then quickly switched buttons to his low band FM channels to inform the platoon commander to get his team to lay low, the zoomies were rolling in.

The platoon commander had observed Watchdog Tango make his marking runs and was relieved to know that help was only moments behind. Once he

got radio confirmation from Watchdog Tango, he had his men close the distance between each other and flatten themselves out so close to the ground that were eyeballing blades of grass. The deafening noise from the mortar rounds and machine gun fire would drown out the jets when they were on top of them, but the noise of their bombs would make the present din seem like a tomb. If the bombs hit their marks, a strange silence would descend, with only the distant gasps of sputtering flames to remind them that they still had a sense of hearing.

Papa and his XO broke off from Val and his wingman, deciding to hit the south line first in order to silence the mortars. Val and his wingman would follow, and would adjust their drops accordingly to the previous two runs.

“Dash 1, rolling in hot,” Papa announced.

Five seconds later Chappie called out, “Dash 2, rolling in hot.”

Val watched as the first two jets disappeared in the clouds, leaving only their swirling vortices behind to remind anyone that they were previously there.

“Dash 1, in sight. I have you leveling out. You look on line, you are cleared hot.” Watchdog Tango was directing to help the jets make final adjustments for the desired effect. As Papa pickled off his first load, he called out, “I have four away, Dash 1. Dash 2 cleared for roll-in, in sight. Move slightly right of Dash 1’s hits.” A moment, then, “That looks on line. Dash 2 cleared hot. I have four away.”

From his orbit five thousand feet above the cloud deck, Val could make out the brilliant flashes of the exploding ordnance fill in the breaks of the layer from the runs of his fellow Marines. He did notice, however, that those same breaks were suddenly closing as wisps of wind from the shockwaves and the convection of the heat of the massive flames swirled the layer into ever-tightening eddies. He queried his RIO for his opinion.

“Hey, Double-O, the cloud deck’s tightening up. I see fewer and fewer places to safely punch through.”

“Looks that way to me, too. I hope you studied up on the charts because you can see all the sharp rising terrain around us. The radar altimeter will be crucial when we penetrate the layer. It would make for a really short FAM flight if we tag any of these peaks.”

“FAM flight? You got to go on a FAM flight? When do I get to?” Val replied with a smile, but he was quickly silenced when new instructions from Papa came over the frequency. The CO wanted the next two aircraft to attack the north line, since the south line had become relatively quiet. Then all four aircraft would mop up what was left of either line if required. Papa added that they were to commence attack directly from the east, moving west with a run in of zero-niner-zero with a left-hand pullout. The pullout was switched to left

hand because of the terrain. This run would be a bit more risky than the first because both aircraft would now be on a direct collision course with the highest peak to the west, whose summit would be masked by the clouds once the jets were at the release altitude of their runs. Watchdog Tango added the safeguard of an earlier pullout, but that would mean high-g evasive maneuvering really close to the deck, which was little comfort to Val and his wingman, Dash 3, as they set up for their runs.

Val watched as Dash 3 rounded the westward turn in his orbit and called rolling in hot. He quickly faded from Val's sight just as Papa and Chappie burst through the cloud deck to Val's right. Val counted down a five-second interval, which would help ensure that debris from the previous bomb blast was clear by the time they were at the release altitude. When five seconds elapsed, Val looked at the reflection of his RIO in the right rearview mirror, took a deep breath, and very nonchalantly said over the ICS (intercom system), "Well, Double-O—it's time to get some."

"Ooo-rah, brother," was Nate's reply.

"Dash 4 rolling in hot," Val announced over frequency. He then moved the stick left and rolled his jet inverted and pulled gently aft on the stick until the nose was pointing straight at the clouds. The airspeed indicator's needle moved rapidly to the right, and the noise in the cockpit increased as the jet gained airspeed, building tremendous energy. The clouds that were once beneath them were closing at an incredible rate. He performed a half roll just before the nose of the jet touched the clouds so he'd be able to pull up quickly if he needed to. Instantly his entire field of vision turned into an opaque ghostly gray wall. The radome wasn't even visible now, as if a bed sheet had been wrapped around the canopy. Both his and Nate's eyes were glued to radar altimeter, which was showing that they were perilously close to the ground, but for some reason they still hadn't punched through the layer, which made them a little anxious. Just as suddenly as their visibility had vanished, the entire panorama limits of their vision flashed deep green as the ground and the peak ahead swallowed the horizon. Val caught a glimpse of the tops of trees rushing by in the outer reaches of his peripheral vision, exactly even to his own canopy. That meant that he hadn't broken out when and where he thought he would and that he was way too low! *Pull up, pull up!* his instincts screamed at him just as the jet scolded him with audible alarms. Without hesitation, Val yanked back hard on the stick as he dumped the jet into a left knife-edge bank and watched the earth fall swiftly away from him. Because it was in a bowl-like depression surrounded by high peaks, the target area offered poor accessibility for bombing with high-speed, fixed-wing aircraft. Slower aircraft would more effectively place the ordnance and deal with the surrounding terrain.

“Dash 4 in sight, very low. Pull up. You’re at a good altitude now. Make your drops forty meters farther west of Dash 3’s. You are cleared hot,” Watchdog Tango gave his instructions with the same monotone voice, absent of excitement or concern, so as not to cause the pilots of the jets to get too nervous, doubtful, or anxious.

Val was breathing heavily from his close encounter with mother Earth, but quickly returned his focus to the task at hand and continued flying toward the rising columns of smoke. He had his piper set where he wanted to release, then made a gentle dive and pickled off four bombs. He had to start his pullout almost immediately after release, and the first bomb exploded just as he rotated skyward.

“I have four away, Dash 4. That was a close one, Pal. Next run if needed on this line will have an even earlier pullout for better terrain clearance.” Watchdog Tango was a little shaken by the sight of his fellow Marines almost auguring in, but he made sure he never let his voice give it away.

Just as Val was about to hit the cloud deck on his climb-out, Dash 3 came on frequency. “Dash 4, be really careful—there’s one small area of sagging clouds in the layer, but it’s so small, you should either miss it or be through it quickly.”

“Dash 4 copies—thanks,” Val said sarcastically, looking back at Nate in his rearview mirror. He could practically see the same sarcastic smirk through Nate’s mask. “Dash 3’s never been accused of being punctual. I can already tell,” he said over the ICS.

Nate laughed. “First to go, last to know—that’s us.”

Watchdog Tango over flew both lines to see if additional runs were needed, and if it was quiet enough to send in the helicopters to extract the team on the ground. He began checking the south line first and could tell that there was still enemy activity on the eastern most part. Maybe the hostiles were just trying to slip away out of sight.

He conferred with Papa and decided that two west-to-east runs with a right-hand pullout should finish off the south lines, with Dash 1 and 2 each dropping their remaining six bombs. Val watched as Papa and Chappie swung around the eastbound turn of their orbits in front of the highest peak to the west. Then, established on an eastern heading, they plunged under the clouds. Dash 3 and 4 listened as Watchdog Tango instructed them on their adjustments, and the runs went flawlessly. Once again Papa and Chappie burst through the deck within minutes of their runs, and Watchdog Tango seemed to think that the south line had been completely destroyed. The north line seemed lifeless, so Watchdog Tango thought that now would be the best time for the helicopters to attempt the extraction after one more flyover to double-check.

Zippo 1, a flight of two UH-1 Hueys, had been orbiting low to the west, near the peak, awaiting Watchdog Tango's invitation to come in and get the team out.

"Zippo 1, Watchdog Tango."

"Go ahead Watchdog Tango, this is Zippo 1."

"Both lines seem to have been silenced. I contacted the platoon commander and he will release a smoke grenade at your landing zone. You should be outta here in minimal time. Go ahead and begin your descent."

"Roger. We're comin' through a small break about three clicks in front of the western peak. Have the platoon commander release his smoke when he has a visual on us."

"Wilco."

Zippo 1 descended quickly through the break and was under the clouds, heading east toward the grassy bald. When they were less than two miles from the bald, the platoon commander released the smoke, though he was still unsure that the enemy had retreated or was destroyed, and Zippo 1 instantly headed for it. When both helicopters were about fifteen feet above the ground, the platoon commander's suspicions were validated as the helicopters suddenly came under heavy machine gun fire from the north line. Zippo 1 had no choice but to pull out in order to save themselves from being shot down and stranded, just as the recon team was. "North line! North line! Shit! We're taking hits! We have to pull out! Are those fast movers still around? Get them down here now!" Zippo 1 yelled frantically over frequency.

"Affirmative! Affirmative! Get the hell outta there, Zippo 1!" Watchdog Tango barked back. Watchdog Tango had smartly positioned himself to the south to have a good visual on both lines if they were to start up again, so he quickly fired off a fan of Willie Petes that almost pinpointed the enemy's position. The high peak to the west prevented a run in from that direction, so any new runs had to come from the east. That presented a new problem in that the enemy had also moved farther west, knowing that it would be harder for the jets to pull out safely, much less begin a run on them. The terrain didn't allow for a long-enough run in from the south or north either. It was a real pickle. Watchdog Tango conferred with Papa once more to assess if such runs were too risky.

Papa quickly reminded Watchdog Tango, "We're Marines, dammit! This is our job! As long as those men down there need a hand and we can give it to 'em, they'll get whatever they want! Now give Dash 3 and 4 a goddamned mission to copy! When they run out of bombs, we'll switch to our guns and strafe 'em till we're Winchester!"

This run would be similar to the previous one Dash 3 and 4 had to make, except farther west. Both crews had a solid copy on what they needed to do, so they took a deep breath, knowing they had to really concentrate.

Dash 3 called rolling in hot and blasted through the clouds and performed the run without incident, but both crewmembers were breathing heavily and sweating profusely. Obviously the run was too close for comfort.

Val was instructed to wait until Dash 3 rejoined the orbit before making his run, and when 3 finally got back they muttered between deep breaths over frequency, “Watch out, Dash 4—don’t try to be a hero. If you can’t safely pull out, then what’s the point? You can high-five the trees on this run.”

