

THREE PROUD WOMEN



A Fiction Novel

By

MICHEL POULIN

THREE

PROUD WOMEN

A FICTION AND ALTERNATE HISTORY NOVEL

BY

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS SOME HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION TAKING PLACE IN AN ALTERNATE TIMELINE AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel follows the novels ANGEL GIRL and AND AN ANGEL SANG. Its story takes place in a parallel timeline I designated as 'Timeline C', which split from another parallel timeline, 'Timeline B', in 1941, while Timeline B itself split from the original historical timeline (ours) in 1940, due to the involuntary time travel of Nancy Laplante, a Canadian war correspondent and reserve army officer, from 2012 'A' to 1940 'A'. This story is centered on three women: Sergeant Greta Visby, a young female member of the United States Marine Corps in 1999 'C'; Ex-General of the Army Ingrid Dows, who has just retired from U.S. service and is starting a civilian career; and Nancy Dows, Ingrid's daughter and a talented young musician and singer on the rise.

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THE MAIN BATTLE TANK, STILL RELEVANT OR IN NEED OF FURTHER
EVOLUTION

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CHAPTER 1 – A PROUD MARINE

19:14 (Eastern Standard Time)

Friday, June 25, 1999 ‘C’

Sixth Marine Regiment’s NCOs’ Mess

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, U.S.A.



Most of the men present in the bar-lounge room of the NCOs’ Mess of the Sixth Marine Regiment turned their heads to look at the young blond woman wearing a summer tan uniform who had just walked in. For one, she was presently the sole woman inside the bar-lounge section of the mess. She also happened to be tall, athletic-looking and quite pretty. Two of the men sitting on high stools at the bar watched her walk towards the bar, but with very different expressions on their faces. One, Staff Sergeant Jeffrey Brown, was smiling to the woman as she approached him, while the other, a sergeant, eyed her with barely disguised contempt. Brown noticed that and in turn stared hard at the man, who sat three stools away from his.

“What’s your problem, Jenkins?”

“My problem? She just got promoted to staff sergeant after only four years in the Corps, while I am still stuck at sergeant despite my own six years in the service. Don’t tell me that there isn’t favoritism involved in that.”

“The reason you are still a sergeant is simple, Jenkins: you proved yourself to be a poor squad leader, on top of showing by your treatment of the soldiers of your squad that you are an avowed racist. In comparison, Greta Visby showed outstanding valor and leadership skills in both combat and in garrison and gained the respect of her soldiers. It’s that simple! So, you better leave her alone tonight.”

Jenkins, a man from Alabama, shot back an angry look at Brown, who happened to be an African-American. However, understanding that starting an argument or even a fight here would only result in trouble for him, he left his still half-full beer mug on the counter and stepped off his stool before stomping away, nearly colliding with the blonde woman as he crossed her path. Greta Visby had to take a quick step sideways to avoid him and then stared at Jenkins as he walked away without apologizing. Continuing her walk to the bar, she finally sat on the stool next to Brown and spoke to him in a low voice.

“What’s wrong with that asshole today, Jeff?”

“He is jealous of your promotion, Greta. However, don’t pay attention to him: he is not worth it. So, you came to the bar-lounge to celebrate your promotion to staff sergeant?”

“Uh, not really, Jeff. I came mostly to have a nice cold beer while watching the evening news on the bar’s television set. I am hoping that they will show at least part of the retirement ceremony for General Dows which was held at the White House this afternoon. Since I was giving a class on rifle squad tactics at that time, I was unable to watch that ceremony.”

“Aah, I see! Still, congratulations for your promotion.”

“Thanks, Jeff!” replied Greta before ordering a beer from the barman. As she did so, Brown discretely admired her body and face. He was happily married but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t admire female beauty from time to time. A tall young woman at 177 centimeters of height, with shoulder-length blond hair twisted into two short braids and with clear blue eyes, Greta Visby was the perfect image of a Scandinavian beauty, for one simple reason: she had been born in Northern Sweden from Swedish parents and had lived there until her father moved to Alaska after the death of his wife, when Greta had been fourteen-years-old. There, she had lived in Alaska’s outdoor nature, hunting, trapping and fishing with her father, until she had enrolled in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1995. The short sleeves of her summer tan uniform’ shirt made evident her uncommonly muscular arms for a woman, something Jeffrey knew could be attributed to her past outdoors life in Alaska and to the intensive physical training she was assiduously following. That training included lots of weight-lifting and exercise bicycling, so her legs were at least as muscular as her arms. Having seen her often at the base gymnasium, Jeffrey also knew that Greta sported a proverbial ‘sixpack’ denoting her high level of fitness and strength. Still, that didn’t mean that Greta looked like some kind of man-like woman. At the age of 23 she could definitely be described as a sexy-looking girl, with firm, medium-sized breasts and wide hips. The resulting overall look, along with her friendly and easy-going character, had made most male Marines around her wish that they could date her. However, as far as Jeffrey knew, Greta had been careful not to date any of the Marines on base, something that could have been construed as detrimental to discipline due to possible accusations of improper behavior between members of different ranks. As for her private life when outside of the base, nothing was really known about it, except for the fact that she regularly went to nearby Jacksonville

during her free weekends to train at a martial arts studio, where an ex-Israeli paratrooper gave classes in Krav Maga, the no-holds-bar martial art adopted decades ago by the Israeli Defense Forces. While she had been a member of his rifle squad, Jeffrey had seen Greta make many strong male Marines go down when pitted against her in unarmed combat training sessions. She also happened to be both a qualified rifle marksman and a pistol sharpshooter, thus adding to her impressive military skills. Her sharp intelligence and highly developed outdoors and tactical skills further helped Greta be what she was now: a brave, skilled and competent rifle squad leader.

As the barman finished serving her a mug of cold draft beer, the evening NBC news program started on the bar's television set, placed high so that all in the room could see its screen. Greta happily smiled when she saw that General Dows' retirement ceremony was actually the first main item in the news program. While General of the Army Ingrid Dows had started her career as a fighter pilot in the Airforce, she had quickly become a legend throughout the Marine Corps, where she was both admired and respected. Even though Greta already knew pretty much everything about Dows' military career, she still listened religiously to the newscaster as he described her 57-year military career, started in 1941 in the Philippines during World War 2, and her accomplishments through a total of seven wars and two regional conflicts. The NBC co-host, a woman, also talked about her exploits in Space, which she had opened to the United States by becoming the first human being ever to fly into Space and then developing the American Space Program throughout the years as National Director of Space Programs for the United States. Her staggering accomplishments had also included landing on the Moon, then on Mars, before traveling to the Jupiter and Saturn Systems as commander of the first interplanetary ship to travel to the outer parts of the Solar System. Greta had a nearly religious fervor-look in her eyes when her crucial role as commander of all American combat forces during the Russia-United States War of November 1996 had saved the country from nuclear Armageddon.

"Our country owes so much to that woman." said softly Greta as the clip on the retirement ceremony ended. "And to still look young at the age of 74, on top of possessing all those supernatural powers. We will never see someone like her again."

"Maybe, maybe not!" replied Jeffrey. "Remember her daughter Nancy: she has proved to be actually a half-angel, half-human girl, with powers even more extensive than those of her mother. And, with the way she publicly demonstrated her powers

during the last few years, nobody can now deny what she is, unless they show some tremendous bad faith and hypocrisy.”

“Hum, sounds like the Church to me.” shot back Greta, a sarcastic smirk on her lips, making Jeffrey wince.

“Ouch! Touché!”

“I wonder what General Dows will do next, now that she is out of uniform and retired from military life.”

“I heard that she plans to work as a test pilot and aircraft designer in an aeronautical company.”

“That would make sense. She designed most of our military aircraft and Space vehicles since the end of World War Two, so she shouldn’t have any problems finding employment.”

“And what about you, Greta? Did the colonel tell you what your next assignment will be, now that you are a staff sergeant?”

“I will still command my actual rifle squad until an opening at platoon-level will become available in our battalion. I must say that I will regret having to leave the First Rifle Squad: I enjoyed commanding the guys of our so-called ‘Ethnic Squad’. They may have been derided by many as a mismatched group of misfits but they proved to me that they are great Marines and they in exchange fully accepted me as their leader, contrary to some others we know.”

“Yeah! Unfortunately, there are still plenty of assholes like this Jenkins around. Well, here is a toast to your promotion, Greta. May you climb high in the Marine Corps.” The two of them then knocked their mugs together before taking a pull from their beers.

CHAPTER 2 – A RETIRING COMMANDER

15:06 (West Coast Time)

Saturday, July 3, 1999 ‘C’

1402 South McDonald Street, West End District

Port Angeles, coast of Juan de Fuca Strait

Clallam County, Washington State, U.S.A.



Ingrid Dows, as she appears at age 74

“That dresser will go upstairs in the main bedroom, guys.”

“Yes maam!” replied one of the two moving company employees carrying the large, varnished wood piece of furniture inside the small bungalow home Ingrid had recently bought in Port Angeles, a small community of about 18,000 people located on the coast of the Juan de Fuca Strait, opposite the Canadian island of Victoria. Letting the two men climb the stairs to the upper floor, Ingrid went to her kitchen, where a third employee had started to bring in the various cardboard boxes containing her kitchenware, cutlery and dining ware, and started opening the boxes, using a box cutter. As she took out her kitchenware and dishes, she looked a number of times outside through the kitchen windows giving a view of the waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, less than 100 meters from her house. That view was both nice and soothing for her, as she always had been fond of the outdoors. In fact, the location of her new house, close to the shore, had been a prime reason for her to buy it. It wasn’t a big house, nor was it fancy or luxurious, but it was plenty enough for Ingrid, who always had frugal personal needs and could be content with little, even though her accumulated military pension and bank accounts would have allowed her to easily buy a much bigger and luxurious home.

Seeing that the movers were now carrying in the last piece of furniture into her new house, Ingrid stopped her work for a moment and took thirty dollars from her wallet, which she carried on herself in a pocket, before waiting for the movers to come back to the house entrance. The older mover smiled to her while presenting her a clipboard on which a waybill was fixed.

“We’re done, miss! If you want to check our work first, then I will ask you to sign for the reception in good order of your belongings and furniture.”

"No need to check, mister: I counted the items as you brought them inside from your truck. Where do I sign?"

"Right here, maam, along with writing down the date."

Ingrid quickly executed herself, then gave back the pen to the man, along with the three ten-dollar bills.

"Thank you for your good work, gentlemen. Have a nice supper on my account on your way back."

"Why, thank you very much, maam!" said the happy worker, who nodded in salute to her before leaving. Going to the entrance door behind the three men, Ingrid watched them close off their truck and then roll out of her entrance. That was when she saw a police patrol car, stopped at the entrance of her property and which had been hidden by the movers' truck. Taking a quick decision, Ingrid got out and closed her front door behind her, then walked calmly to the patrol car, which bore the markings of the Port Angeles Police. A female police officer stepped out of the vehicle as Ingrid was approaching her. Ingrid was the first to speak while still walking.

"Hello! Can I do something for you, Officer?"

"Not really, miss: I was simply curious to see the latest person to move into Port Angeles. Officer Carol Wright, at your service."

"And I'm Ingrid Dows. I just moved in from Arlington, Virginia, and will be working at the new Hiller aircraft plant at the nearby Fairchild International Airport."

"Ah, yes! And what is your specialty, if I may ask, Miss Dows?"

"I'm an aerospace engineer and a test pilot. I will be test-flying the aircraft which the new Hiller plant will produce."

"Sounds like a fine job to me, miss."

"It is indeed, Officer. While you are here, may I ask you where I could go buy a few groceries items before everything shuts down for the Fourth of July tomorrow?"

"Oh, there are a few places you could go for that, miss. The closest are a couple of convenience stores and one small groceries store situated on West Fourth Street, just before the marina. As for tomorrow, you are right in assuming that pretty much everything will be closed off then, so don't wait too much before going to do your shopping, miss."

"Thanks for the advice: I will heed it, Officer."