“Roger,” Val responded. Under his breath he added, “No sagging clouds on this one?” Over the ICS he sighed and told Nate, “Ready to soil your drawers again, Double-O?”

“I’m wearin’ my best diapers. Let’s do it,” Nate said with a sigh.

“Dash 4 rolling in hot.” Val knew he was going in even farther west and closer to the mountain, as Watchdog Tango had said. This time as his vision was obscured once again, he was better prepared to take evasive action as he planted his feet on the rudder pedals and tightly grasped the throttles with his left hand and the stick in his right.

This time when he broke out, what met his eyes was worse than before as the thick black smoke billowing up from the previous runs almost completely hid the mountain. His vision flashed green to black, green to black, as he punched through plume after thick plume of heavy smoke, making his speed through the air frighteningly apparent to him.

Watchdog Tango was orbiting low to the northwest when something unusual caught his eye. The enemy was now running as a group out in the open toward the west, which wasn’t typical of the NVA. “Dash 4, make your drop about a hundred meters west of Dash 3’s. I have visual on the Gooners. They are in a large group heading west for a tree line at the base of the mountain...I guess. You are not in sight. I will duck out to the south. You are cleared hot.”

Val responded with a simple “Roger,” then flew blindly toward the west, his vision totally obscured by the thick black smoke. He broke out to see a large group of about a hundred men running west about a mile ahead, all appearing to be firing at the recon team’s position. It was unusual for Val to be able to actually see the human element of his targets. They were practically fish in a barrel, and he knew in the back of his mind that he would actually end their lives in a matter of seconds. Up until now, all he’d ever dropped bombs on were canvas targets during combat training. He’d never been on an actual combat sortie before, so all this was new and strange.

He also knew that late at night, when he was in his rack with nothing but his thoughts, he might have to deal with feelings he had not yet experienced in his lifetime.

Surprisingly, before he could close the distance, the men reached the tree line and were concealed by the foliage. The mountainside now loomed before him and it seemed like he'd have no choice but to pull out.

Watchdog Tango agreed. "Pull out, Dash 4! I'll set you up for another pass, plus I'll have their position marked. You're too close to the mountain." He was obviously disappointed by the thought that the enemy might escape.

Val was about to comply when something off to the right caught his eye. Just popping out of the north tree line were two light trucks, each with a .30mm machine gun on its roof, moving slowly south toward the recon team's position. As Val quickly gauged his distance from the western peak, he saw men on foot running east from their tree line toward the recon team. The enemy platoon wasn't retreating—rather they were flanking the team in an effort to drive them toward the trucks and toward annihilation. For their part, the trucks were trying to drive the team toward the enemy platoon.

Val realized that by the time he got turned around and set up for another pass, the team would easily be easily overrun, and all his fellow Marines would be dead! He wasn't about to let that happen. "Negative, Watchdog Tango. I've got to get those bastards now, and their trucks," he announced.

"What tru—" Watchdog Tango had to break hard right to avoid some tracers that raced by his canopy. "Shit! Where the hell were they hiding? Say intentions, Dash 4."

"Just remain to the southeast at five hundred feet or less. Clear the area, and stay out of my way. I'm gonna need a lot of room."

Papa overheard the conversation from his orbit but couldn't see what was going on, and he really hated not being able to see his Marines when he was leading them in combat. "Dash 4, Dash 1. I'm listening to this conversation, and I'm telling you now not to do anything stupid, like get yourself killed. I hate fucking paperwork. Get back up here and we'll figure something else out."

"Aye, sir—I promise I won't kill myself," Val said under the strain of g-forces as he pitched into a vertical climb. Just as his radome touched the clouds, he performed a half roll and, while in the clouds with his vision obscured, pulled back on the stick.

The rest of Rhino Flight looked to the west in time to see Val's jet barely break the cloud deck, only to dive right back into it in a tight, lenticular loop, all within the frame of a second and half. Val's jet then came blasting down the mountainside a mere five meters above the trees.

Val acquired a visual on the enemy platoon, which was still west of the recon team, and the closest truck, which was east of the recon team about a hundred meters in front and to the right of the second truck. The enemy platoon and the trucks had each now closed to within 150 meters of the recon team within the short time Val had begun his maneuver. He did some quick calculations and guesswork in his head and hoped for a touch of lady luck as he blasted down the mountain behind the enemy platoon. He waited a few split seconds, then pulled up as he released one rack, waited a microsecond until he was sure he had cleared the recon team, then released the second rack. The first three bombs slid in behind the enemy platoon, which was swallowed from behind in a vortex of fire. Two of the second group of three soared to the southeast and missed everything completely, but the third bomb landed fifty yards to the right of the lead truck and destroyed it. The second truck stopped dead in its tracks, the driver and gunner completely dazed from the blast of the three bombs. After a few seconds, the two men dizzily scanned the skies for the American jet responsible for their headaches, even as their entire bodies were still throbbing. The driver began to turn around and was going to drive back to the cover of the trees when his gunner spotted Val to the east.

Moments earlier the recon team's platoon commander had seen Val blasting down the mountainside toward the enemy platoon and his heart had stood still, thinking he was about to draw his last breath. After he heard the first explosion, he looked up in time to catch a glimpse of Val's Phantom streaking only a few hundred feet overhead and pickling off his second load. He realized then that he was still alive, but he couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed. He looked back to the east and spotted the second truck and Val's jet, and was even more shocked by what he saw next.

Val had pulled up, rolled inverted, and pulled back into a low altitude split-S, leveling off only two hundred feet above the ground. He didn't spot the other truck until his jet was greeted by clouds of tracers, like a swarm of angry fireflies, zipping by within mere inches of his canopy. "Big sky, little bullets. Right, Double-O?" Val said to Nate over the ICS as he switched to his gun, which had been pre-set before the flight to six thousand rounds per minute. Val put the truck, which was driving very intelligently at him head-on to present a smaller target, right in the center of the pipper. He squeezed the trigger and the 20mm M61A1 Gatling cannon growled as it spit rounds out of its muzzle. The rounds kicked up huge clumps of earth as they drew a straight line to the truck and then cut it in half, followed shortly by an explosion as some of the rounds sliced through the fuel tank. Val then looked up to see the peak rapidly filling up his view and yanked back hard on the stick and shoved the throttles to their full stops, stroking the burners, disappearing into the

layer above, blowing by his fellow Marines in their orbit at nine thousand feet.

Watchdog Tango was speechless. He'd just watched a fellow Marine pilot do something he'd almost written off as impossible, all to save fellow Marines on the ground. "God *damn!*" he said with excitement as he flew over the area to see if Zippo 1 could safely extract the recon team now. "That was the craziest thing I've ever seen, Dash 4!" He looked down to the recon team standing up and cheering in elation.

Papa heard the excitement and at first thought something bad had happened as he saw Val burst through the layer and up into the sky above the orbit. Val had overshot by five thousand feet by the time he got turned around and rejoined. "What happened? Everything okay? Dash 4? Watchdog Tango?" After a few seconds of silence he said, "Will somebody fucking talk to me and let me know something?"

"Everything's fine, Rhino 1. Everything's really fine. You got a steady stick there in Dash 4. That crazy jet jockey single-handedly wiped out a platoon of Gooners and two of their trucks. I don't think there are any more NVA around, but hang around if you can for a BDA. Zippo 1 is cleared for extraction."

"Roger, Zippo 1." The Hueys once again dropped into the clouds to extract the team.

In the orbit, Val's fellow Marine aviators just flew around in silence, occasionally glancing over at the newest additions to their squadron with amazement. After a few minutes, the silence was broken by Zippo 1 announcing their departure from the area. Then on frequency everyone heard, "Rhino Flight, Zippo 1."

Papa answered "Zippo 1, Rhino Flight."

"This is Blue Fox Actual"—the platoon commander of the recon team. "I'd like to personally thank the crew of that last jet. You saved our asses. Drinks are on me, Devil Dogs." In the background everyone could hear the rest of the platoon telling the story of them taking heavy fire, and then watching the enemy disappear in a wall of flames only a couple hundred yards away, looking up to see a jet pass low overhead and taking out one truck, then swinging around and blasting the other with its gun.

Papa felt pride well up within him. This meant he got some quality newbies, and he was thankful for them having the guts to finish their job in true unselfish Marine Corps fashion. For Val and Nate, getting thanks from their fellow Marines for just doing their job was the best reward.

"Rhino 1, Watchdog Tango with a BDA"—bomb damage assessment. "Four mortar batteries, five machine gun nests, and at least 250 KBAs"—killed by air. "I'm impressed by your fancy flat-hatting down here, Dash 4. You're gonna fit right in. I'll pass along a full report later."

“We’re about Winchester anyway. Thanks for the action today. It’s sure nice to go on a scramble when it’s for an important cause.” Papa smiled as he glanced over to his wingmen, especially when his eyes came across Val’s jet. “Rhino Flight, let’s go home.”

The Phantoms lined up in echelon right formation with Papa in the lead. As they got closer to base, Papa’s voice shattered the silence, “For the FNGs, guess what—you just had your FAM flight. You gotta admit, that was a helluva way to get your combat cherries popped. Great job! Welcome to VMFA-2—you boys can stay.”

2

THE BOYS ON THE FRONTIER

Ask any Marine aviator how they'd like being assigned to VMFA-2 and they'd say they would feel truly honored. After all, it was the most elite squadron in the entire Navy, if not the entire DOD. However, most would add, "As long as I'm not based at Linh Thu." Val and Nate had heard this sentiment many times before in their infant aviation careers, but they'd always dismissed it as scuttlebutt from someone who'd found out that they'd just bit off more than they could chew in terms of a career choice. However, after months of hearing so many stories about the mysterious base, they began to believe that some of them truly had merit, but at this stage of their careers; they both knew that they'd better take whatever assignment was handed them with a smile. It wouldn't be long before even they were on their way to finding out just how hard it is to smile at times in the most feared assignment in the whole of Southeast Asia.

Linh Thu. The name still sent shivers down the spine of men who'd served within her concertina wire fences in the past and gave the jitters to those presently stationed there. Just like the sword of Damocles, there seemed to be this looming fear that would be permanently ingrained into anyone who ever set foot there.

Originally intended to be a SATS (short airfield for tactical support) hot-pad, Linh Thu became a full-length base within a year of her inception and was the northernmost US base in Vietnam. Its very location put the people stationed there directly in harm's way. Located just five miles south of the 17th

parallel and twelve miles from the Laotian border, it was just moments away from the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Rocket and mortar attacks were a frequent occurrence at night, and occasionally enemy troops actually entered the base during these attacks, causing much havoc. Even flying in and out of Linh Thu was dangerous as it lay under the southernmost tip of the umbrella of North Vietnamese SAM coverage, as just seventy-five miles to the northeast was the North Vietnamese airbase of Dong Hoi, once abandoned but now a SAM staging area. Besides the danger of the SAMs and MiGs, the terrain around Linh Thu made departures to and approaches from the west treacherous as a sharp rising ridgeline covered thick with trees towered over the western horizon only three-quarters of a mile away.

Thick jungle blanketed the remainder of the land surrounding the base, which provided excellent cover for enemy forces to attack and withdraw. The jungles also brought all its tenants to visit the base—rats, bugs, venomous snakes, and all the various ailments and diseases that accompanied them, things people who never experienced such a climate didn't take into account. The few buildings that weren't canvas tent living quarters were unpainted wood construction, partially sunk into the ground to give them a lower profile in a rocket attack—or that was the theory. The buildings bore the scars of skirmishes with enemy forces—bullet and shrapnel holes hastily patched up with putty. Around the base was stretched concertina and chain-link fencing, machine gun nests, and mud roads. Linh Thu was linked to the rest of the outside world in only two ways: daily COD flights, and one dirt road that led to Dong Hoi, which was the city east of the North Vietnamese airbase of the same name. The gate to the road was heavily barricaded and was often the focus of the raids at night. There were only two runways at Linh Thu—10–28 and 13–31, both made out of a special earth-toned concrete that, when viewed from a distance, gave the appearance of a wide dirt road. Overall, Linh Thu mimicked a prison camp in appearance, providing an especially drab and dismal setting for its inhabitants. Being so far into hostile territory is how the base got her name of Linh Thu—loosely translate, “frontier guard.”

There were only two squadrons stationed within the concertina of Linh Thu—VMO-16 and VMFA-2. VMO-16 was a mixed bag of a squadron as far as the types of aircraft deployed. The predominant plane was the OV-10 Bronco, but there were three types of helicopters as well—UH-1s, AH-1s, and CH-46s. All VMO-16 pilots were trained to fly all four types of aircraft and rotated among them. The squadron performed a variety of missions—light attack, forward air control, reconnaissance, search and rescue, and insertion or extraction of troops.

Val and Nate were assigned to VMFA-2, a squadron famous throughout the DOD. They were nicknamed the “Playboys,” a name they’d had since WWI. VMFA-2 pilots often got in heated debates with another Marine Corps squadron—VMAQ-2, which flew A-6 and EA-6B aircraft. They argued about who actually used the Playboys moniker first.

VMFA-2 flew F-4J Phantom IIs. They were currently the only squadron of F-4s in the Department of the Navy equipped with fixed 20mm Gatling cannons, serving as a test squadron to prove that guns were still useful on supersonic jets. But F-8 Crusaders were already proving that as they were killing more MiGs with their guns than with missiles, which were still largely in the infancy of their development. So after long debates and miles of red-tape, the squadron was granted the chance to mount the gun and validate their claims.

VMFA-2’s missions were typically air-to-air superiority (air combat and interception), escort duty, medium to heavy attack, and close troop support. They were often asked for by name by the grunts because of their dedication to the mission and always putting the men on the ground ahead of themselves. Even Army units would request them, and all the ground troops knew that the Playboys were positioned way out in the forward areas and could assist quicker than other squadrons. The squadron was efficient and effective in an air combat role, with an outstanding record to back them up.

The squadron symbol was the rabbit’s head insignia of Hugh Hefner’s magazine of the same name superimposed on a lightning bolt. When Mr. Hefner first came out with his magazine in the 1950s, the squadron asked for his permission to use the symbol, to which he eagerly personally wrote his response, overflowing with enthusiasm for a squadron of Marines to use it. After all, servicemen were some of his most loyal subscribers.

The squadron had twenty-four aircraft, each with a pilot and RIO. Flight crews were on a rotation schedule, with four crews—eight men—would always be waiting in their flight gear in the “Shack,” the only air-conditioned building on the base. The Shack was on the northwest ramp, or the hot-pad, where the crews’ jets would always be fully fueled and waiting, and could be quickly armed with whatever ordnance a combat sortie require. They were known as Alert-5 crews because they’d be airborne within five minutes of a call, with priority over all other aircraft—including those on short final. Once a call came in, plane captains preflighted the aircraft and ordnance techs armed them, while linemen started the engines with start-carts and GPUs. All the flight crews had to do once briefed on the mission was to jump in the jet and go—just like the old saying, “Kick the tires and light the fires.” Alert-5s would be the immediate response to any situation and buy the time needed until other aircraft could be airborne to assist, if needed.

Alert-5 crews were on duty for twenty-four hours, then replaced by another group. The rest of the squadron was often heavily involved in Rolling Thunder strikes—pre-planned, on call, or target-of-opportunity missions deep into North Vietnam. VMFA-2 was the perfect squadron for the Rolling Thunder strikes because of its location at Linh Thu.

Another reason VMFA-2 was considered elite was because of its personnel, especially its highly decorated CO, Lieutenant Colonel Earl J. “Papa” Driskell, whose combat record alone commanded respect. In WWII, he was drafted into the Marine Corps at the age of seventeen because he lied about his age, out of a small town in southern Louisiana and flew the super-fast inverted gull-wing Vought F-4U Corsair fighter in the South Pacific. He ended the war with fourteen kills in the air, just one shy of triple ace, and had many more ground kills, eventually earning the Navy Cross. He continued flying for the Marine Corps and after several years found himself in Korea. He started out flying F-9 Panthers and ended the war flying the Navy version of the F-86 Sabre, the FJ-3 Fury. Once again he became a double ace, with twelve air-to-air kills and many more ground kills. Again he switched between flying off carriers and land bases, and again he earned Navy Flying Cross. Many who knew him strongly felt he should have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in both conflicts.

But that was just part of the reason he was so highly respected by subordinates, peers, and superiors alike. The main reason was how he carried himself, and his leadership style on and off the battlefield. Because he was a southern gentleman, he was laid back and easy-going, yet at the same time had certain expectations of each person under his command. He set a high example and expected everyone to do their part to help the squadron get the job done. On a more personal level, he was respected because he was a Marine who loved to fly high-performance aircraft. He led from the cockpit and not from behind a desk. He seized every chance to fly, and performed flawlessly every time—even under strenuous pressure. Passing up promotions to full colonel so he could keep flying earned him even more respect because it proved he wasn’t focused on his personal career, as most officers were, but rather on his squadron and the men under his command. Because of his style of leadership he became affectionately known by all who knew him as “Papa.”

Papa’s wingman and exec, Major William “Chappie” Chapman had known Driskell for many years. They’d been wingmen since their early days in Korea, and Chappie was an ace himself with seven air-to-air kills and numerous ground kills. Both he and Papa had flown off the same carrier or were stationed at the same ground base. They would always return from sorties as the only two unscarred jets if their squadron got in a tiff with the enemy, and that completely baffled everyone. It was as if they were being protected by an

unknown divine force. Chappie was ten years younger than Papa and had learned almost everything he knew about leadership and combat flying from him. As long as Papa remained on active duty, Chappie wanted to serve with him. But as Chappie's reputation of being just like Papa became more entrenched, most believed he'd simply replace his mentor as CO when he retired. This earned him another nickname among the men of Linh Thu—"PJ," short for "Papa Junior."

There was one other officer who made VMFA-2 the best of the best, and that was the CO of aircraft maintenance—and Papa's best friend in the whole world—Major John M. Darrell, better known as "Big John." He'd known Papa since junior high school back in Louisiana, and was drafted into the Marines at the same time, but John's eyesight kept him from being a pilot. John decided the next best thing would be to repair the aircraft and keep them combat ready. He quickly became the best mechanic wherever he was stationed; with his uncanny ability to troubleshoot any problem and his resourcefulness when repairing things with limited supplies or equipment. When the age of RIOs arrived in the late '60s, John applied for a lateral transfer, but was denied in favor of younger men and the fact that the conflict in Vietnam was escalating. The Navy felt that they might not have enough time to train him, plus they'd be losing the best mechanic in the entire Department of Defense. Papa tried to pull some strings for John, to no avail, and many believed it was political retaliation against Papa for turning down what might have eventually led to a chief of staff assignment at the Pentagon. The best Papa could do was guarantee that he and John would serve their entire careers in the same squadron. John and Papa had similar personalities, both laid back and loving to joke around. Whenever they got to drinking, they were the loudest guys around and could out-drink any of the young men under their command. They were fun drunks, and people liked to be in their company—just at a distance.

Val woke up in a furious sweat. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was 0400. He rolled on his back to stare at the sloped canvas ceiling above him that would ripple under a strong enough breeze. Val never slept well here, and he didn't know why. The heat and humidity didn't help much, but he knew that in time he could adjust to that. It was clearly something that eluded his comprehension. Most nights the same thing would happen; something would interrupt his slumber and he'd lie awake until reveille, then be tired the rest of his waking hours. He'd never been a light sleeper, but now the least disturbance would wake him up and take a long while to wear off until he could fade back to sleep.

As he stared at the canvas, he began to wonder if it would get worse as his tour of duty progressed, and he wondered if anyone else had the same problem. He'd only been over here a scant fifteen days now, so he hadn't asked

anyone yet—he wanted to give it at least a month before he did that. He felt that if it was affecting his performance, he'd address the problem immediately, but so far it wasn't showing.