"It was my pleasure, miss. Welcome to Port Angeles!"

"Thank you, Officer."

Ingrid then returned inside her new house as the policewoman got back inside her patrol car and then drove off towards the port area. However, Ingrid went out again after only a couple of minutes, carrying a large thermos ice box. Putting the ice box in the trunk of her convertible Firebird TRANS AM, she then drove out onto South McDonald Street and turned on McDonald Street, then on West 14th Street in order to get to the port area and shop for some essentials.

Some six minutes later, she was parking her car in front of a small family groceries store on Marina Drive and got out. Taking her empty ice box with her, she entered the store and went directly to the cashier's counter, behind which stood a small, mature woman in her fifties.

"Good afternoon, madam! I just moved into Port Angeles and my refrigerator, which had been unplugged and moved for travel, won't be ready to store perishables for at least another day. Do you mind if I first buy and then pack bags of ice at the bottom of my ice box before I purchase some more items in it?"

"Go right ahead, miss. Our ice freezer is in the back, against the left wall."

"Thank you, madam."

Going to the said freezer, Ingrid lined the bottom of her ice box with six bags of ice cubes, then added another six bags on top before returning to the cashier, where she put down her ice box and grabbed a shopping basket.

"I shouldn't be long, madam."

"Take all your time, miss." replied the cashier, smiling back to her. Ingrid then roamed quickly the alleys of the small store, picking up some milk, butter, fresh eggs, bread, a pack of bacon, a variety of jam and peanut butter jars and a couple of bags of frozen and cut vegetables. Returning with the lot to the cashier, Ingrid paid for her items before asking a question to the woman.

"Madam, would you be able to counsel me on a nice place where I could go have supper. No need for that place to be fancy: I am fairly simple in my tastes but I like places with a healthy, balanced menu."

"Then, I strongly advise you to go try the 'Toga's Soup House Deli & Gourmet', on Highway 101, just past Valley Creek. Do you have a map of Port Angeles, miss?"

"Yes, I do!"

The woman then took out her own map and explained to Ingrid how to get to that restaurant, which already sounded very tempting to Ingrid. Thanking the woman, Ingrid

picked up her heavy ice box and carried it out to her car without any apparent effort, surprising the cashier. She was soon reversing out of her parking spot and rolling through town, heading eastward first before turning south on South Lincoln Street, which soon became Highway 101. The Toga's Soup House Deli & Gourmet restaurant turned out to be a charming Victorian style house converted into a restaurant and, judging from the cars parked into its small parking lot, appeared to be quite popular. Parking her TRANS AM and getting out of it, Ingrid locked it before walking inside the restaurant. While the internal decoration and furniture was quite simple, Ingrid liked at once its quiet atmosphere, where a mix of mature and senior citizens ate alongside a couple of younger families with small children. Going to a vacant table in a corner of the dining room, Ingrid promptly received a menu from a passing waitress, ordering at the same time a glass of milk. Her eyes widened with glee once she opened the menu and started looking at the various items offered in it.

"Smoked Salmon Chowder? Pork Schnitzel Sandwich? SOLD!"

Taking a minute or so to read and memorize the whole menu first, she then intercepted the waitress and gave her choice of menu to her.

Less than five minutes later, she first received her smoked salmon chowder, then her sandwich plate another six minutes afterwards. She was still eating her schnitzel sandwich with gusto when she saw three men wearing U.S. Coast Guard uniforms enter the restaurant. From their wing insignias and ranks, Ingrid pegged them at once as aviators, probably serving at the small local Coast Guard air station, in the port area. One of the aviators, a captain, who was scanning the dining room for an empty table, then hesitated when his eyes caught on Ingrid. Followed by his two comrades, the young captain slowly approached her table before stopping two paces from it and speaking to her in a low voice, trying to be discrete.

"Uh, sorry to bother you like this, miss, but would we know you by chance?"

Ingrid smiled, then quickly wiped her mouth with her napkin before getting up from her chair and presenting her right hand to the young officer.

"You are indeed correct, Captain: General of the Army Ingrid Dows, retired, at your service. Please, have a seat at my table with your two comrades."

The captain shook her hand and spoke again.

"Then, let me present myself to you, General: Captain Ronald Atkinson, of the Port Angeles Coast Guard Air Station. These are my copilot, Lieutenant Ken Nakamura, and my loadmaster, Warrant Officer John Canning."

"Pleased to meet you all, gentlemen. But sit down, please. You must be getting hungry at this hour."

"Indeed, General!" replied Atkinson while taking one of the empty chairs, imitated by his two comrades. Ingrid then waived at the waitress, who promptly came and distributed menus to the newcomers. Still, Atkinson couldn't help ask Ingrid another question.

"And to what do we owe the honor to see you here in Port Angeles, General? Are you on some post-retirement vacation traveling?"

"Make it a very long post-retirement vacation period, Captain: I just moved in to a new house and a civilian job here in Port Angeles. But take the time to choose your supper before we talk more, gentlemen."

Still a bit overwhelmed by this most unexpected meeting, the three aviators consulted quickly their menus before giving their orders to the waitress. Ingrid then shocked them by talking to the waitress as she was about to walk away.

"Put everything on my tab, miss: it's on me."

That left the three aviators both stunned and incredulous, with Canning objecting feebly.

"But, General..."

"No but, Warrant: my military pension is probably bigger than the total of your three salaries. Besides, I am most happy to pay for your meals. So, how are things in Port Angeles, Coast Guard-wise?"

"Rather busy, General." answered Atkinson. With the heavy maritime traffic passing through the Juan de Fuca Strait and the often-bad weather out at large, we have quite our share of emergency assistance calls and rescue missions. We do have three search and rescue helicopters at our station but our support facilities are minimal, to say the least."

"How minimal, Captain?"

Realizing that he may have said too much, Atkinson hesitated, prompting Ingrid in insisting.

"Don't be afraid to say things the way they are, Captain: I am now retired and am not part of any commission of inquiry. I suppose that the Coast Guard budgets are rather minimal these days."

"You could say that, General. While we are able to operate and maintain properly our helicopters, there are no official accommodations in Port Angeles for our personnel: we have to rent civilian facilities for that. Thankfully, the service does cover part of those rental costs."

"An old problem indeed in all of our services. I did my best while in command of our forces to improve the service and living conditions of our personnel and of their families but the Congress didn't always support my requests for supplementary housing budgets. I am afraid that this will stay a problem for a long time still."

"I have to agree with you on that, General. May I ask what kind of civilian job you moved into, here in Port Angeles?"

"You may, Captain. I am the chief test pilot and designer at the new Hiller aircraft plant at the local airport."

"That's super, General! Can we hope to see a new type of Hiller aircraft be designed and produced here?"

"Maybe!" replied Ingrid, a mysterious smile on her face. "Uh, tomorrow is the Fourth of July. Does your unit plan to have some kind of special activities in order to celebrate it?"

"We do, General. While our ground facilities are limited, we are preparing a few helicopter tours for the families and children who will attend our open day event."

"Nice! Are such open days popular around here?"

"Oh yes, General!" said Atkinson, smiling. "Kids are especially fond of our helicopter tours. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate tomorrow. You must know how gray and wet the Washington State and the weather in this area could be."

"Oh, I do, Captain. Well, I believe that your food is starting to arrive. Bon appétit, gentlemen!"

After a good 45 minutes spent eating and discussing together, their group separated, with the three aviators warmly shaking hands with Ingrid before leaving on their own way. Now back in her car and looking at her local map, Ingrid saw that the most direct route back to her new house would make her pass close to the Fairchild International Airport, where the new Hiller aircraft plant was located. She thus decided, since there still was some daylight, to go have a look at it, at least from the outside. Starting her engine, Ingrid then backed her car out of its parking spot and started rolling west on Highway 101, then turned right after about 1.6 kilometers on Fairmount Avenue.

After another kilometer, she turned left on West Laundsen Boulevard and a bit later on the South Airport Road. That road had recently been lengthened in order to give access to the new Hiller aircraft facility. That facility proved to be fully completed and operational, with a perimeter security fence around it and a security access gate manned by a lone private security guard. However, due to the late hour, the few workers and staff who normally worked at the plant on Saturdays had already left, as the security guard explained to Ingrid after checking her identity. Ingrid hesitated for a moment before deciding to wait until Monday before paying a visit to the facility. She did contemplate the complex for a long minute before turning around, wanting to make a first impression of it in her mind. While of the size of a large aircraft hangar, it was much smaller than the facilities of other, bigger aircraft manufacturers, like the Boeing Seattle plant or the Lockheed facilities in Burbank, California. Still, it represented an important investment for the Hiller Aircraft Corporation, which had been quite small as an enterprise before Ingrid had started to design her Aircar and Airbike for Hiller, designs which had then propelled the company forward and had made it earn hundreds of millions in profit. Now, much of those profits had been used to build this new facility in Port Angeles, a risky economic and financial gamble for the company. While someone else would be the general manager of that facility, it would be up to her to design new aircraft which would be both innovative and competitive commercially and would sell well. Contrary to most of her past aeronautical design work, this time she would be designing purely civilian aircraft, not military ones, something that suited her just fine. After 57 years of military service, nine wars and conflicts and thousands of people killed directly by her during air combat operations against opposing forces, Ingrid was truly tired of war and of killing. Now was her chance to contribute in a peaceful way to the aeronautical world.

CHAPTER 3 – A YOUNG MUSICIAN ON THE RISE

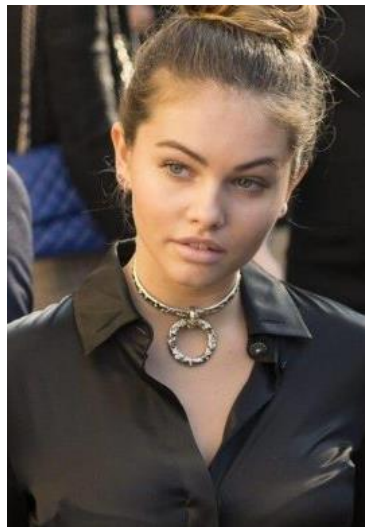
16:55 (New York Time)

Thursday, July 8, 1999 'C'

Quad Recording Studios, 723 7th Avenue

Manhattan, New York City

U.S.A.



“AND CUT! PERFECT! IT’S IN THE BAG, GIRLS!”

Nancy and the four girl members of her band, ‘The D.C. Five’, shouted out their happiness at that announcement from the sound engineer of the Quad Recording Studios, where they had just officially finished recording their latest song. Nancy took off her pair of headphones and switched off her sound synthesizer, then exchanged hugs with her band members.

“This was great, girls! We should be able to smoke the radio charts with this new song. Once I will have written another new song and have it recorded, then we will be able to launch our third album.”

Nancy then went out of the sound-proofed recording booth where they had just played and sung and went to see the studio manager, who grinned to her.

“That was a truly fantastic song you just made, Nancy. I predict that it will take it only weeks before shooting up to the top of the charts. I must say that my Quad Recording Studios was well inspired when we accepted to deal with your band: The D.C. Five is quickly becoming one of the most popular bands on the airwave. What I particularly like about your band is that your wide variety of types of songs and music you produce, from Pop to Ballads and all the way to historical music, makes your band popular with a wider swath of the audience than, say, a group that plays only Pop or Hard Rock. This also tells me that your band’s popularity will be no flash in the pan, contrary to many past ‘one hit wonders’.”

“Thank you, Mister Moore. We appreciate a lot the willingness of your studios to have given us a chance to break through as a band. We should have another new song

ready to record in about a month, time for me to write it and compose the music with my friends.”

“Are you planning to make a pop song, an adaptation from one of the songs from the future you got from your mother, or another song using historical music?”

“I intend to write something completely new which could be described as pop music, with emphasis on using to the utmost my vocal range.”

Jack Moore grinned on hearing that: Nancy Dows’ fantastic voice was a big part of the popularity of her band, even though her four band partners were no slouch either in the musical department. That popularity had also meant nice profits for his recording studios.