It wasn't long before darkness gave way to the light of early dawn and it was time to get up and head to breakfast and then to the briefing room. Val, Nate, and their two wingmen on the past few sorties—RIO Jamie "Speedy" Sanders and pilot Frank "Notso" Wise—left their hooch and headed for the chow hall in the heavy morning air.

The chow hall was nothing more than a huge canvas tent the size of twenty hooches, and the dining area was a little larger, with see-through walls of mosquito netting, but it was the men's favorite place on base, after the pub. Every day presented new challenges on many different levels. One big problem was keeping rats and roaches away from your food. Both pests were fearless and would stay just out of arm's reach while you were cooking or eating, waiting for you to be distracted just long enough for them to make a pass at the food and dash away before you knew what happened. Life was stressful enough, but keeping pests at bay made it worse. Sometimes on slow days, the men would pass the time by betting on the pests in hot-tray races. The goal was to pick a captive roach or rat, whose owner had tied a colored thread to one of its legs, and place the critter on one of two metal trays that were slightly heated. The trays were placed side by side, and when the owners released their vermin, they would scurry across the tray in order to save their feet from being burned. The first critter across the tray won the race and its owner some money for the pub.

§ § § § § §

The four aviators sat down to their breakfast of packaged scrambled eggs and crumbly pancakes and wouldn't speak until they swallowed the first forkful, which often required the assistance of juice or coffee to wash it down.

"What the hell were you dreaming about last night, Speedy?" Val said with a laugh. "You were clutching your cot like it was Marilyn Monroe. Your pillow was sopping up a lot of slobber." Val paused as he tried to swallow his chow. "You know maintenance is on the way to the briefing. Maybe we'll stop in and get you a mop this morning."

Speedy returned the laugh. "Hey! How you'd know it was Marilyn?"

"I know about them all, my friend," Val replied.

"Even the Playmates too," Nate added, "though lately you haven't been calling their names out as much. 'Brandy...Brandy!'" Nate held out his arms and kissed the air.

Notso joined in with a laugh. "Well at least he's not calling out 'Randy! Randy!'"

They were all laughing now as they finished their breakfast, knowing that there'd be few chances to yuck it up before the morning briefing. They were a bit ahead of schedule and took their time walking to the briefing tent, which was near Papa's office and the ready room, where they stored their flight gear. They talked openly about previous sorties while they could, knowing they'd have to keep their opinions to themselves while in the company of higher ranking officers. The second most common topic of conversation was sex. There was little else to talk out in the middle of nowhere but work and sex.

"How about those trees we leveled last night?" Val asked.

"Not as nice as the ones we nailed the night before," Frank replied.

"I wouldn't say that. These were a bit taller," Nate added.

"Wonder what it will be next sortie," Speedy put in.

"I don't know, but I heard we got a teletype from the lumberjacks' union telling us to stop because we're putting a lot of 'em out of work," Val replied.

"I just got an earful about wood and nailing things, and something about something being taller. Are we still talking about work, or have we moved on to sex?" Notso asked.

"I'm not sure. I haven't been around a woman in too long to know the difference—and Nate and I haven't been over here as long as you guys," Val replied.

Their conversation concluded when they reached the briefing tent. All four just took a breath as they opened the door and stepped inside.

The briefing tent was about half the size of the chow hall kitchen, and every nook and cranny was occupied by something—equipment, maps, easels, books, chairs, and so on. Because the men were squeezed in like sardines, writing on a knee pad was so difficult that the briefing tent was known as the "Cannery." Papa knew that such conditions reduced attention spans, even when a briefing was about a serious topic like an air strike, so he made sure everything was laid out as plain and to the point as he could. This would keep questions to a minimum and shorten their time in the cramped quarters.

Luckily for the aircrews, there wasn't a sortie every night, but there was one more often than not. The sorties were getting more and more detailed and involved with every passing day. Early on they mostly involved escorting other aircraft, but more and more often the Playboys were actually making the strikes themselves, and that trend showed no signs of slowing. Escort sorties required four to six aircraft at most, but the Rolling Thunder strikes involved at least ten or more aircraft. Sometimes the call would come on a night that had no previously planned sortie, and half the squadron would find them following the Alert-5s out into the blackness of the Vietnamese night sky. Occasionally the squadron would actually be returning from a sortie and happen to fly over some enemy activity or target and would be authorized to attack,

though such cases were becoming more and more infrequent as authorization to attack targets of opportunity were rare—even though the target might have valid, even crucial, tactical or strategic value.

Val and Nate had only been on two Rolling Thunder strikes in their tour so far. Speedy and Notso had arrived in Linh Thu only a month and a half earlier, so they were still considered newbies, but they'd been on fourteen previous sorties. The enemy air defenses were intensifying with each strike, so returning with an aircraft unscathed was becoming a rarity. Val and Nate had had some very close brushes with SAMs on the two sorties they'd been on, and it was already making a firm impression on their minds. They thought of it as they tried to ingest the briefing being presented that morning.

Papa and Chappie always presented the briefings and always flew each sortie with their squadron. Chappie would give the basic rundown and Papa would fill in the details and accentuate all the really pertinent information that he wanted each man to know.

“Morning, gents. It's starting to warm up outside, so let's begin,” Chappie said as he pointed to the image on the screen at the front of the room. “Our target tonight is this small complex suspected to be a truck park and ammo depot that supplies several of the larger NVA forces in our immediate area. It was found by a high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft, and the location was confirmed yesterday morning by one of Linh Thu's OV-10s on a low sweep. The OV-10 met heavy resistance, so there's no reason for us not to expect the same tonight.” Chappie continued with the particulars of the briefing on times and directions to commence attack, ordnance used, what resistance to expect, lost com procedures, who'd be flying which sector, etc. Val and Nate noticed that the target was against a ridgeline, and they had flashbacks of their first sortie—except this one might be worse because it was at night and with anti-aircraft weapons—ack-ack. Both men wrote down everything they could while absorbing the images of the target and the sortie.

Papa finally took over the briefing but didn't have very much to add. He answered questions for the most part, and the men could tell he had a lot on his mind. Papa had a full plate, and envied him. Papa then sighed as he pulled a large envelope out of his briefcase on the table. This was the part of every briefing that he loathed. He pulled out some papers out of the envelope and had them passed around until every man had a copy. He sighed again as he said, “Gents, I hate this as much as you do, but it's just like a bad case of hemorrhoids—a constant pain in the ass that you can't ignore and even when you're done with one, there's a bunch more that just keep coming back.”

All the men laughed briefly, then focused their attention on the paper and began marking on them with the pencils Papa passed around. The papers were a test on the Rules of Engagement that had to be administered before every

sortie, and each man had to pass it with a perfect score. The test wasn't a challenge because the men knew that the answer that made the least sense or the answer that restrained the pilot the most would be the one the leadership back in Washington deemed correct. The first they had to take the test was the moment they knew that the leadership in Washington had no interest in winning the war. After all the steps set forth by the test were complied with in actual combat, it would be too late for a pilot to assist a fellow aviator or insure victory for himself in a one-on-one situation as the narrow window of opportunity would have already closed.

Papa scanned the room and saw his men shake their heads in disgust and disbelief, and he wore a sympathetic frown. It wasn't long before they all finished and passed the tests back up front. "You know the only freebie on this stupid thing is your name. Did anyone think they missed that one?" Papa smiled as he collected the last few tests. "You know, gents, I hate that you have to take these things, but I'm glad *when* you take them."

"What the hell for, sir?" Chappie asked.

"Well, they won't give us a damn fan in the Cannery, so the only time it gets cool is when y'all take this stupid test and you create a breeze when you shake your heads." The men laughed as Papa dismissed them, and they quickly filed out of the tiny briefing room into the hot mid-morning air.

§ § § § §

Val always wrote a letter to Virginia after the morning briefing, a ritual he religiously followed. She was probably the biggest reason he couldn't sleep well. He thought about her in every imaginable situation. He'd look at his watch several times a day, do the math to figure out what time it was back home, and wonder what she was doing. He pictured her going about daily business and hoped all was well. It often took him an hour or more to compose even a short letter to her because he wanted everything to be perfect. Letters from her were the highlight of his existence here on the other side of the world. He always asked for her to send pictures of herself, which he'd tape to the canvas wall next to his rack. The pictures anchored his sanity when things weren't right and were the biggest motivator to avoid getting killed. He always kept at least one picture on him at all times, and when he was writing her a letter he'd take a picture out and glance at it.

Val returned to his favorite place to write letters—a small patch between the headquarters and logistics buildings, the only place on base where grass grew. The buildings shaded it from the morning sun, and a slight breeze added to the effect. It was sheltered from the noise of the flight line by the buildings and was one of the quietest places on the base. Some of the men with time off would stretch out on a few lawn chairs that had been smuggled in and read,

drink a beer, or just sleep. Val sat in one of the chairs with his pen and paper and reached into his breast pocket for a picture of Virginia and another pen. He always had a spare in case the first one had dried up. Val clipped the picture to the paper and began to daydream a bit as he stared at it. She was truly beautiful, photogenic woman—tall and lean with long, flowing dark brown hair that faded to light brown at the very tips. She had large dark eyes and dark skin, and had a glowing smile that you noticed almost immediately. Val looked at her picture, then looked at his surroundings, took a deep breath, and began to write.

§ § § § § §

Dearest Virginia,

I know I write to you every day, but it seems like an eternity to me between the letters. I hope you never get tired of me writing because it's the highlight of my existence down here. It's funny how I always took it for granted whenever I received mail back home, but down here it's really the only thing that keeps me sane. I've only been here two weeks now, and it already seems old to me. I'm flying on average once every other day, and once every other day fear chips away a small part of me. I've never known such a deep primal fear existed as what I felt on my last sortie, I can't imagine anyone ever getting used to it. I guess the only thing that balances it out is that some sorties are uneventful. Enough of this. I don't want to upset you with my day to day worries.

I hope you're doing well. I know that some of my letters are longer, better, and healthier sounding, but I just try to write something. I need to write you every day. You already know about how I like the people I work with down here, so tell me more about the people you work with on your new job. You said you were the only woman in that entire region, and that your boss was pleasantly surprised with your fierce hunger for your job that made you outperform everyone else last quarter. That's my girl! You're going to own the place soon! I guess I'm just rambling because I'm at loss for topics to write about since I haven't received a letter in a few days.

I'll just let you know as I always do how much I love and miss you. You're my life, you're why I live and breathe. Many people tell their spouses that their lives would be much easier down here if they didn't have someone so important back home to distract them from their duties, but I totally disagree. It's because I love you so much and think of you so often that it I'm inspired to do my job the best I can, and gives me the courage to fight through that primal fear so I get home and back into your arms. I think of you so much. Just simple things: what you're doing, how you're feeling, just in general hoping things are going good for you. Even if you're having a bad day, just remember there's someone down here who's always thinking of you

and forever will be loving you. I think of other simple things that I miss, such as your voice, the smell of your hair and perfume, your smile, your laugh, your incredible hug.

God I miss you. I'd better just sign off because I'm just rambling. I love you so much.

Love, Val

PS: The guys are extremely jealous of me when they saw the pictures of you. You've got a lot of new fans down here at camp. Please send more pictures, I always keep a couple of them on me at all times, so you'll always be close to my heart.

Val finished the letter and dropped it at the post office on his way back to his hooch. He needed to study up for tonight's sortie, so he and Nate went to the chow hall to compare notes. It wasn't long before Speedy and Notso joined them, and all four were studying. They liked studying together because when they felt they understood the mission they took some time to joke around. Free time was scarce, and the day always ate it quickly.

Before they could wonder where the day went, it was already sunset and time to prepare for the sortie. The ready room was silent as people strapped on their gear. Val was amazed at how much gear each man carried—almost ninety pounds of it. Every time they got together to inventory their gear and try to decide what to leave behind, they found themselves unwilling to sacrifice a single item in the name of comfort. Occasionally they would discard an item, but on hearing scuttlebutt about how some aviator used that very item to save their life, they'd find themselves burrowing through their locker or digging through the trash to recover it. There was an old adage that if you were comfortable in your gear, you either neglected to put in on right or you left something behind. Once the men got a last-minute briefing, they waddled out the door to the awaiting pickup truck that took them to their jet.

The night air was thick and heavy as it always seemed to be in Vietnam, whether day or night, but the night air was slightly cooler and was often stirred by a light breeze. Val and Nate started their preflight at the cockpit ladders and went opposite directions around the jet until they met at the right wing, where they would exchange discrepancies and have each other verify them. Along the way they pulled pins off bombs, and anything else they needed to do to prepare their jet for duty.

As Val met Nate at the right wing, he asked, "Got anything?"

Sometimes Nate would sigh, as if he wished he did find something. But tonight he just said, "Nope—she's ready to fly."

"All right—let's do it," Val replied as he and Nate locked hands with a firm grip at chest level. That was their way of letting each other know that they

wouldn't let each other down. If they had a disagreement earlier that day, it was all forgiven and forgotten now; if one of them was feeling down, it had to be set aside for later. They had a job to do now, and they owed it to each other to be at their peak.

They walked around the nose to their ladders and climbed into the cockpits. Engine start and run-up were routine to them now, but they would never get complacent as they performed their BITs and checklists. Val looked up in one of the mirrors as he locked the ICS into "hot mike" and checked in with his RIO. "You up back there?"

"Five by five," Nate replied as he gave a thumbs up to his pilot.

They completed their checklists and had a minute to relax as they waited for Papa to ask for check-in. It was never very long as they listened over frequency for Papa's voice to come on, which meant it time to begin the mission.

"All flights check in," Papa called out.

"Dash 1's up," Chappie replied.

"Dash 3."

"Dash 4's up."

"Dash 5," Notso called out.

"Dash 6," Val called out.

After Val checked in, Papa called ground control to announce that Bunny Flight was taxiing out from the jet ramp to runway 31. As Papa throttled up and moved away, the rest of Bunny Flight followed close behind. As usual, they'd be departing in sections of two. Linh Thu was extremely dark at night. The surrounding jungle and ridgeline devoured all available light, and in the moonless sky only stars twinkled.

The pale glow from the instruments was almost immediately absorbed by the black veil of night just beyond the thick glass of the canopy. It was even darker for the RIOs, whose smaller canopy severely limited outside visibility. The aircraft were forbidden to use their taxi lights at Linh Thu. They were on only in emergencies, when an aircraft really needed them. It was actually the responsibility of follow-me trucks to lead aircraft down taxiways to the runway, or off runways to the ramp. Runway lights were only on when an aircraft was on approach or on its takeoff run or initial landing roll-out.

Once an aircraft rotated, the lights were turned off, and once an aircraft on landing roll-out had slowed down to just above taxi speed, the lights were extinguished, and it was up to the pilot to follow all markings with his landing and/or taxi lights until the follow-me truck intercepted them and led them to the ramp. Once they were intercepted, all exterior lights on the aircraft were extinguished, and they followed the dim row of lights in the bed of the follow-me truck, which contained a centerline hash the pilot lined up on. The light bar also told the pilot how far he was from the truck, and his speed on the taxi-

way. The reason for all this, in theory, was to make the base a more difficult target for mortar or rocket attacks from surrounding enemy territory. Whether it actually helped was open to debate. As the Marine pilots who'd served a tour on an aircraft carrier would tell the others, there'd been more available light on the carrier's flight deck than at Linh Thu.

It wasn't long before Bunny Flight was lining up and departing from the darkness of Linh Thu into the darkness of the night sky. The view outside the canopy remained unchanged; it was a steady veil of black until they were at a high enough altitude to make out the faint glow of Dong Hoi and Hanoi to the north and Saigon to the south, and that was if the sky was clear enough. It made each flight crew member settle into his cockpit even more, glad to be in a cramped space gently bathed in the glow of the instruments rather than outside in the black unknown. Rolling Thunder strikes were flown into designated route packs that were divided between the Air Force and the Navy. North Vietnam was divided into six route packs, with Route Pack II, III, IV, and VI-Bravo designated to the Navy and the others designated to the Air Force. It drove the flight crews from all three tactical air support branches crazy because they had to get permission to operate in another's route pack. At times it seemed as if there were more than one enemy—the Communists, and people from other branches of the US Armed Forces. Even if there was a valuable tactical target of opportunity in plain view, it couldn't be attacked in another branch's route pack without going through miles of red tape that often allowed the enemy to escape. These nightly strikes seemed meaningless to the crews as they attacked seemingly worthless targets while risking being shot down and captured or killed.

As Bunny Flight neared the target, Papa's voice came over frequency. "Okay, fellas, let's green 'em up." This referred to the light that indicated when the racks were armed and ready for release. If there were any mechanical problems, the troubled bird and his wing would then break formation and RTB. Soon TOT, time on target, had passed and Papa led his flight into their runs. Val saw him and Chappie break off and dive at a small hut illuminated by one pale light and appeared to have a small truck parked nearby, maybe twenty meters away.

Inside the hut, two men slept while another ate, completely unaware of what was poised to strike from the darkness above. The man barely got some rice to his mouth when he heard a whistling rustle from outside, causing him to drop his chopsticks and pick up his rifle. By the time he got to the door to take a peek, the sky seemed to fall on his hut as a deafening bang filled his ears. The world seemed to coming to a violent end as the hut collapsed around him. Somehow managing to make his way outside, he felt the ground shake violently again as another deafening roar rumbled from the south, just outside

where his hut once stood. Soon he felt a pounding compression sweep around him and through his body from the shockwave of the blast, which pushed the truck five meters from where it had been parked. In great pain, he then heard a piercing whine and swish of air from above, and he looked up in time to see two bright purple cones of flame shooting out from a jet now illuminated by those flames. Then the thundering boom of another bomb landed even closer, spraying him with flying chunks of earth. He knew he had to get as far away as he could, but it was almost impossible to think. He tried to tell his legs to move, but they were sluggish. Each blast seemed to either be closer or originate from where he was trying to run in. Flames were raging in almost every direction, and it was getting harder to breathe as they sucked up all the available oxygen.

The target area was now clearly illuminated from the previous runs as Dash 3 and 4 began theirs. Val questioned in his own mind why such an insignificant target needed to be struck in the first place, much less by six heavily loaded F-4s, when an attack helicopter or an OV-10 could have easily done the job, but he knew it wasn't his job to question, just follow orders. Just as Dash 4 pulled up, Frank began his run with Val ten seconds in trail—"batting cleanup," as was his designation for being the last jet on a run. Val pushed his stick forward as Nate counted down altitude over the ICS. The flames were now so bright that Val had to switch to his red visor, and he still couldn't make out exactly what he was supposed to hit. The hut and the truck were no longer discernible, so Val picked out a spot in the middle of the flames that wasn't on fire yet and set his pipper on it. Nate soon announced that they were at release altitude and Val pickled off two racks and pulled up. The bright inferno gave way to the pitch black of the night sky as the nose of his jet pitched up into a climb. The target had not only been destroyed, but completely erased.

Moments earlier in the raging inferno below, the man realized he was hopelessly trapped. Feeling helpless and terrified, he struggled to breathe and keep away from the terrible heat. Filled with anger and a desire for vengeance, he realized his clothes were on fire and the skin beneath them was beginning to melt. In a final act of desperation, he rolled over onto his back and faced the sky, which was a tiny black wall at the end of a tunnel of fire. He grasped the AK-47 at his side that he'd dropped and nearly emptied the magazine at the black wall that was rapidly being swallowed in an orange haze. When he got to the last round, he stuck the muzzle to his chin and squeezed the trigger one final time.

As Bunny Flight climbed out to leave the area, each man gave one last look groundward to validate in their own minds if it was worth it. All of them were glad that they'd met no resistance on this flight. It made up for the ones that had aged them a bit from fright. Each looked toward Papa as he gave the order

to RTB. Each man was looking forward to an early night, knowing that it was indeed rare to have it this easy. Papa asked all wings to check in and give him a damage report, and each crew replied that there was none. This always seemed abnormal to Papa. When things went too smoothly, he was left with the uneasy feeling that it would catch up with them on the next mission.