“Nice! I can’t wait to hear your new song. Well, we should be able to officially launch today’s song on the air next week. I will call you to confirm to you when your band will be able to come and do the official announcement for the launch.”

“And we will be awaiting your call eagerly, Mister Moore. Thank you again for supporting our band.”

“My pleasure, Nancy.” said Moore, who then had a thought as Nancy walked back into the recording booth in order to pack her instruments. *‘God, what a beautiful girl! I would give everything to bed her.’*

Nancy and her four band members quickly but carefully packed away their instruments, then left the recording studio and, using a cargo plate to carry their instruments down to the internal garage of the building housing the Quad Recording Studios, loaded them up in the extended chassis minivan used by the band to go around to clubs and other musical venues. With their drummer, Erika Lang, at the wheel, they rolled out of the underground garage and onto Seventh Avenue.

“Back to Washington, Nancy?” asked Erika, who was a bit of a blond tomboy.

“Let’s pass first by my Windermere project, Erika: I would like to go check on it quickly before we return home.”

“The Windermere Community Home Project it is!” replied Erika, who then headed westward along Seventh Avenue. As they drove through the dense Manhattan traffic, Lucy, Nancy’s sister by adoption and the band’s dedicated violonist, looked at the latter.

“And how is your project doing lately, Nancy?”

"Quite well, I must say. The legal penalties that the Hudson County Hospital was hit with after they lost their ill-fated lawsuit against me were finally paid off two weeks ago. That in turn allowed me to launch another renovation phase for my project. This will allow me to soon add an extra 94 new, renovated apartments to my Windermere Home project. This will in turn mean that more homeless people in New York will be able to get some decent lodging before the coming of next Winter."

"Nancy, you are a saint!" said Carmen Estrada, the flute, guitar player and support singer of the band. Nancy smiled at that while shaking her head.

"Wrong, Carmen! I am a half-angel, not a saint."

"There's a difference?" sneakily asked Sarah Weissman, who mostly played the piano, the synthesizer, the violin and the bass.

"Yes, there is, and a big one, Sarah: saints don't have the power to vaporize bad people with thrown plasma energy balls."

"I stand corrected." said the Jewish young woman while making a face, making the others chuckle. "By the way, have you heard from your mother Ingrid lately?"

"I talked to her by phone yesterday. She told me that she loves her new place in Port Angeles and that she was about to start working on a new aircraft design project there."

"What kind of aircraft? A military one?"

"No! She is now concentrating on purely civilian types of aircraft. What she has in mind is a multi-role vertical takeoff and landing transport. However, she still has not fixed for good the basic parameters of that project. She promised me to keep me informed about it in the future."

"Hey, maybe we could try to arrange a tour of our band in the Northwestern states in the future? That would be a nice excuse to go visit Ingrid then."

"That, Lucy, is a wonderful idea. I will think about it."

Some fifteen minutes later, they arrived within sight of a big, squarish building made out of brown bricks that had obviously been built many decades ago. Erika was about to search for a parking spot along the West 57th Street when Nancy



pointed at the entrance of an underground garage near one corner of the building.

“Go into that underground parking lot, Erika: it is reserved for the service vehicles of my project and I have a pass for it.”

“Good! Parking on the street in this area and hour is always a bitch.”

Erika turned onto the ramp leading to the entrance of the underground garage, with Erika then making the garage door open by pressing Nancy’s magnetic parking pass against the card reader fixed on the left side of the entrance. Once the door rose open, Erika drove inside a relatively small garage with forty parking spots, sixteen of which were occupied by either delivery vans, minibuses or private cars. Once their own minivan was parked, Nancy turned around in her front passenger seat and spoke to her band members.

“I know that you all visited this place many times before and, since I will just go get a quick update from the manager, you can either wait here for me to return or go upstairs and wait in the communal cafeteria. What do you prefer?”

“Well, we still need a few hours of driving before we could get to our home in Washington.” replied Carmen. “I will wait for you here.”

“Me too!” said Lucy, then imitated by Sarah and Erika. Nodding in acknowledgement, Nancy stepped out of the minivan and went to a nearby bank of elevators, calling a cabin and then going up in it.

As promised, Nancy was back in less than fifteen minutes and climbed back in the band’s minivan, where she spoke to her friends while buckling up her safety belt.

“Everything is going fine here. The new apartment units should be ready for new occupants in about a month.”

“And how many ex-homeless people will then be living in your community home project, Nancy?” asked Sarah.

“If all the new units get taken:160, on top of the 46 low-income families lodging in my project. I was also able to recently add a few more services and facilities in the building for my tenants, including an in-house doctor to support the community nurse who already works here.”

“I wish that more people could show the kind of generosity and compassion you are showing towards people in need, Nancy.”

“I wish so too, Sarah. Thankfully, a couple of very rich philanthropists are giving me some precious financial support for my community home project, while my example

are shaming the municipal authorities into doing more to help the homeless people in New York.”

“Maybe you could start other similar projects in other cities, using the support of more philanthropists, or someone else could imitate you.” suggested Lucy, making Nancy nod her head slowly.

“That would be truly nice, Lucy, but right now I want to concentrate on developing this building to its utmost possibilities. If things continue as they are, my project will be fully operational in a couple of years or so. Well, time to go home! Let’s roll, Erika!”

CHAPTER 4 – STARTING A NEW PROJECT



10:04 (West Coast Time)

Tuesday, July 27, 1999 ‘C’

Aircraft design section, Hiller aircraft production plant

Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles

Clallam County, Washington State, U.S.A.

“We’re here, Ingrid!” announced out loud Jeff Hiller, the present CEO and owner of the Hiller Aircraft Corporation, as he entered the wide-open work room of the design section with his ageing father, Stanley Hiller, the founder of the company and now a retired 75-year-old man. Ingrid, who had been waiting for them, quickly walked to them to shake hands with the two men.

“Welcome to Port Angeles! How was your trip from California?”

“Fine!” answered Jeff Hiller. “There is a bit of a grey sky right now but it didn’t affect our flight.”

“Well, grey skies are rather common around here. Mister Steve Miller, the plant’s aircraft production manager, and Misses Roberta Smith, the plant’s administrative manager, are here with me, so they will be able to listen on as we discuss my proposed project.”

“Then, let’s start right away, Ingrid.” replied the elder Hiller. “I am impatient to see what kind of idea you came up with this time. Mind you, I am confident that it will be worth looking at: your past ideas and designs basically brought new life to this company and turned me and my son into multi-millionaires. Hiller Aircraft owes a lot to you.”

“Thank you, Stanley! If you will follow me, please.”

The two men eagerly followed her to Ingrid’s private office, which was attached to the design office and had a view of it through a large internal window. There, Ingrid invited the Hillers and the two plant managers to sit in a pair of sofas and then sat in an easy chair facing them.

“While things are going very well for our company, I am still very conscious that we are a rather small aeronautical company, compared with such giants as Boeing, Lockheed or Douglas. Our success during the last ten years was due mostly to the production of small to medium aircraft designs which played on their VTOL¹ capabilities to fill new customer niches. Hiller has not produced yet larger aircraft, like airliners and military bombers, and I am very conscious of the limited capacities of our production plants, including this new one. Right now, this plant’s first aircraft to be produced is a PELICAN, part of an order from the Navy for eight extra PELICANs to beef up their inventory. This however leaves us enough available space to build a prototype aircraft of a new design which will be the largest aircraft to be produced by Hiller...if you approve my project, of course.”

“And we are anxious to see what you will propose to us, Ingrid.” said Jeff Hiller. “So, tell us about your projected design.”

Ingrid nodded once before going to her desk and grabbing four thin files, then distributing them to the Hillers and to the two managers before sitting back in her easy chair.

“What I have in mind will be totally revolutionary, yet relatively simple and economical to build. Most of the main components, like the turboshaft engines, ducted propellers and landing gear, are existing ones either made by Hiller or by other aeronautical companies. The real novelty will be in the aircraft structure. I made a few preliminary sketches to show what I have in mind. If approved by you, the Hiller SKYTRUCK will be a medium-sized VTOL multi-role transport aircraft with quick-switch role capabilities. Another thing that I would like to emphasize right now is that the Hiller

¹ VTOL : Vertical Takeoff and Landing.

SKYTRUCK will be primarily targeting the international markets, rather than initially aiming solely at the American military or civilian markets. This way, and with its quick multi-role switching capabilities, our SKYTRUCK will be a very tempting bird all across the World, especially if we succeed in keeping its acquisition and operating costs as low as possible. I will thus make my best during its design to adhere to the KISS Principle: Keep It Simple, Stupid. The novelty will be in its basic design, not in its subparts.”

Stanley Hiller, who had opened wide his eyes after a first look at the sketches in his file, looked up at her, frankly surprised.

“Where did you get such an idea for an aircraft design, Ingrid? I have never seen anything like this.”

“Don’t laugh, Stanley, but I got the basic idea from an animated TV series from Nancy Laplante’s timeline. That TV series was called ‘The Thunderbirds’ and featured a private family group which secretly operated a number of one-of-a-kind aircraft and vehicles used by what they called ‘The International Rescue’. One of their aircraft, a big transport type, used quick-change mission pods which carried rescue equipment geared towards specific operations. If, say, the International Rescue needed to save people trapped in some underground complex, like a large underground garage, then their cargo aircraft would select and load a cargo pod containing the equipment most relevant for that operation. While my proposed design will be a lot smaller than the THUNDERBIRD 2 in that TV series, it will have a basic airframe able to carry a variety of specialized mission pods. Those specialized mission pods could include a basic cargo pod with aft ramp for the carrying of cargo or vehicles, a passenger transport pod, a search and rescue mission pod, a waterbomber pod and a sea container holding pod, which would allow our SKYTRUCK to pick up vertically a sea container or a truck container of up to 45 feet in length, then transport it across our country and put it down at the vertical at the final delivery point wanted by the customers. The main beauty of this design is that, if some customer wants to use our SKYTRUCK for some other role, then we will only need to design and build a new specialized pod for that role, while not touching the basic aircraft airframe. If, for example, the Coast Guard wishes to acquire our new aircraft in order to conduct maritime patrol and search and rescue missions, then we could quickly produce such a mission pod, as long as we keep its dimensions and shape compatible with the basic airframe of the AIRTRUCK. Oh, I nearly forgot: our SKYTRUCK will be amphibious and will be able to securely float on water. That should

make it an invaluable asset for countries with many islands and underdeveloped transport networks.”

“This, this is positively brilliant, Ingrid!” said Stanley Hiller, who had himself been a brilliant aircraft designer. “If you could really come up with a viable and economical design for this, then dozens of countries will run to us with contracts in their hands. Another argument which we could use with those international clients, especially in the smaller, poorer countries, is that they could buy a number of our aircraft and add to them a choice of mission pods which would allow them to be used in a range of roles, thus avoiding the necessity for them to buy additional airframes. This could really work, Ingrid.”

“I certainly hope so, Stanley. So, do I have your green light to start the detailed design of our future SKYTRUCK?”

“Hell yes!” exclaimed Jeff Hiller, enthusiastic. “Go for it, Ingrid! How long do you expect that you will need to make and finalize your design?”

“Give me ten to twelve months and I will then be able to present to you production blueprints for a prototype, Jeff.”

“Excellent! If you need anything during the design phase, just tell me.”

“I do have a requirement right now, Jeff.” said Ingrid, now looking sober. “That is absolute discretion about our project. No preliminary press releases and no official announcements. I want our prototype to come as a complete surprise to other aircraft producers when it will roll out of its hangar for its first flight.”

“That I can understand and agree with, Ingrid. We will keep our mouths shut about the SKYTRUCK.”

Jeff Hiller then looked again at the sketches in his file docket and smiled.

“I can already see this selling like hot cakes.”

CHAPTER 5 – A NEW PRESIDENT

21:02 (Standard Eastern Time)

Tuesday, November 7, 2000 'C'

6th Marines regiment's NCOs' singles quarters

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina

U.S.A.