“Glad to hear it, fellas, but I always feel bad when absolutely nothing goes wrong.” Papa then looked over to Val’s jet and said, “For you FNGs, you’d better not get too used to this. Anytime we go on these types of sorties, it’s usually some big cluster that ends in near disaster—always really fucking nerve-racking.”

“Roger, sir. Guess we may be your new good luck charms, sir,” Val replied.

“Great—you just fucked us now!” Papa returned sarcastically.

As soon as Papa unkeyed his mike, instructions came over from Panama that they’d just received a distress message from an A-6 shot down over Quan Lang. The crew had stayed with their wounded bird as long as they could but had eventually bailed out east of Vinh. They needed cover and their position pinpointed until the rescue helicopter arrived.

“See what I mean?” Papa sighed, then announced to Panama that Bunny Flight would assist after he got fuel status checks from his pilots. That done, each plane followed his lead as they turned northeast toward Vinh. Each jet was still armed with four 500-pounders each plus their guns, so they should have plenty of ordnance to provide cover for the downed flight crew and the rescue chopper. Papa knew in the back of his mind that if the crew landed close to the city, his flight could see heavy fire from ground defenses. The crews knew this had the potential to be an extremely dangerous recovery since Vinh had recently been identified as a SAM site, and that the surrounding area was mostly flat, open terrain. Flight crews liked having the natural cover of ridgelines and mountains to protect them from being tracked by SAM sites. But their primary concern was the recovery of the flight crew. They hoped that if they ever found themselves in the same situation, other crews take risks to help them.

Papa and the rest of Bunny Flight followed their DF equipment until they were in the area of the signal. The only rescue aircraft in the vicinity was King 02, an SA-16 Albatross amphibious aircraft circling off the coast, but he was too far away and unable to assist in this type of rescue, where a helicopter was needed, but he was able to provide some information since he was the first to pick up the Mayday call from the downed A-6.

“King 2, this is Bunny Flight 1, over,” Papa called as he initiated contact.

“Bunny Flight 1, King 2.”

“I’m leading a flight of six Fox-4s with four 500-pounders each and twenty mike-mike. We’re overhead the downed flight crew with thirty-five minutes

of playtime and will provide cover until recovery team arrives. Have not made contact with crew.”

“Roger Bunny Flight 1. I have lost all contact with the crew twenty minutes ago, and do not know their condition. They should be monitoring guard. Their call-sign is Rattler 4. Chariot 1 is the recovery team and is inbound with ETA of twenty-five minutes.”

“Roger. We’ll orbit at angels niner so we can monitor all frequencies and will try to reestablish contact. Bunny Flight, throttle back to save fuel and descend to a right-hand orbit at angels niner.”

Papa descended his flight to orbit at nine thousand AGL, then reached out for the downed crew on guard channel. “Rattler 4, do you copy Bunny Flight?”

An eerie silence mixed with the static was all they heard before Papa tried again. All the Bunny Flight crews were nervous, fearing the men may have turned their radios down for fear of being detected by nearby enemy patrols.

“Rattler 4, do you copy Bunny Flight, over?”

Again silence intermixed with static dominated the frequency for a couple of moments until finally a voice crackled over the static. “Bunny Flight, this is Rattler 4 Bravo”—which meant it was the bombardier. He’d heard the whine of jet engines above him, but couldn’t see them in the blackness above.

“Say your status.”

“I’m a bit banged up and have a sprained, maybe broken ankle, but otherwise I’m okay.”

“Roger. Do you know the status of Alpha?” Alpha was the A-6 pilot.

“Affirmative. He landed about two hundred meters from me, but I’m beside him now. He’s coughing up blood and is having difficulty breathing. We’re taking cover behind an embankment at the southeast corner of a rice paddy in the elephant grass.”

“Roger. Help is on the way and should arrive in twenty minutes. Lay low and report any problems to us. We’re here to protect you fellas till you’re recovered and headed home.”

“Wilco.” The bombardier looked at his watch and sat next to his pilot, trying to do whatever he could to comfort him. “Relax, Taylor. We got cover above and our ride out should be here in twenty minutes.” Whenever his pilot violently heaved and coughed, he helped him sit up and tapped him on the back to help him cough up the blood that was slowly drowning him. “Stay with me—we’re gonna be outta here soon.”

Ten minutes passed uneventfully. The bombardier looked toward the vast, empty blackness above where his protectors could be heard, but not seen, then stretched aching muscles that had taken a heavy jarring during the ejection sequence. As he stretched his neck out, his eyes rested on something that

made his heart briefly stop. Several dark shapes, human in size, were closing in on them from the west. They appeared to be about two hundred and fifty meters away. He squinted to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing as he grabbed his .38 caliber pistol and also grabbed his pilot's pistol and tucked it into a fold in his G-harness. He grabbed the radio and quietly spoke, "Bunny Flight, Rattler 4."

"Rattler 4, this is Bunny Flight."

"We've got a problem."

Papa knew this could only be urgent. "Go ahead."

"There appears to be a platoon of Charlie closing in approximately two hundred and fifty meters west of our position. Can you assist?"

"Consider it done," Papa replied, knowing that it could be trouble since they couldn't see the downed flight crew or the enemy platoon. It was just black everywhere—in the air, on the ground, out to sea. It was as close to flying inside of nothing as was possible.

Papa faced a dilemma because he risked giving away the position of the downed crew to the enemy platoon if his flight didn't eliminate them within the first couple of passes, and at only two hundred and fifty meters away the platoon could easily close the distance and kill the downed men before other passes could be set up. The platoon could also shoot down the rescue team if they were still around after a few runs. After a couple of seconds, Papa spoke. "Chappie, I want you fly a low pass from east to west about two hundred feet off the deck. Fire your gun once you think you're past our boys down there and see if you can draw some ground fire. I'll be close behind. The rest of you line up for sequential runs and note where you saw the muzzle flashes. I'm gonna drop one rack on 'em to make a barrier between them and our boys. We can finish 'em off with either our guns or our bombs, whatever it takes. Any questions?"

A resounding "No sir!" was the reply from the rest of Bunny Flight as they prepared to carry out Papa's orders. All the RIOs looked into the blackness below as Chappie set up for his strafing run.

"Dash 2's rolling in hot," Chappie announced as he dove toward the deck with his RIO calling out altitudes on the radar altimeter. Papa lagged behind eight seconds in trail, but remained at a higher altitude so he could hopefully see the muzzle flashes and would have a better angle to release his bombs.

Chappie leveled off when his RIO announced that they were at two hundred AGL. When he thought he was above the downed Americans, he blindly opened fire with his cannon. The 20mm Gatling cannon, with its exploding rounds, was more feared by the North Vietnamese than any other weapon in the entire US arsenal. It was so feared it was often referred to as "blinking death," and it was certainly no exception this time as the enemy platoon

looked up to see a twinkling light in the sky and see tracers zip all around them, shredding the ground and sending small pieces of shrapnel flying. The entire platoon dropped to their bellies and tried to hug the ground until they heard the jet pass overhead. The older, more experienced soldiers were disciplined enough to stay still even after the jet passed, knowing there was always at least one more not far behind or coming from another direction. A few of the younger ones among them instantly jumped to their feet and fired their rifles in the direction of the roar of jet engines until their platoon leader scolded at them, but it was too late.

Papa had been watching as he began his dive, and the instant the troops fired, he knew exactly where they were. The other Bunny Flight crews instantly locked onto the muzzle flashes below and made a mental note of the location. Papa's plan had worked.

As Papa was in his dive, he gave the order for all aircraft to release at least one rack into the vicinity of the muzzle flashes, knowing the platoon would now either be in full retreat or moving to another position to attempt to get at the Americans on the ground. The bombs had enough power and range to easily compensate for any distance in any direction the platoon could possibly cover on foot. He released his first rack about five hundred feet AGL and began his pullout. The explosion completely whited out the next pilot's vision for a brief moment, but soon the surrounding terrain was exposed. Even the Americans' position was bathed in firelight after the third run from Bunny Flight.

It wasn't much longer before Chariot 1 checked on and was easily led to the downed crew's position with all the readily available light from the bombs. Chariot 1 was a single UH-1 covered by two AH-1 Cobras. During the rescue operation, Bunny Flight went back up to nine thousand feet and orbited with less than ten minutes worth of fuel to spare before they had to RTB. It wasn't much longer before Chariot 1 announced that they had recovered both men and were also returning to base.

Papa and his flight listened to the entire operation from above and breathed a sigh of relief when they heard from Chariot 1. Papa promptly ordered Bunny Flight to RTB and climb to angels eighteen for better fuel economy.

The fires from their bombs, to the southeast of Vinh, caught the attention of the CO of a SAM site, who happened to be outside smoking a cigarette when he heard and saw the explosions. He ran down and told his radar operator to turn on his Fan Song radar, knowing Americans were close by. The sleepy radar operator reluctantly turned on his radar and was pleasantly surprised when he immediately got several strong returns from Bunny Flight, who were still in their climb-out. The operator locked onto the strongest return and the commanding officer gave the order to launch.

Bunny Flight was near level-out when the audible alarm of the enemy missile warning rang in their ears, making every man's heart skip a beat. RIOs immediately scanned their scopes and pilots immediately began searching outside for visual clues. Val and Notso were looking groundward when the bright orange flame signaling a launch flared up at seven o'clock. It was immediately followed by another.

"Tally ho! Seven o'clock low! We've got a pair of SA-2s lifting off. Appears to be heading our way!" Val announced over frequency.

"Everyone spread out in loose deuce formation, make it approximately seventy-five meters between each jet," Papa ordered. He knew that SA-2s were often confused when aircraft flew this formation, usually passing between the planes, but the North Vietnamese would counter this by launching two or more missiles in succession. Papa also knew the missiles could be beaten by making a hard turn as the missile closed in, but the key was having a visual on the missile and keeping it in sight.