Instead of going to the NCOs' regimental mess to watch the results of the U.S. presidential elections, Greta had elected to invite two other NCOs she knew well to come and watch with her the election coverage on the television set of her mini-suite, which was part of the quarters building for single NCOs attached to the mess complex. While small, her suite, similar to over 200 suites in the four-story building, was very efficiently designed, with a small lounge which also contained a work desk and a small kitchenette, a small bedroom, a large kit locker and a small but fully equipped bathroom, the lot covering a floor surface of 24 square meters. Both Sergeant Joshua Stern and Sergeant Ken Nakamura, who had served under her leadership during the fighting in Somalia, were now sitting with Greta in her sofa, which faced the personal television flat screen set that she had bought to replace the small set originally provided with the suite by the Marine Corps. Only six years ago, such accommodations for single NCOs would have been unthinkable but a lot of things had changed under the leadership of General of the Army Ingrid Dows, who had forced all the armed services to better treat their more junior personnel and their families, notably by pushing for a vast construction program for newer and better military accommodations, both on the ground and aboard ships, where new crew facilities standards were now enforced into the design of any new warship built since the new rules had been laid out. Now, in 2000, no serviceperson lived in old style, platoon barrack rooms, except in the case of recruits under training or troops using temporary accommodations during field exercises and deployments. As a result, morale had shot up, while the reenlistment rate for the junior ranks had more than doubled. That last point, by saving undreds of millions of dollars every year in new recruits training, had placated most of those who had criticized General Dows' policies as being 'wasteful and extravagant expenditures', to which she had shot back that those

criticizing her were all senior officers who had personally been enjoying large salaries and lots of command perks in terms of quarters, chauffeuring and domestic aids.

While Joshua Stern and Ken Nakamura were now sandwiching Greta on her sofa, they knew better than to think that they could play 'wandering hands' with her. For one thing, they respected her too much to try doing that with her. They also knew that such conduct would be completely inappropriate and could land them in big disciplinary trouble. Greta, while a very pretty girl who liked her fun as much as any other normal girl, firmly believed in keeping relations between people of different ranks strictly non-sexual, unless of course you were talking about a married service couple. The three of them thus kept to close but clean comradeship while in private. At one point, as the reporting was being interrupted by a commercial break, Greta got up from her sofa and smiled to her two friends.

"Care for a cold beer, guys?"

"Yup!" replied at once Joshua. "I may be officially Jewish but I am really a very liberal Jew."

"And I have nothing against a cold beer, Greta." said in turn Ken Nakamura, who led one of the three rifle squads of the rifle platoon in which Greta served as platoon sergeant. "What brands of beer do you have?"

"The good kind: foreign beers. I don't care for the colored water produced by too many American beer makers, like Budweiser and Schlitz. I usually get German beers but I also buy from time-to-time Canadian beers made by small breweries. I will make you guys taste my latest find: a blond beer made by the Canadian brewer 'Unibroue' from Quebec. It is a strong beer but it also has a very smooth taste. I am sure that you will both like it."

Two minutes later, she was back in her sofa after handing over to Joshua and Ken cold bottles of beer, which they examined with interest.

"Don de Dieu? What does that mean, Greta?" asked Joshua

"It means 'gift from God' in French."

"Wow!" said Ken while looking at the label on the bottle. "This thing is 9% in alcohol content?"

"It is, but it also has a smooth taste. Try it!"

Both Joshua and Ken took a swig from their bottles, to then nod their heads in appreciation.

"It is smooth and also really good, Greta." said Ken. "Where did you buy it? At the base PX²?"

"You're kidding? The PX only stores the cheap brands. To provision myself in beer, wine and spirits, I go to a store in Jacksonville which specializes in the importation of foreign alcohol products. It is a lot more expensive than at the PX here, but the quality is so superior. Since I don't frequently drink alcohol, I compensate quantity with quality."

"You will have to tell me where is that store, Greta." said Joshua after a second swig of his beer. "I really like this 'Don de Dieu'."

"Good for you! I... Haw shit! Look at those numbers in the bottom info band on the screen! The Reform Party is getting a beating!"

"I gather from this that you voted for the Reform Party, Greta?" asked Ken, making Greta nod.

"Yes, although I didn't approve of their ultimate choice for presidential candidate. I would have much preferred to see John McCain lead it as their presidential candidate rather than this Buchanan guy. There were some political shenanigans and backroom deals made in choosing him over the advice of President Perot, who was favoring McCain. Now, these backroom idiots are costing the Reform a third shot at the presidency."

Joshua, who had been looking at the numbers parading on the info band while listening to Greta, then pointed out something else to her and Ken.

"Look at how close the portions of the votes to date are between the Republicans and the Democrats. These two will split nearly equally the large majority of the votes, while Ralph Nader and his Greens are further spoiling the chances Reform had to get more votes. This is going to be a close race between George W. Bush and Al Gore. We probably will not be able to know for sure who won until tomorrow."

"Oh well!" replied Greta, a bit discouraged by those results. "It looks like we will have to live again with one of those old parties and their unending partisanship politicking. I will miss President Perot and his coalition cabinet of ex-Democrats and ex-Republicans."

² PX: Short for 'Post Exchange'. Common name given to military supermarket stores on American bases.

21:19 (West Coast Time)
1402 South McDonald Street
West End District, Port Angeles
Clallam County, Washington State

Ingrid felt some frustration when it became evident from the televised reports she was watching that this presidential election would result in a close tie between the Democrats and the Republicans at nearly every level of government: she knew from long experience, having been a part-time presidential advisor to all the presidents between 1946 and 1999, both Democrats and Republicans, that political partisanship in a two-party system too often ended up in political paralysis and inaction. Closer to home for her, that close tie looked about to result in a split outcome in the state of Washington. While a Democrat looked to be on his way to win the state's gubernatorial race, the Republicans already had a comfortable advance for the congressional Sixth District of the House, which included the Clallam County, where she lived. As for the presidential election proper, it was still too tight to call. By the time that Ingrid was ready to go to bed, at around midnight, it looked like the most likely winner for the White House race was going to be the Republican nominee, George W. Bush. While she had met him a number of times in the past and had found him to be in essence a fairly decent man, she was afraid that, if elected in 2000 'C', he could repeat the same mistakes and miscalculations that his timeline counterpart had made in Timeline 'A', Nancy Laplante's original timeline, and this mostly thanks to bad or misguided advice he got from hard-right advisors and cabinet members.

16:41 (Eastern Standard Time)
Friday, November 10, 2000 'C'
The Oval Office, The White House
Washington, D.C.

"So, Ross, what did you want to talk about with me in such confidentiality?" asked George W. Bush as soon as he had sat down with Ross Perot in one of the easy

chairs in the discussion corner of the Oval Office. Perot, apparently most serious, answered him in a sober tone.

“George, I am going to talk to you about something your own father insisted on talking about with me in private only days after I had won the elections eight years ago. I am talking here about the Athena Files, which are still being kept under lock at the Pentagon.”

“The Athena Files, the ones brought from the future by Nancy Laplante in 1940?” asked Bush, not a little surprised. “But that was sixty years ago! With all that happened since, their present relevance must be minimal at best.”

“Most people would think so, George, but I can tell you that I still found them most useful to our country despite their age, the same way your father relied on them at the same time he relied on the advice of Ingrid Dows, Nancy Laplante’s adopted daughter. What Laplante brought to the United States in 1940 was both historical and technological information from the year 2012. In the case of the historical information of then immediate interest to the President of the time, Franklin D. Roosevelt, it gave a timeline of World events covering the period from 1940 to 2012. While F.D.R. took that information very seriously, some of his political and military top advisors didn’t prove as receptive. One of the early consequences of some of our leaders ignoring the data in the Athena Files, or of even refusing to consult them, was the disaster we suffered in Pearl Harbor on that fateful day of October 19 of 1941. Those Athena Files contained detailed information about the Japanese attack plan on Pear Harbor and on the other moves the Japanese would do that same day around the Pacific and Asia. Nancy Laplante had also personally warned Roosevelt in 1940, when she visited the White House, that the Japanese would be bound to change the date of their attack once they realized that she had given historical information from the future to the Allies as early as September of 1940. Well, the Japanese did just that but otherwise kept their attack plan as it was, while our obtuse military commanders did nothing at first, still expecting for a Japanese attack in December, the original historical date recorded in Laplante’s timeline. As a result, we suffered disastrous losses in Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked in October, losses which proved even higher than those suffered in the historical December attack. The one American military leader who acted properly with the Athena info was General Douglas MacArthur, in the Philippines, who had the good fortune of receiving a copy of the Athena Files, brought to him from England by the husband of Ingrid Dows, who had just been posted from London to Manila. By acting swiftly on that

information mana, MacArthur was able with the collaboration of the local Navy commander, Admiral Hart, to stave off the Japanese attempts to take the Philippines and also caused them very heavy losses. That is only one example of how crucial those Athena Files were for us.”

“But that was still 59 years ago, Ross. From what I know, these files did help us in other crisis and other conflicts but we acted on that data, contrary to 1941, and beat back our enemies. More recently, General Dows’ military genius helped us to defeat and defang in succession the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, the Caucasus Islamic Republic and Russia, leaving the United States alone as a World superpower. Today’s history is thus completely different from the history of 2000 known to Nancy Laplante. How could those old Athena Files still be relevant or useful, Ross?”

Perot gave Bush a cautionary look.

“One could think rightly so, George, but there is still information in those files which could prove most valuable to us. My advice to you about those Athena Files would be to do like I did about them: I appointed someone with a good analytical, open mind as custodian of those files, with the responsibility of studying them and preserving them and also to advise me if he found something of possible interest for the present or near future. I strongly advise you to either keep that custodian or to find a competent and dedicated person to replace him in the job.”

Bush slowly nodded his head as he thought that over, finally looking back at Perot.

“Alright, I will heed your advice, Ross, and will place someone I trust as custodian of those files. Uh, where are they kept exactly at the Pentagon?”

Perot smiled at that question and, getting up from his chair, when to his big presidential desk, where he retrieved a small card that he brought to Bush, who took the card and looked at it briefly before pocketing it.

“One last question about those files, Ross, but answer it only if you feel comfortable about it. Did those Athena Files predict your electoral victories in the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996?”

That question brought a devilish grin on Perot’s face.

“What they said was that I lost both of those elections and came in only as a distant fourth. For this election, the files did hit the mark: that the Reform Party would be marginalized because its political caucus ignored my advice and named Buchanan as their presidential candidate.”

“Well, I’ll be!” said Bush, smiling to himself at the irony of this. He then got up and shook hands with Perot. “Thanks for the advice, Ross. By the way, any chance that I could convince General Dows to return as a presidential advisor? From all that I have heard about her, including from my father, she is pure gold.”

“She is indeed pure gold, George. However, she is now doing what she loves the most: designing and piloting aircraft, so I doubt that even a crowbar could pull her out of here retirement place near Seattle. I do however have an advice for you about her.”

“Shoot!”

“If you ever feel like you could use her advice, then jump in a plane and go see her in Port Angeles. I am serious about that, George: she is that precious to us.”

“Gee! That’s some advice you are giving me, Ross. It could rile some of my advisors and cabinet members.”

“Fuck them! Dows is worth more by herself than the lot of them.” replied rather unceremoniously the lame duck President of the United States.

09:33 (Eastern Standard Time)
Thursday, November 16, 2000 ‘C’
Sub-basement #1, The Pentagon
Arlington, Virginia

Despite having been told in advance that the historical Athena Files were heavily protected and guarded, Lizzy Brown was still impressed by the number of armed Marines and identity checkpoints she had to go through before arriving at the door of a basement office in the Pentagon. That door was made of steel and was protected by both a closed-circuit security camera pointed at it and by a security card reader box fixed on the wall, along with an intercom box.

‘Hell! This must be about as secure as Fort Knox.’ thought the 26-year-old political intern and analyst as she approached the steel door. Thankfully, she had been issued with a proper security access card and she was able to swipe it and unlock the door, then enter in a surprisingly small room. It was however well lit and she saw at once the man with grey hair sitting in front of a computer console in a corner of the room. That man in turn looked at her and smiled before getting up from his chair and coming to Lizzy with a hand extended for a shake.

"You must be Miss Lizzy Brown, my replacement after all those years in the Mushroom Depository. I am Brent Widmark, Official Custodian of the Athena Files."

"The Mushroom Depository?" said the pretty African-American woman, confused. Widmark, who had to be in his early sixties, smiled at her reaction.

"Yes, the Mushroom Depository: where you are kept in the dark and fed shit. Mind you, that nickname given to this place by my Marine guards is quite unjust: it is well-enough lit and the salary is most decent, while the job is positively fascinating. However, I rarely seen the light of the Sun, especially in Winter, so the nickname does have some justification to it."

"I see!" said Lizzy, smiling in amusement. "So, how long have you been working here, Mister Widmark?"

"Please, call me simply Brent. To answer you, I have been working down here, safeguarding and studying the Athena Files, since 1981, when President Reagan asked me to fill this post after the retirement of the previous custodian, who himself had been in function since 1952."

"My god! This long?"

"Yes, and I never regretted taking that job. It may be a solitary one but, intellectually, it is the most fascinating job I ever had. Now, I will be able to happily retire...once they will have cut my tongue off."

Lizzy took a step back while a horrified look came on her face. However, Widmark broke into laughter nearly at once.

"Just a joke! Sorry if I scared you but the confidentiality and security level of those old files cannot be overstated. You are after all going to deal with Top Security, Special Access, NoForn³ Athena files. By the way, can I see your security pass, miss, plus two identity cards with photos?"

"Uh, of course!"

Widmark closely examined her pass and two identity cards before giving them back to Lizzy.

"Excellent, miss: you are now part of the Mushroom Depository. Don't worry about me abandoning you here right away: I will still stay on the job with you until this December Second, the date I will officially retire. I will thus have plenty of time to teach

³ NoForn : Short for 'No Foreign Nationals', a security caveat which means that a document could be read only by American citizens.

you the job before I go. And don't worry about being locked in alone with a man, Lizz: I am gay."

"Wow! You are of surprising frankness, Brent: few federal employees would dare disclose that kind of information to other employees."

"I know! However, I assume that if you were deemed trustworthy enough for this job, then you could keep secrets. Well, shall I show you your new kingdom, Lizzy?"

"Please do, Brent." replied Lizzy, who was quickly starting to like that man, even if he was a bit weird.

CHAPTER 6 – A BIT OF FLYING AROUND

08:55 (West Coast Time)

Monday, December 4, 2000 ‘C’

Prototype hangar, Hiller aircraft plant

Fairchild D. International Airport, Port Angeles

Washington State, U.S.A.



Ingrid, along with another Hiller test pilot, John Meredith, and a test flight engineer named Carmen Morena, contemplated for a moment the prototype of the Hiller SKYTRUCK which they were going to test fly this morning for the first time. The prototype, sitting inside the workshop cum hangar in which it had been built, followed the now classic Hiller VTOL formula designed and patented by Ingrid for her original AIRCAR some fifteen years ago. The size of a small airliner, its fuselage was basically shaped like a narrow section of wing profile with four ducted propellers mounted on pivots fore and aft and on each side of the fuselage. The six powerful turboshaft engines, each rated at more than 8,000 horsepower, turned four ducted contra-rotating propellers, which could lift vertically up to 55 metric tons, or over 65 metric tons on short takeoffs. The result may not have been exactly appealing to the eye but that formula was in Ingrid's opinion the most efficient design possible for a VTOL aircraft using propeller propulsion, something that the commercial success of the Hiller AIRCAR, PELICAN, SUPERCAR and AIRBIKE attested to. If her SKYTRUCK performed as expected, then Hiller was going to have a VTOL aircraft of unparalleled capability and flexibility of use and should then be able to sell hundreds of them around the World.

"Well, time to see if this beast will hold its promises, guys." said Ingrid to her two crewmembers before starting to walk towards the aircraft. The three of them then climbed aboard via an opened forward side airstair, a combination door and staircase often found on smaller civilian aircraft. Once inside, they went to the door separating the forward facilities section and the cockpit, entering the latter and taking place in their respective seats. The cockpit area was unusually wide compared to that of most other aircraft, simply due to the fact that the fuselage width was eight meters from nose to tail, so that it could act like a lift-providing airfoil surface. However, that wide cockpit area

also provided the crew with a large window area, thus giving the pilots an excellent view around their aircraft. Ingrid took the pilot's seat, while John Meredith took the copilot's seat to her right and Carmen Morena sat at the flight engineer's station, situated further to the right and behind, on one side of the cockpit area. The mission specialist's seat, situated to the left and behind Ingrid's seat, was going to be left unoccupied for this inaugural test flight.

First switching on the various systems of their SKYTRUCK, Ingrid directed her crew through the preflight checklist and, when completed to her satisfaction, signaled by hand to the hangar mechanics that they could open the hangar doors and tow their aircraft out in the open. Ingrid made a smirk as the nose of her aircraft started emerging out of the hangar and into the grey daylight of this December early morning.

"Watch out for Boeing spies with cameras, guys: we are going to create some curiosity around us this morning."

"They will probably say something like 'what the fuck is this thing?'" replied Carmen Morena, making John Meredith chuckle briefly.

"I hope that they say that, Carmen. We kept a pretty tight veil of secrecy about this prototype. The only thing that they saw come out of this plant during the last year was a succession of PELICANs destined for the Navy."

"And we will keep our commercial competition guessing by only doing conventional takeoffs and landings in the next few days." added Ingrid. "We first need to make sure that our new SKYTRUCK behaves correctly in conventional flight mode and that it doesn't hide some instability problem. I'm going to contact the control tower now."

In the control tower of the Fairchild International Airport, the two air controllers on duty, who were accustomed to have mostly small private planes and a few small to medium airliners, grabbed their binoculars when they saw the SKYTRUCK, now fully out of its hangar, situated some 300 meters from the control tower.

"What the... Look at that thing that just rolled out of the Hiller plant. It looks like a Hiller PELICAN but is much bigger." said one of the air controllers, Jeff Chandler. His colleague, Michael Sturgis, examined the new aircraft for a few seconds before checking his list of registered flight plans for the day.

“There it is, Jeff: the new Hiller SKYTRUCK, registered as Hiller X-06, is due to make its first test flight this morning. Basically, it will take off and then fly west towards the coast before conducting some test flying for a couple of hours.”

“And they are now calling us.” replied Chandler. “Hiller X-06, from Fairchild Tower, you have permission to taxi to Runway 8/26 and to take off when ready: there are no other aircraft in the circuit right now... Acknowledged! Have a good flight, Hiller X-06.”

Chandler and Sturgis then watched on as the Hiller SKYTRUCK, which was about as big as any other aircraft which customarily used their airport, rolled to one end of the main runway, then stopped there for a few minutes, probably to make its final pre-takeoff checks, before starting to accelerate down the runway with a roar denoting the power of its engines. It then took off in a very short distance, something that didn't really surprise the two air controllers: Hiller specialized in making VSTOL⁴ aircraft, after all.

In the cockpit of the SKYTRUCK, Ingrid felt the usual joy she experienced every time she took off in an aircraft: flying was still her life, always had been since her first experience in glider flying at the tender age of thirteen in Germany.

“We took off in less than 400 meters and we didn't need to push our engines to maximum or pivot our ducted propellers a few degrees upward. This beast has some serious guts.”

“Still in European metric mode instead of feet and knots, Ingrid?” said her copilot in a playful tone. That made Ingrid grin to Meredith.

“And why not? This outdated Imperial System is going to eventually go the way of the dinosaurs. But you are right: when talking on the radio, I will revert to Caveman speech, as per international aviation rules.”

Carmen Morena, who was watching the engine parameters carefully on her instruments panel, shook her head in amusement.

“Here we go again: the perennial conflict between European and American Speak.”

“And what's wrong with that, Carmen? Even the British saw the light and now use the Metric System instead of their old Imperial System. The United States is now

⁴ VSTOL : Vertical and Short Takeoff and Landing.

about the only country in the World which still uses the Imperial System. But I diverge! How are the engines behaving?"

"Smoothly and as they should be, Ingrid. Those Allison turboshaft engines are after all known for their reliability. So, what kind of tests will we do first?"

"Once over the Pacific, we will first concentrate on testing the stability of our aircraft in all axis while performing basic maneuvers at medium altitude and speed. If we don't detect any problem, then we will try some transitions to STOL mode but we will refrain from trying full VTOL mode during this flight. We have to learn to walk before trying to run with this baby."

That made both Meredith and Morena nod their heads in approval: Ingrid may have had a long history of flying exploits but she was no unnecessary risk-taker.

Three and a half hours later, they landed back at Fairchild International Airport and rolled back inside the Hiller prototype workshop/hangar, where Ingrid shut down her four engines and did a final check before getting up from her pilot's seat.

"Well, that first flight went as well as I had hoped for, guys. We will gather our flight data, then will bring them to our test flight office before going for lunch. I don't know about you but I am getting quite hungry."

"Me too!" said Carmen. "What do you have in mind for tomorrow, Ingrid?"

"We will continue to follow our pre-established flight test program, Carmen. I want to make sure that our baby doesn't hide any design vice before trying more unorthodox flying. After all, Rome wasn't built in one day."

18:24 (West Coast Time)

Ingrid's home, South McDonald Street

West District, Port Angeles

Ingrid was tired but happy when she parked back her Firebird TRANS AM in her garage: she had worked hard at analyzing the results and data from her first test flight of the SKYTRUCK but the results were very promising, while the prototype had behaved very well in flight. Locking her car and closing her garage door, she walked to the entrance of her house and was about to unlock it when she spotted an envelope inside her mail box. Taking out that envelope and examining it, she suddenly felt joy fill her: it was from her old friend and wingman Shirley Slade, who had been working with another

old friend of Ingrid as a pilot for Air Philippines in Manila. Hurrying to unlock her door, Ingrid entered her house and closed and locked back the door before opening the envelope and extracting from it two folded paper pages and two small pictures. The pictures made her smile at once: they showed her friends, Shirley Slade and Elizabeth Gardner, veteran pilots from the 99th Composite Wing, nicknamed 'The Fifinellas', which she had personally formed as an air group in 1942 and then led into combat during World War 2 and the First Korean War. In the photos, taken recently, her two friends appeared to be in their late fifties but also looked to be still fit and healthy. However, Ingrid knew very well that both of them were born in 1921, thus were presently 79-years-old. Their apparent youth was in fact due to having been rejuvenated by the Archangel Michael in 1985, at Ingrid's request. Reading the two-page letter made Ingrid's smile widen: they were planning to visit her during the coming holidays while taking some vacation time from their flying job in the Philippines. All ideas of making supper for herself now set aside, she hurried upstairs to her private study, in order to write back to her friends and tell them that they were most welcome to come to Port Angeles.

17:03 (West Coast Time)

Thursday, December 21, 2000 'C'

Passenger terminal, Fairchild International Airport

Port Angeles



Elizabeth Gardner, age 21 in 1942.



Shirley Slade, age 21 in 1942.

Having been warned in advance by telephone of their arrival by plane from Seattle, Ingrid was on hand to greet Shirley Slade and Elizabeth Gardner when they

entered the small passenger terminal of the Fairchild International Airport, walking in after disembarking from the small twin-engine prop aircraft which had brought them to Port Angeles. Since it was a domestic flight, Ingrid was able to go hug them joyfully and kiss them on the cheeks the moment they were inside the terminal.

“Shirley! Libby! It is so good to see you again after all these years.”

“And it also a joy to see you, Ingrid. You look as youthful as ever.”

Ingrid nodded at that while examining the faces of her two friends. Both looked to be around their late fifties, despite being in reality 79 years-old, something they could thank the rejuvenation done on them fifteen years ago by the Archangel Michael. There was however something that she noticed in their expression, which seemed a bit guarded.