The missiles arced toward the closest pair of jets—Val and Notso. "Looks like we're the lucky ones, Notso!" Val said as he saw the missiles turning toward him. "I guess you can relax now, Papa, because it looks like you're gonna have your typical sortie glitch!"

As soon as Papa realized who the missiles were locked on, he ordered the rest of Bunny Flight to get down low and head to Linh Thu as fast as safe fuel consumption would allow. He stayed behind and lagged well below and behind Val and Notso in order to help them know where the missiles were. Val and Notso, meanwhile, began a shallow dive to the right to see if the missiles followed their general flight path, which would indicate they had a positive lock on the American jets.

Both pilots focused on the bright flame from the rocket engines to see that the missiles were indeed mimicking their flight path, tracking them both. The missiles were about a half mile apart from one another as they continued streaking toward the jets.

"First missile is now about four miles away, closing fast," Nate announced.

"Second missile is about four-and-a-half away," Speedy announced.

"Should we split up?" Val asked Notso.

"I don't know," Notso admitted, knowing that he and Speedy had only been over here two months longer than Val and Nate, and this was the first time his plane had ever been acquired by a SAM.

"Negative. Spread your formation out about ten meters more," Papa ordered. His voice was comforting counsel for both crews. "Now listen to me, gents. What I'm about to say will defy all your instincts to survive, but it will work, understand?" Papa reassured his newest aviators. "I've got both of you and the missiles in sight, so listen to me."

“Aye, sir,” was the unanimous response from both pilots.

“Stay where you are. The first missile should pass between you. After it does, wait for my command and break in opposite directions. Then listen for my instructions for the second one, which will be only seconds behind, got it?”

“Yes sir.” Again both pilots responded with nervous breaths.

Within seconds, the first missile was looming in both pilots’ eyes, filling up their field of vision as it drew closer, streaking at them from below and behind, testing the nerve of each pilot to remain basically motionless.

“Here it comes, gents. Stay still.”

Val and Nate looked outside to catch a brief glimpse of light zip between them and continue skyward, closer to Val’s jet.

“Break now!” Papa ordered.

Both pilots responded immediately as Notso broke left and Val broke right. The second missile was now closing on Val’s jet and was only seconds behind.

“Dash 6, reverse your turn and then immediately break back right in a steep diving turn!” Papa coached from Val’s four o’clock.

Val responded and reversed into a sharp climbing left turn, as soon as he was in the left knife-edge, he rolled back to the right into an incredible energy building diving right break. The missile exploded just as Val was established in the right break, a mere seventy meters away. Both Val’s and Nate’s vision were still partially grayed out as the missile exploded, and its shockwaves buffeted Val’s jet and almost forced it into departure as it began an accelerated stall. Val recovered his jet before it got any farther into departure, and his vision started to clear as he rolled wings level. He looked straight up in time to see the first missile explode high in the atmosphere.

“Excellent job, fellas! Are you okay?” Papa’s voice was drenched in elation.

“Yes sir,” Val and Notso responded.

“All right. Let’s not hang around long enough to become targets for another launch. Let’s get down to some cover and head home.” Papa knew they were approaching the protective ridge lines of the west and would soon be out of the SAM site’s range.

“Aye, sir, and thank you,” Val said.

“What are you thanking me for?” Papa asked.

“For saving our asses, sir,” Val answered.

“Don’t thank me now—we’re not home yet. You can thank me at the pub after debrief.”

Val moved his stick forward and left so he could follow Papa and Notso back to Linh Thu, but his jet didn’t respond as quickly as it normally did. Val

tested it again by trying some gentle Dutch rolls, but the jet was extremely sluggish, and the stick required more and more effort to move it. Val's eyes immediately went to his hydraulic pressure gauges. The needles were dropping rapidly and soon a warning light illuminated on the panel. Val looked at the DME to see that they were still twenty DME from Linh Thu. When the last missile exploded, some of its shrapnel had apparently severed a line or punctured a reservoir. He drew a deep breath and reluctantly keyed up on frequency. "Papa, this is Dash 6. We have another problem."

"Go ahead, Dash 6."

"Apparently that missile got us after all. My instruments indicate I'm losing hydraulic fluid and my flight controls are sluggish."

"Roger—I'll have a look." Papa said as he rolled under Val's jet. As he pulled up close to the wounded jet, some drops of the red-dyed fluid splattered on his canopy. He could barely make out what appeared to be steady streams of fluid venting out from a few places in the fuselage and wings. "That's affirm, Dash 6. You have fluid spraying from several places in your wings and fuselage. We'd better get you on the ground quick. Lower you landing gear and tailhook now while you still can."

Val lowered the gear and tailhook and began mentally preparing himself for the challenge ahead. He'd only faced one real emergency before—the time he'd flamed out and had to dead stick onto a carrier at night during a thunderstorm with severe crosswinds and huge waves that rocked the ship. He knew that this time would be no less challenging. Although he still had his engines, he faced the possibility of complete failure of his flight controls and brakes, which would require that he and Nate do the one thing every aviator feared more than combat or landing on a carrier at night—eject from his aircraft.

Papa made the mayday call to Linh Thu tower, and fire equipment was now standing by runway 13 at various spots. The winds were light and variable so shouldn't be a factor, and the tower had the arresting gear locked into position should it be needed.

Val was flying hot as he turned an eight-mile final and the tower informed him, "Bunny 6, Linh Thu Tower, wind calm, runway one-three cleared to land, check gear down."

Val keyed up his response, "Bunny 6 cleared to land, three down and locked." The flight controls were extremely heavy now and inputs took a lot of physical force. The jet was even slower to react to commands from Val, so he had to stay several seconds ahead of the aircraft to anticipate where he wanted it to be whether than where it was now.

As he continued the approach, his muscles were starting to fatigue from the effort required to operate the controls, and he was drenched in sweat. The wings were now rocking, refusing to remain level for longer than a couple of

seconds. Val kept the throttles at higher than normal settings in order to keep the plane airborne and hold the pitch and glide path steady. There was no chance for a go-around on this approach—it was either land or eject.

As he approached five miles, Val made sure as best he could that he was on centerline, for he had limited rudder control and most of his efforts and concentration was on controlling his roll and pitch. At two miles his airspeed and sink rate was faster than he wanted it to be, so he added a bit more throttle to bring the nose up and slow the descent rate. Adding power also seemed to stabilize the aircraft a bit more, but Val knew that any aircraft was more stable at higher airspeeds, so he didn't want to give up too much power until he was practically at touchdown. As he passed two miles, the oscillations of the wings had gotten bad enough that the jet sometimes banked as much as ten degrees, but Val knew if he tried to fight it too much he'd only make it worse. His jet was designed for neutral dynamic stability, so he could only contain the rolling slightly without the aid of having full flight control capabilities. Val planned to reserve his attempt to fully contain the rolling until just above touchdown, as he also knew his muscles didn't have the stamina to keep up this far out.

"Double-O, keep your hand on the ejection handle. I may not be able to keep up with this if her stability worsens," Val said.

"Just say the word, brother," Nate replied as he pulled his visor down in preparation for an ejection. He then reached down between his legs and grabbed the ejection handle, making sure he didn't grasp it too tightly in case a sudden jolt forced his arms up and caused an ejection when Val wasn't ready for it.

"Bunny 6, idle and boards," Val announced over frequency, his voice obviously strained as he quickly put both hands on the stick.

At three-quarters of a mile, he chopped the throttles back for a rapid descent at the numbers, knowing his jet, which was designed for carrier operations, could handle the jolt of a hard landing. He was able to contain most of the rolling, but some of it was too rapid for him or the flight controls to react to in time. The jet continued its rapid descent toward the runway, with the ground now rushing up at him. He knew the jet's airspeed was much higher than it should be at this juncture, and he hoped he wouldn't overshoot or float. The F-4 usually decelerated quickly at idle thrust, so there was also the fear that it would slow too quickly and stall. Val knew at this point that adding power might cause him to totally lose control. His strength was fading fast as he strained to keep his jet under relatively positive control, but he knew that relaxing his burning muscles wasn't an option. He'd have to endure the discomfort until the jet came to rest or until he and Nate were forced to punch out. With the runway now bathed in landing lights, Val buried the stick into

his chest in an attempt to get his jet to round out and flare as it continued to roll.

When the jet was ten feet off the ground, it stalled, dropped, and slammed hard onto the runway in a steep nose-high attitude. Val kept the stick against his chest as the jet bounced off the ground and began porpoising down the runway, but rising lower with each bounce. The jolts from each bounce pounded the crew's bodies, even forcing Nate's hands off the ejection handle a couple of times. The jet completed its final bounce, then rolled swiftly down the runway with the tail-hook sliding along in a spectacular shower of sparks until it snagged the third cable, slamming the giant fighter to an abrupt stop.

Val, his harnesses tugging on his upper torso, looked up to see the glow of the instrument panel mere inches from his face. He then rose up in his seat, shut the engines down, and opened his canopy as he keyed up, "Bunny 6, boots on the boards, snag number three." He then queried Nate of his status and both men finally relaxed as they awaited the rescue crews and the tug to take them back to the northwest ramp.

It was a long, slow ride to the northwest ramp as the tug strained to pull the massive fighter across most of the airfield. Val and Nate didn't seem to mind as they tried to relax and savor in the moment, knowing that a slow, stress-free ride like this was a rare thing. The tug pulled the jet up to its parking space on the northwest ramp, which was in line with other F-4s, all parked behind a barricade of sandbags. Val and Nate were just climbing out of their wounded bird when they heard Papa's distinct voice as he walked toward them shouting, "Jordan! Robinson!"

They turned to see their tall, slender CO, hands on his hips, his gray hair matted with sweat and his ice-blue eyes showing just a hint of concern. Papa smiled and said, "You boys have had a helluva first few weeks. Big John is gonna talk to you for a bit, then you fellas head to debrief." His smile widened as he added, "Then we'll go to the waterin' hole for a coupla cold ones on me! Course you know they're not actually cold. The only thing cold around here's the letters from my ex-wife." Papa laughed as he walked away.