“Is something bothering you, girls? You look a bit preoccupied.”

The smiles on Shirley’s and Elizabeth’s face then faded, to be replaced by sober looks.

“I see that you are still as perceptive as ever, Ingrid. The truth is that we didn’t tell you everything about us in our letter. However, we would prefer to talk with you about that in private.”

Her own smile fading, Ingrid stared at her friends for a moment, then pointed at the luggage carrousel of the arrival terminal.

“Let’s recuperate your luggage first, then I will be able to drive you to my home. It is less than a mile from the airport.”

Keeping in her head the questions she now had about what happened to her friends, Ingrid helped them as their suitcases rolled past them on the carrousel. The sheer number of their suitcases however both surprised and worried her.

“Six suitcases and bags? How long is your vacation in the United States supposed to be?”

“We’re back in the United States for good, Ingrid: we don’t work anymore for Air Philippines. We will explain once at your house.”

Now frankly worried for her friends, Ingrid still managed to stay mum and put their luggage on two baggage carts, then led them out of the arrival terminal and to her car. She scratched her head when she saw that the mountain of luggage brought by Shirley and Elizabeth was not going to fit in the trunk of her TRANS AM.

“Gee! How are we going to fit all of this in my car?”

“Let me sit in the back, then pile suitcases and bags over me, Ingrid.” suggested Elizabeth. Ingrid nodded to that and stuffed what she could into her car trunk, then put the three remaining suitcases on the rear seat and over Elizabeth’s legs. Getting behind

the wheel, she started her engine and backed out of her parking spot, then started rolling at moderate speed towards her house, situated to the North of the airport. She tried to thaw the atmosphere a bit by making an announcement to her friends while driving.

"You will be happy to learn that my daughter Nancy is going to visit me just after Christmas. I believe that you never saw her as a grown girl, right?"

"Correct! She was still a toddler when we saw her in Vandenberg."

"Then, I am sure that she will be happy to see you again, Shirley."

They then fell mostly silent during the rest of the drive. Parking her car in her garage, Ingrid helped her two friends with their suitcases and unlocked the front door for them, then led them up to the upper floor, where they were able to drop their suitcases in Ingrid's guest bedroom.

"Alright! Let's go down to the lounge, so that we could discuss at ease, girls." Her two friends nodded at that and followed her down to the lounge, where they sat in a sofa pointed to by Ingrid, who herself sat in an easy chair set to one side of the sofa.

"Okay, girls, what is happening with you?"

It was Elizabeth who answered her this time, talking in a voice tainted with discouragement.

"Basically, we were doing well in Manila and were greatly appreciated by the Air Philippines staff at the airport...that is until a new CEO took control of the company some three months ago. That man quickly proved to be a complete misogynist, on top of being an incompetent. Unfortunately, he had obtained his position thanks to some dirty politicking and family influence, so nobody dared put him back on the right track. Last November, we were notified that the company would retire us 'due to our advanced age' and that we would be terminated before the end of the year. We tried to plea our cause but the bastard refused to listen to us. By the way, he also fired most of the women who occupied managerial positions at the company at about the same time he terminated us. We then tried to find employment with the other airlines flying out of Manila but got nowhere. With our last paycheck deposited in mid-December in our bank accounts, we then had no choice but to sell our furniture, leave our apartments and go back to the United States, with the hope of finding employment as pilots here. Unfortunately, we faced even less sympathy than in Manila, being told that we were too old to be commercial pilots. While that is technically true, if you look at our biological age, we are still perfectly fit to fly in my opinion but nobody listened to that argument. To

make things worse, when we returned to our native state of Illinois, we found out that our direct relatives were all dead or in old age establishments, while the few nephews and nieces we still had barely recognized us. While they stayed polite, they did not or could not offer us any help. So, here we are, with a few suitcases being the only things we still have and with nowhere to go. We still touch our old military pension but, since we retired from the service decades ago, inflation has seriously impacted our pensions, while we got only a small separation bonus from Air Philippines. It... We..."

Elizabeth then choked up as tears appeared in her eyes. Ingrid hurriedly jumped out of her chair and went to sit next to her, passing an arm around her shoulders.

"Don't worry, Elizabeth. You and Shirley still have many friends, including me. Tell me what you would like to do in the coming future and I will do my best to make it happen."

"Thanks, Ingrid! You are too kind. Both me and Shirley would like to be able to continue flying for a living but all the possibilities we explored were closed to us, due to our age."

"Would you prefer to fly as a civilian or as a military pilot?"

Ingrid's question made both Elizabeth and Shirley nearly jump back in their sofa.

"Military pilots, us? They would be the last to accept us and you know it, Ingrid."

"Why would they refuse a pair of young and highly experienced aviators with chests covered with medals?"

The two women stared in incomprehension at her for a moment before Shirley suddenly understood what she had in mind.

"You want to rejuvenate us again? Do you have that power yourself? Last time, it was an archangel who rejuvenated us."

"I know but I do have some power of rejuvenation, girls. In fact, I used it once a few years ago, to help a trio of Russian friends who were in big trouble with their government. And if I am not powerful enough to fully rejuvenate you, then my daughter, who is a half-angel, will be able to do it. She in fact could easily return you to what you looked like when you joined the Fifinellas in 1942, when you were 21-years-old. Once that will be done, then you will be able to get the jobs you want."

"But nobody will believe us if we tell them that we are 79-years-old, Ingrid!"

"Pooh pooh! And you think that it was always easy for me to get into some of the nightclubs I went into? I was carded more times than I could remember. You will just need to get updated identity papers once rejuvenated."

“And you think that by itself will be easy?”

“Shirley, I still have a lot of powerful and influential contacts around the country, including at the Pentagon and at the White House. Believe me when I say that I can arrange that fairly easily.”

Shirley and Elizabeth looked hesitantly at each other, then looked back at Ingrid.

“Very well, Ingrid. If this could really work, then we would love to join back the Air Force.”

“What about joining the Space Corps?” countered at once Ingrid, stunning her two friends for a moment.

“Us, go into Space?”

“Why not? The only obstacle I would see is the qualification requirements for a science or engineering diploma. You do have diplomas, I hope?”

“Yes, we do, from our previous service in the Air Force. Thank you for being willing to do so much for us, Ingrid.”

“Friends are friends!” said Ingrid while staring at them. “Ready for a little fountain of youth?”

“Let me do this, Ingrid.” suddenly said a male voice from behind the sofa where Shirley and Elizabeth were sitting. Snapping their heads around, both women then saw a tall and very handsome man dressed in a white robe and who was smiling down at them.

“ARCHANGEL MICHAEL!” shouted in unison the two women. The archangel nodded his head once while still smiling.

“Just Michael will do, my friends. Come and hug me tight.”

Shirley and Elizabeth didn’t have to be told twice and nearly jumped over the sofa in order to get to him. With both of his arms around the women, Michael then closed his eyes and started glowing progressively brighter and brighter, until Ingrid couldn’t look directly at the trio. After about thirty seconds, the glow decreased in brightness, until it was all gone. Ingrid felt intense joy at seeing that her two friends now looked in their early twenties. However, her friends in turn gasped while staring at her with big eyes.

“INGRID, YOU’RE NOW A TEENAGER!”

That froze Ingrid for a moment, until Michael flashed a big, malicious grin at her.



Ingrid Dows, rejuvenated...again!

"You think that I would rejuvenate your two friends while not gifting you with a bit of my power, Ingrid? You are now as beautiful and tempting as you had ever been. Oh, I forgot a little detail about all three of you."

At first, Ingrid and her two friends didn't understand what Michael was talking about. Then, Shirley looked down at her chest and opened her eyes wide.

"MY TITS! THEY ARE GROWING!"

"MINE TOO!" said Elizabeth in a disbelieving tone. Ingrid, who had already had her breasts enlarged once via spiritual power, simply smiled while watching her own breasts grow rapidly in size, until she spoke up.

"Okay, Michael, that's enough! I don't want to look like Dolly Parton."

"If you say so, Ingrid. Well, my job is now done here. Have fun with your new bodies, girls."

Michael then disappeared from where he stood, leaving the three young women...or rather two young women and one teenager, alone in the lounge. Shirley, whose breasts were now bulging out of her bra, removed her shirt and unclipped her bra to relieve the pressure on her breasts, then removed her bra entirely.

"Oof! My bra was nearly stopping me from breathing properly. My God! With such a nice chest, I should be able to catch every man around me."

Elizabeth, who did not wear a bra due to the original small size of her breasts, now had her chest bulging through her T-shirt. Going to a wall mirror near the entrance door and looking at herself, she held her face in her two hands, still having difficulty believing what had just happened. For good measure, she pulled up her T-shirt to better examine her enhanced chest and liked what she saw.

"Hell, why didn't I have that kind of chest when I was in college?"

"Well, you could now visit back your old college and see how the boys there react to you, Elizabeth." said Ingrid jokingly before becoming serious again. "How about that we go have supper together, my friends? I know a really nice restaurant where they serve a great clam chowder soup. They also have a nice smoked salmon chowder."

"Clam chowder? I haven't eaten one in years. What are we waiting for?"

13:19 (West Coast Time)

Friday, December 22, 2000 'C'

Head offices of the Hiller Aircraft Corporation

Firebaugh, California

Jeff Hiller had risen from his chair behind his executive desk, so that he could greet Ingrid with a handshake, but then froze while staring with incredulity at her.

"My God, Ingrid! What happened to you? You look so...young."

What Jeff didn't dare add was that he had also noticed how her chest, which had been already quite attractive before, was now most prominent, making him react in an involuntary way. Ingrid, with Shirley and Elizabeth standing behind her, gave him a disarming smile.

"This is the new me, Jeff: younger, better and sexier than ever, thanks to some supernatural rejuvenation from an angel. However, I didn't come to see you to parade my renewed beauty, although I suspect that you are not going to protest about having to look at me. I came to ask a favor from you, on behalf of my two friends here."

"Hell, I could spend the whole day just admiring you, Ingrid. Alright, what can I do for your friends?"

"Let me first present them to you, Jeff: to my left is Elizabeth Gardner and to my right is Shirley Slade. Both of them fought as fighter pilots at my side in World War 2 and are 79-years-old in biological terms. They were rejuvenated at the same time as me yesterday, in my home in Port Angeles."

Jeff looked in turn at both young women before something came to his mind.

"Hey, aren't you the two Air Philippines pilots who managed to foil a hijacking plot some five years ago? That was all over the news then and you were described as veterans from the Fifinellas, a group of female military aviators I always admired."

"It's us alright, Mister Hiller," answered Elizabeth Gardner, reassured by the tone of voice used by Jeff Hiller to describe them. "Unfortunately, Air Philippines recently got a new CEO whose main attribute is crass misogyny. That new CEO, once in place, basically fired or terminated all his senior female staff and pilots, pretending that we were not up to par by his standards. In our case, he relied on the excuse that we were too old to fly for his company, although we were then physically in our fifties. Having worked as pilots in the Philippines for nearly fifteen years, we suddenly found ourselves without a job, with only our old military pensions to sustain us, so we came to the United States to ask for Ingrid's help. In response, her guardian archangel, Michael, apparently heard our pleas and came to Ingrid's house, where he rejuvenated us back to how we were as young women when we enlisted in the Fifinellas in 1942. Now, we wish to continue our lives as pilots, so came to see you with Ingrid."

“Did you consider joining back the Air Force? You were considered as elite fighter pilots before, no?”

It was Shirley who answered Jeff on this.

“We did at first, on the advice of Ingrid. However, we then quickly realized that rejoining the Air Force after having been the beneficiaries of military pensions for nearly twenty years would entail a truly nightmarish administrative and financial circus, including the need for us to reimburse hundreds of thousands of dollars of pension money to the government before we could reenlist. So, we decided on trying for civilian pilot jobs. Unfortunately, before visiting Ingrid in Port Angeles, we had sent our resumés to dozens of airlines and aircraft companies in the United States but were turned down by all of them because of our age. We were becoming truly desperate by the time we went to see Ingrid yesterday.”

Jeff looked soberly at the two young women then, truly moved by their plight. He had truly admired the female pilots of the Fifinellas during his youth and still did, even though many of them had by now died of old age.

“Alright, let’s sit down on those sofas in my discussion corner, ladies.”

Encouraged by the initial reaction from Jeff, Elizabeth and Shirley went to sit in one sofa, while Ingrid and Jeff took easy chairs. Jeff, now armed with a pen and a notepad, looked first at Shirley.

“Alright, Miss Slade. Could you list your qualifications as a pilot, military and civilian, including the types you flew in and your total of flying hours?”

“With pleasure, Mister Hiller. I already had 340 hours of flying time on small private aircraft when I joined the Fifinellas in 1942. I was then trained on the Lockheed P-38N fighter before being deployed to the Pacific Theatre on P-38s. I fought in the Guadalcanal Campaign, the Papua-New Guinea Campaign and the Dutch West Indies Campaign before World War 2 came to an end. I then stayed with the Fifinellas after the war, still flying on P-38s while stationed in the Philippines. I also fought in the First Korean War, then in the Indochina War, where I flew on F-83 supersonic jet fighters. From Indochina, I went to Palestine with my unit, still flying a F-83, and downed a number of Arab aircraft in that conflict. Afterwards, I was posted to Germany, where I took command of a F-83 squadron and fought in the East Europe War of 1955, shooting down an additional seven enemy aircraft. After Germany, I was posted to the United States and continued to fly on F-83 until I retired from the service in 1983 with the rank of colonel. That was when me and Elizabeth decided to go to the Philippines after being

turned down as pilots by American civilian airlines. There, we were hired by Air Philippines and flew on Convair 800 for over fourteen years before being terminated. I personally have a total of 14,755 flying hours recorded and was credited with 41 air victories by the Air Force.”

“Impressive!” said Jeff, meaning it, before looking at Elizabeth Gardner. “And you, Miss Gardner?”

“I basically followed a similar path to Shirley and flew in the same aircraft types and in the same wars. I retired from the Air Force in 1983 with the rank of lieutenant-colonel and with 33 enemy aircraft credited shot down. My total of flying hours stands at 13,990 hours.”

Taking note of that on his notepad, Jeff then sat back in his easy chair and looked in silence at the two women for a moment before speaking.

“I may have something for you, ladies. Know that my company’s business is presently booming, thanks to the various designs invented for us by Ingrid. We are actually barely able to cope with the orders we get from our customers around the World and are building and delivering a monthly average total of over fourteen AIRCARs, AIRBIKEs, AIRBUS and PELICANs for our customers. As a result, our pilots used to deliver those machines are quite overwhelmed and could use some extra help. Know that my company uses, among other transport aircraft, a pair of Convair 800-200, which we use to carry AIRCARs and AIRBIKEs to their customers in the United States and in Europe. The Convair 800 is actually perfect for that role, as it is very economical to use, is reliable and can land at about any airport, including small general aviation airports, where many of our customers are. I can thus offer to both of you full-time positions as Convair 800 pilots. If you accept those positions, you will then operate and fly from our main production plant in Palo Alto, California, with an annual salary of 105,000 dollars. So, what do you say, ladies?”

Elizabeth and Shirley looked at each other with big grins on their faces, then exploded into a loud cheer.

CHAPTER 7 – TERROR ATTACK



20:29 (Afghanistan Time)

House of Osama Bin Laden, Kandahar

Afghanistan

Osama Bin Laden did not like the expression on the face of his chief of operations when the man came into his office after knocking on the door.

“What is it, Musab?”

“I have bad news about our planned operation in the United States: our main operators who were learning to fly planes there were found and arrested by the American FBI. What is left of our network there is now being hunted down by the Americans.”

“WHAT? HOW COULD THE AMERICANS HAVE FOUND OUT ABOUT OUR OPERATION?”

“We are not sure, Amir. However, my assistant reminded me that the Americans have been in possession for decades already of documents supposedly brought from the future, documents which describe History prior to the Christian year 2012 in detail. Maybe the Americans used those documents from the future to predict our attack and kill it before we could launch it.”

Still fuming, Osama Bin Laden did have to agree that this was a plausible explanation for this disaster. However, abandoning his ideas of making the Americans pay for the many

insults to Islam they had committed was out of the question. He finally looked back at his chief of operations and pointed an index at him.

“Find out another way to kill many Americans, a way we never used before. Then the Americans will not be able to predict what we will do.”

“A new way... Er, yes, Amir.” said Musab al Zarkawi, bowing to Bin Laden before leaving his office. As he walked down the hallway of the house towards the room housing his operations center, Musab scratched his head.

“A new way to kill many Americans...”

06:21 (West Coast Time)

Prototype workshop/hangar, Hiller Aircraft Plant

Fairchild D. International Airport, Port Angeles

Washington State, U.S.A.

“Get us at least a few first customers for our SKYTRUCK in Europe, Elliot: we will need orders to at least recoup the costs of designing and developing our newest baby.”

Elliot Goulding, Hiller’s Vice-President for Sales, nodded his head once while shaking hands with Jeff Hiller as they stood next to the SKYTRUCK prototype.

“I already have a few potential customers interested in our new aircraft. I sent a few weeks ago offers and invitations to come and look at our SKYTRUCK to dozens of airlines and governments who will have commercial representatives at the Le Bourget Air Show⁵. Since our aircraft occupies a niche that no other aircraft manufacturer has been able to fill yet, I am confident that we will have a good success at Le Bourget.”

“I believe so as well, Elliot. I saw that you loaded aboard our prototype a number of scale models of the various types of mission pods we designed for the SKYTRUCK.”

“Correct! I wish that we could have had a second prototype ready to go to Le Bourget with our first one, so that we could display in real life our general cargo pod, to supplement the search and rescue and waterbomber pod carried by our first prototype. However, I am confident that demonstrating our S.A.R. pod will be enough to wet the appetite of many potential customers.”

⁵ Le Bourget Air Show : Aerospace display held every two years in Le Bourget Airport, near Paris, France. The Le Bourget Air Show is the biggest such aerospace display in the World.

"I think so as well, Elliot. Well, have a nice trip and enjoy yourself in Paris."

"Thanks, Jeff!"

With his two suitcases and three boxes of printed advertising booklets already inside the prototype, Goulding then went to the forward left side airstair door of the aircraft and climbed aboard the SKYTRUCK, which was already fully fueled and checked out for its long trip to France. Inside, he went to the cockpit, where the crew was already sitting in the ten seats installed there in two rows: a front row of four seats for the pilot, copilot, flight engineer and mission specialist and a second row of six seats lining the back wall of the cockpit. Since the SKYTRUCK was designed so that a major portion of its fuselage-cum-main wing could be quickly changed to accommodate various specialized mission pods and since it was relatively slow compared to jet aircraft and thus needed to carry a relief crew for long trips, those extra seats only helped add flexibility of use to the aircraft. Goulding then smiled to Ingrid Dows, who was occupying the pilot's seat.

"Well, I believe that we are ready to go, Ingrid."

"We indeed are, Elliot!" replied Ingrid before signaling to the technician driving the aircraft tractor linked to her aircraft that he could start pulling the SKYTRUCK out of its hangar. As the aircraft started moving, Goulding went to sit in one of the back-row seats, with the three members of the relief crew occupying other seats of that row. As he buckled his safety harness, Goulding smiled to Elizabeth Gardner, the designated relief copilot for this flight.

"I can't wait to see how the public and commercial and government representatives will react to our SKYTRUCK. It may not be the prettiest aircraft but no other aircraft can do what it can in terms of capabilities."

"Who else produces an aircraft that can deliver up to thirty tons of payload at the vertical, without the need for an airfield or even a dirt runway? Apart from various government coast guards around the World, I believe that our aircraft will be perfect for charter airlines, which have to transport a mix of cargo and passengers between points which often have only limited landing facilities. The trick for us will be to convince our prospective customers that buying our SKYTRUCK will mean more profits for them in the long run."

"And that's where I will operate my magic, Miss Gardner. This trip will undoubtedly be one of the most important ones in my career in selling aircraft. By the way, Ingrid, how advanced are you on that other secret aircraft project you were working on?"

“Quite advanced when it comes to its basic design, Elliot. However, I still have a lot of calculations and wind tunnel testing to do before we could start the detailed design work on it.”

“Secret aircraft project? What secret aircraft project?” asked Shirley Slade, confused. Ingrid smiled at her reaction.

“Sorry if I hid things from most of you guys but I kept this latest project of mine as discrete as possible, in order not to see one of Hiller’s rivals steal my ideas. Basically, I have in mind a new type of jet airliner which could hopefully replace the thousands of Boeing B-717s, which I helped design some fifty years ago, which are presently in service around the World. My planned Hiller ARROW would be a VTOL-capable jet airliner with high subsonic speeds, transcontinental range and a capacity of around 250 to 300 passengers. It will be more economical to operate than the B-717, will be a bit faster, will have a longer range and will also have the benefit of not needing any runway or airport, since it will be a VTOL aircraft. It will also look a bit like our SKYTRUCK but with much sleeker lines. My main problem with that project though will be its production once it is tested and accepted in service. In view of the large number of B-717s which will be in need or replacement in the next few years, Hiller’s production capacity will never be sufficient to produce it, by a long shot. Me, Elliot and Jeff Hiller are presently studying the possibility of producing my future ARROW in collaboration with Boeing. We would build the more specialized variants of the ARROW, while Boeing could produce the basic airliner variants for us under licence. That way, Hiller would still profit from those bulk sales while not having to build a brand new assembly plant for the ARROW, something that would be way outside the financial capabilities of our company.”

“That’s right, Ingrid! Only twenty years ago, the Hiller Corporation was nearly moribund and produced only a few light helicopters, that is until you showed up with your AIRCAR design. I am however confident that we will be able to present to Boeing a deal that will prove juicy enough for them to sign on.”

Goulding then fell silent and concentrated on what he could see through the windows of the cockpit section as the SKYTRUCK was being towed to a spot in front of its workshop/hangar. As soon as the aircraft tractor was uncoupled from it, Ingrid started one by one her six powerful turboshaft engines, then conducted a pre-takeoff checklist with her copilot before starting to roll towards one end of the main airport runway. It normally would have taken off in short roll mode but this time the SKYTRUCK took off in conventional mode, being heavily loaded with its maximum internal fuel capacity of thirty

tons and with Ingrid wanting to burn as little fuel as needed. It thus rolled on the runway for about 700 meters before rising off the ground, to then turn towards the East after taking some altitude.

16:08 (Eastern Standard Time)

Bridge of the cruise liner PRINCESS OF THE SEAS

Approaching the coast of New Jersey, on the American East Coast

Captain Roger Knudsen was quite satisfied with how this cruise trip to the Bahamas with some 3,442 passengers aboard had gone. Launched some two years ago, his 68,000-ton, 311-meter-long liner had shown a few minor mechanical glitches during the voyage but that was to be expected in such a young ship, which also happened to be the first of its class to be built. Besides, his engineering team had proved very professional and skilled in dealing with those minor problems. Now, he was only a few hours from completing the nine-day trip and from docking in New York. Using his binoculars to check for the ship traffic in his vicinity, he saw two ships in the distance: one cargo ship heading East and one large tanker ship heading West on a roughly parallel course to the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS and slightly ahead of it. The liner was in fact catching up to the tanker ship quite fast, as it appeared to sail at only half the speed of the liner. That didn't surprise Knudsen one bit: his liner was quite fast, while typical tanker ships, especially when loaded down with oil, had quite a low top speed. Pivoting on the spot, Knudsen then looked at the approaching American coast, barely visible on the western horizon. He was still looking westward with his binoculars when he heard his bridge officer exclaim himself.

"What is this idiot doing?"