"Aye, sir!" the young Marines said in stereo as they snapped a salute and returned the smile, then immediately went to their jet to inspect the damage. They found the underside still lightly coated with a thin film of the red-dyed fluid, but none of it was dripping from anywhere, which meant the reservoirs were bone dry. The Marines looked at each other with mouths wide open, then stomped down a couple of time to make sure they were indeed standing on solid ground and still alive. As they discovered the source of the leaks, they realized just how lucky they were to have actually landed the aircraft. They found five large holes, two in the left wing, one in the right wing, and two on the belly of the fuselage. Luckily, there were only punctures in the bottom half

of the wings, but two fingers could fit in each. The holes in the fuselage were much deeper and larger—large enough to fit three, almost four fingers into both holes, and deep enough to jam their fingers into the holes up to their knuckles.

“Damn—that settles it,” Val said as he jammed three fingers into the largest hole in the belly. “I’m suing the USSR.”

At that moment, a big man about six-three and two hundred and twenty pounds walked up to jet, pushing a large tool box on wheels with “JOHN” stenciled on the side in large, black letters.

“Evening, boys,” he said as he began to open drawers until he found a flashlight.

Val and Nate were a little awed by the size of the man and approached him to verify his identity. “You must be Big John,” Val said as he launched into a detailed explanation about the SAM and the damage it caused. All the while the man listened with a smirk, waiting to get a word in.

By the time Val finished, he was a bit winded, and his jaw dropped when the man replied, “Pretty interesting, sir, but I’m not the one you need to tell all this to.”

“Excuse me?” Val answered with a tone of surprise.

“You need to tell that to Big John, sir.”

“What? You’re not Big John?” Val said, surprised.

“No sir—I’m Little John.”

“You’re Little John?” Val said as he again took in the man’s size.

“Yes sir. You know—like the guy in Robin Hood?” Little John patted the large tool box and explained, “This is Big John’s toolbox. I was pushing it out here for him.”

“Right. Well, where’s Big John?”

“Here he comes.” Little John smiled as he pointed behind Val and Nate.

Val and Nate turned around to see an absolute mountain of a man walking toward them—easily six-seven and three hundred and twenty-five pounds of solid muscle, with balding gray hair and blue eyes.

“Is that an earthquake or just King Kong’s little brother over there headed toward us?” Nate whispered to Val,

“I thought the Incredible Hulk was just a comic book character. All this guy needs is green skin and a ripped-up pair of purple pants,” Val whispered back.

Val and Nate froze in attention as the giant ducked under their jet to inspect the damage. He stayed underneath for a while before shifting his attention to the aviators standing beside it. He came out from under the plane and approached the flight crew with a furious look on his face, making both Val and Nate cringe.

“Evening, sir.” Both aviators saluted the major as he stopped in front of them. His brute size combined with the angry expression was intimidating.

“Well, it would’ve been a nice evening if you boys hadn’t ruined my poker game by waltzing in with not just one, but two fucking missiles. I was winning. That only made me slightly pissed off. I have a cooler of cold beers and a few hot local honeys waiting on me tomorrow night, so this plane better be an easy fix because I don’t want to miss that. That would make me mad.” Big John made his face cold and devoid of expression as he leaned toward Val and Nate and added, “You don’t want to see me get mad, do you?”

“No sir,” they replied in unison, avoiding eye contact with the giant towering over them.

“Good.” Big John suddenly erupted in laughter. “Excellent, in fact, cuz the truth is, I totally suck at poker, and the only cold thing around here are letters Papa gets from his ex, which I’m sure he’s already explained to you, and the only women around here are at the PX in the pages of *Playboy*.”

Val and Nate breathed a sigh of relief and laughed with Big John, even though they were not quite sure if they should yet. Then the big major asked, “You’re the new boys, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir.’ I hate being called ‘sir’—makes me think I’m old or something. I heard about your very first sortie from Papa and the FACA pilot. Sounded impressive to me. Just don’t do anything stupid and get yourselves killed.

“Listen to Papa and you won’t ever go wrong. You boys’ll fine here. You can go to debrief—Little John gave me the skinny on your jet. I’ll have her up and flying in no time.” Big John paused, then continued: “I don’t know if you’d consider that good news or not. I’ll see you gents at the pub later. Dismissed.”

“Aye, sir,” they responded as they walked away.

“Dammit—don’t call me ‘sir’!” Big John reiterated.

“Sorry. It’s hard not to call a man of your stature ‘sir,’ sir. Oops—sorry!” Val said. Big John just smiled and shook his head.

Val and Nate walked into debrief just as it was being dismissed. They found it odd that it was over so quickly. Papa looked up at them. “Glad you strolled in. I want to thank you.”

“Thank us, sir?” Nate asked.

“Yeah—for listening to me up there, as you should. Because you listened, we’re having this conversation and I’m not writing a letter to your families about how you were killed in action. It’s usually hard for young Marines to listen to anyone when they’re first starting out; it’s even harder for them to listen to an old fart like me. So I’m glad you do. I’m glad I get crews willing to

hang it all out on the line, including their egos. I either get dedicated crews, or ones that're completely fucking nuts.”

“Sorry we missed debrief, sir,” Val said lamely.

“Don't sweat it, son. You'll listen to enough of 'em in time you might actually consider taking another hit so you'll get to miss another one. Anyway, I'll speak to both of you privately tomorrow at 0700 sharp. Why don't you boys head on down to the pub after you get out of your gear? You've had a busy night. Sit at my table, the staff already knows you're allowed to tonight.”

The pub was another large canvas tent in the middle of the housing quarters, open to both enlisted men and officers—unlike on large installations, where there were separate clubs. Everyone was pretty much on a first-name basis there, except for when the brass made a rare appearance for inspections. The pub was where the men of Linh Thu got to know each other and simply relax after a stressful mission.

The only rule was that no shop talk was allowed, under penalty of a five-dollar fine that went into a mason jar at the corner of the bar. The money in the jar was used to buy special items for the PX that were usually unavailable to servicemen stationed overseas, thanks to supply officers with connections back home.

Nate and Val walked in and Big John slipped up behind them and directed them to a table that was reserved for Papa and himself. They were instructed by Big John never to sit at that table unless specifically invited by Papa or himself. Big John began to fill in the newest crew about everyone on base, including Papa and himself, and about the crew they shared their hooch with—Notso and Speedy.

Frank M. Wise was from Florida. His call-sign, “Notso,” had become forever attached to him when he'd misspelled his name on a test at flight school—Frank “Notso” Wise.

Jamie Sanders, who hailed from Oregon, had earned his call-sign, “Speedy,” when he'd gotten into a drunken argument at a party in the wee hours of the morning about whose car was faster—his, a Dodge Charger, or his buddy's, a Ford Mustang. Both men knew they were too inebriated to actually drive, so they did the next best thing—they had a foot-race down a hill, staggering and weaving a hundred yards down the empty street. Jamie won, but not before he flattened a street sign because he was too drunk to slow himself down in time. The next day he received a gag gift—a GI Joe parachute with the word “Speedy” on it.

Papa soon walked in and joined Big John and his newbies at his table, and after his first two beers he had them tell him the short versions of their life stories.

Nate Robinson was from Texas. He'd known Val practically his entire aviation career and they'd been stationed together in every assignment thus far. He spoke fluent Italian and French, and was extremely suave in his mannerisms. All these attributes added up to a man that never failed to attract women; they had flocked to him all his life. Nate never let that make him cocky or arrogant; he simply appreciated all the attention the fairer sex would shower on him and return the favor. James Bond was 007, so Nate became 008, since he seemed to be the real life version of the fictitious super spy. He'd known Val practically his entire aviation career and they'd been stationed together in every assignment thus far.

Valentine Jordan was from a small town in east Tennessee, where he'd lived until he was thirteen. He'd then moved to Hawaii to Ewa Beach, a small town on Oahu. His dad was a linguist for the CIA, and Val spent his youth traveling the world. An avid thrill seeker, he loved being a Marine fighter pilot and was always the best in his class. His got his call-sign, "El Tiburon," when he was at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, on a cross-country flight. He and some other Marines had snuck out one weekend and somehow ended up playing poker in a shady, underground casino all the way up in Havana. He was winning consistently and ended up closing down the table. His aggressive playing style had the dealer calling him *El Tiburon*—"the shark." Val surprised the dealer by rolling up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo of a shark on his right deltoid. When the dealer asked him about the tattoo, his buddies explain that Val was a fearless pilot.

The men drank their warm drinks and shot the breeze for a couple of hours before deciding to hit the rack. The pub was the only place where the men of Linh Thu felt they shut out the world, which did its best to remind them that it was impossible to forget they were on a military base in the middle of hostile territory with a war raging around them.

Tonight ended up being no exception as a loud whistle silenced the conversation and laughter and replaced it with the thunder of a distant explosion. More explosions followed, accompanied by the rattle of machine gun and small-arms fire that intensified and drew closer. The lights suddenly went out and sirens sang out from various speakers. Linh Thu was once again under attack from rockets and mortars, and men scrambled in the darkness for their hooches and rifles. Because of the constant attacks, every man at Linh Thu was issued an M16A1 service rifle, war belt, and several full magazines. When the men reached their hooches, they loaded their weapons and took cover wherever they could find it. The only good thing about the attacks is that they seldom lasted more than twenty minutes, and the enemy normally never tried to enter the base.

Soon an eerie silence fell over the base, and the men just lay there in darkness, listening only to their heavy breathing and heartbeats, trying to pick up any rustle of movement that might warn of the enemy. After lying still in silence for ten minutes, most assumed the attack was over and relaxed a bit. They never knew for sure, so most would stay where they were for an hour before finally crashing into their racks to find the welcome peace of sleep—if that was possible when snuggled up to a loaded assault rifle.

Buy the B&N ePub version at:

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/rolling-thunder-i-erik-fleming/1111662886?ean=2940015006421>

Buy the Kindle version at:

<http://www.amazon.com/Rolling-Thunder-ebook/dp/B008PF62TA/ref>