Snapping his head to his right, he quickly saw why his bridge officer had spoken up: the tanker ship was now in the process of turning hard to its left, a move that would make it cut directly across the path of the liner. Anger immediately flared in Knudsen at that most unprofessional display of poor seamanship and of disregard for the most basic navigation rules.

"Mister Chiarelli, blow our horn twice to remind that idiot that we are here."

"Yes, Captain!"

Knudsen then watched for how the captain of that tanker ship would react on hearing the horn from the liner. To his complete surprise and incredulity, that tanker then

seemed to accelerate at maximum power while heading straight for the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS.

“Is that captain mad? HELM, VEER EIGHTY DEGREES TO PORT! MISTER CHIARELLI, CALL OUR ENGINES TO FULL POWER!”

For the next minute, Knudsen kept hoping to see that tanker ship veer away but that was in vain. A nasty, scary thought then came to his mind.

“THIS IS AN INTENTIONAL ATTEMPT AT RAMMING US! MISTER CHIARELLI, CLOSE ALL WATERTIGHT DOORS AT ONCE! SOUND THE COLLISION ALARM!”

An alarm started ringing all over the ship the moment that the bridge officer punched the large red button which would make the watertight doors across the whole ship close tight. The passengers, who were either in their cabins, on the open deck or in the boutiques and restaurants of the ship, mostly froze on hearing the alarm or looked at each other, confused. The members of the crew, the majority of which were service personnel like cooks, maids and janitors, also reacted slowly and in a confused manner, having only minimal training in emergency drills. As for the sea-trained officers and sailors of the crew, they did react properly and quickly but there was very little they could do right now about the impending collision. The frantic helmsman of the liner nearly managed to avoid the collision with the tanker ship but ‘nearly’ was not good enough. The 110,000-ton tanker ship, fully loaded with Saudi crude oil, impacted at a speed of fourteen knots the right side of the liner, close to its stern. The massive bow of the tanker, with its prominent underwater bow bulge, ripped through the hull of the cruise liner, destroying its propellers and rudders and breaking the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS in two, with a sixty-meter-long section of the stern breaking off and sinking in a mere minute. The colossal impact threw to the deck every crewmember and passenger on the liner, with many of those suffering wounds from slamming against walls, corners or pieces of furniture, or from falling down sets of stairs. The last-minute closing of the watertight doors however saved the whole ship from sinking outright in minutes and what was left of the ship continued to float, although flooding of some compartments made the liner take a pronounced list to starboard. As for the tanker ship, it survived the impact mostly intact, save for a crushed and deformed bow section. However, that crushed bow caused the forward-most crude oil holds to start gushing highly flammable oil in large quantities into the sea, where it started to float in a progressively expanding layer. Then came something possibly even more damaging than the collision itself. Shaken

but only slightly wounded by the impact of the collision, one of the two Al-Qaeda operatives who had taken control of the bridge of the tanker ship ran down to the open weather deck, then started to run as fast as he could towards the bow. Once close to the part of the bow that had been crushed, the Al-Qaeda operative went to the railing on the starboard side and took a white phosphorus incendiary grenade from one of his pockets. Looking down at the oil now gushing out of the tanker's forward tanks, the Saudi pulled out the safety pin of his grenade, then let it drop overboard while shouting as loud as he could.

"ALLAH U AKBAR!"

The moment that the incendiary grenade burst in the water, projecting white phosphorus around and over the floating crude oil, it ignited at once the tons of crude oil already in the water, creating a mighty flash of flames which started to blacken the white hull of the liner and roasted alive the unlucky passengers and crewmembers nearest to the tanker. With the sea itself being apparently on fire and with the layer of floating and burning oil steadily getting larger, the panicked passengers and crewmembers ran towards the bow of the ship in order to escape the flames' searing heat.

Some four kilometers away, on the bridge of the cargo ship M.V. SOUTHERN STAR, Captain James Whitby could only look with unmitigated horror at the tragedy that had just happened within sight of his ship. With both the tanker ship and the cruise liner now partially engulfed in flames, he finally shook himself into action and shouted at his helmsman.

"HELM, TURN TO HARD STARBOARD! MACHINES FULL AHEAD! GET US TO CLOSE TO THE BOW OF THE CRUISE LINER! WE WILL NEED TO BE AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO IT TO HELP THOSE POOR PEOPLE EVACUATE THEIR SHIP."

"AYE, CAPTAIN!"

Whitby then ran to the radio sets installed near the helm and picked up the handset of the HF radio tuned to the International Distress frequency.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY! THIS IS THE CARGO SHIP M.V. SOUTHERN STAR, PRESENTLY LOCATED 92 NAUTICAL MILES EAST-SOUTH-EAST OF NEW YORK. A LARGE TANKER SHIP JUST COLLIDED WITH A CRUISE LINER AND BOTH ARE NOW IN FLAMES. I AM GOING TO HELP AS MUCH AS I CAN BUT I WILL NEED HELP, LOTS OF IT. OVER!"

To his relief, he got a response just after repeating his call.

“M.V. SOUTHERN STAR, this is the U.S. Coast Guard Center in Boston. Please describe the present situation, over.”

“To Coast Guard Boston: a large tanker ship heading West deliberately collided with a big cruise liner also heading West and apparently sheared off the stern section of the liner. The oil contained in the tanker ship then burst into flames. The cruise liner is still afloat but is listing to starboard and is partially in flame as well. I am now approaching the cruise liner in order to help evacuate the people aboard it, over.”

“SOUTHERN STAR, did you say that the tanker ship deliberately rammed the cruise liner, over?”

“Affirmative! The tanker turned hard port towards the liner, then kept changing course in order to intercept it. This was no accident, over.”

“We acknowledge, SOUTHERN STAR. We will immediately dispatch all the resources available in this sector. Please keep us apprised of the developments in this situation, over.”

“Will do! SOUTHERN STAR, out!”

James Whitby then put down the radio handset and used his binoculars to see how things were going on the cruise liner. Tears came to his eyes when he saw dozens of desperate people, unable to use the ship's lifeboats because of the ship's inclination, jump into the water, close to the floating layers of burning crude oil. He also could see hundreds more people packing the relatively small bow deck of the liner.

“The poor bastards. They will now have to choose between drowning or roasting alive.”

16:22 (Eastern Standard Time)

U.S. Coast Guard District One Operations Center Boston, Massachusetts

Commander Norman Keating started shouting orders around him as soon as he finished talking with the SOUTHERN STAR.

“Sound the alert to all our stations! Also advise District Five about this and ask for their help! Lieutenant Manning, send a general call on the International Distress Frequency, asking all ships and aircraft in the vicinity of New York to reroute and render assistance to this cruise liner as much as possible. Do we know the identity of that cruise liner?”

“According to its last recorded position, it must be the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS, which was returning from a cruise to the Bahamas, sir.” answered a junior officer. “According to its manifest, it was carrying 3,442 passengers, plus 1,186 crewmembers.” Those numbers struck Keating hard: over 4,600 persons were now trapped on a burning and sinking cruise liner.

“Have we received any distress call from the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS?”

“Negative, sir! With the SOUTHERN STAR reporting that the tanker ship sheared off the stern section of the liner, the cruise ship probably lost instantly all power.”

“And what about that damn tanker ship?”

“We earlier noticed some forty minutes ago that the Saudi-registered tanker MEDINA, which was approaching the coast of New Jersey, switched off its locator beacon. We have tried to contact it ever since but we got no answers, sir.”

A black look appeared on Keating’s face as he digested that information.

“This indeed sounds like a deliberate terrorist attack. I will have to advise our headquarters in Washington about this. In the meantime, help direct all responding ships and aircraft towards the scene of that collision. Tell our own ships and aircraft that this was a probable terrorist attack against us and to treat any survivor from that tanker ship as potentially hostile.”

“Aye, sir!”

16:24 (Eastern Standard Time)

Logan International Airport, Boston

Massachusetts

Ingrid had left her SKYTRUCK and was walking around the tarmac near her plane as it was about to topped off with fuel prior to its transatlantic crossing when Elizabeth Gardner, who had stayed in the cockpit, shouted to her through her opened cockpit side window.

“INGRID, YOU BETTER GET UP HERE! THERE IS A GENERAL CALL FOR HELP FROM THE COAST GUARD ABOUT A CRUISE LINER IN DISTRESS NEAR NEW YORK.”

“Shit! I’M COMING!”

Before running inside her aircraft, she gesticulated at the airport employees who were about to fill her fuel tanks.

“STOP THE REFUELING OPERATION! WE ARE GOING TO RESPOND TO AN EMERGENCY REQUEST FOR HELP FROM THE COAST GUARD. WE WILL RETURN HERE AFTERWARDS TO FUEL UP. FEEL FREE TO CHARGE ME FOR THE EXTRA COST OF DELAYING OUR REFUELING.”

She then hurriedly climbed the airstairs on the forward starboard side and nearly ran inside the cockpit, where Elizabeth Gardner briefed her at once on what she had heard.

“According to the Coast Guard general emergency call, the cruise liner PRINCESS OF THE SEAS was rammed by a tanker ship off the coast of New Jersey and is on fire and in danger of sinking. The Coast Guard is asking all ships and aircraft in the vicinity of that incident to reroute and offer all assistance possible. I have already plotted the position of that cruise liner and the heading and distance to it.”

“Good! Are all of our people aboard?”

“Yes, but nearly all of them are presently asleep in our relief bunk beds.”

“Wake them up, right now! I am going to make sure that this refueling truck rolls away before we start our engines.”

Some four minutes later, with all her team awake and sitting inside the cockpit, Ingrid was able to take off vertically from the main parking apron of the Logan Airport, watched by the incredulous people inside the nearby passenger terminal. She then climbed to an altitude of 2,500 meters while turning on the heading calculated by Elizabeth, pushing her engines to maximum power and accelerating her aircraft to its maximum speed of 750 kilometers per hour. As she overflew the Boston harbor, Ingrid saw below her a Coast Guard helicopter taking off from the Boston Coast Guard Air Station, with a second helicopter still on the ground but with its rotors turning.

“If this cruise ship is full or next to it, then the Coast Guard will truly need every help we will be able to give it. We are probably looking at a few thousand people to save.”

“But, we can normally accommodate about ninety persons aboard or, at the most, about 160 persons in emergency situations.” said her copilot from the primary crew, Shirley Slade.

“I know! However, the more urgent thing will be to offload these poor people from that burning and sinking ship and to bring them to a safe spot. If there are ships

close by, then we will fill up as much as we can and will fly them and drop them on those ships before returning for a new batch of survivors.”

“Uh, how can I make myself useful, Ingrid?” asked Elliot Goulding. “I am not trained in rescue operations.”

“You can do your best to comfort the people we will pick up and make them as comfortable as possible, Elliot. What you can do right now is to go get from our equipment lockers the wool blankets we have and distribute in advance one blanket per seat. Once that is done, prepare a big pot of coffee in our kitchenette and check how many bottles of water we have.”

“On it!” said the executive, happy to be able to contribute to this rescue mission, as he got up from his seat and went aft inside the rescue mission pod.

It took only minutes before they were able to see a big column of black smoke on the horizon, something that made Ingrid frown.

“Damn! To be seen from this far means that there is a lot of oil burning on the ocean. I really hope that at least one ship will be in proximity to this cruise liner, so that we could keep our shuttling time as short as possible. Alright, me and the main crew will stay in the cockpit, while the relief crew will man our rescue stations. Let’s move, people!”

16:50 (Eastern Standard Time)

Bridge of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS

Captain Roger Knudsen felt nearly powerless as he had to face a truly impossible situation. With all ship power gone, his crew didn’t have any working pressure in the ship’s water mains, so couldn’t fight the internal fires inside the ship. Neither could he evacuate his passengers by using his lifeboats: those on the starboard side were too close to the burning oil or had their fiberglass melted by the high temperatures of the flames, while the lifeboats on the port side could not be used because of the ship’s listing to starboard. The only hope he could see right now were the two motor launches from the cargo ship that had stopped ahead of his bow some ten minutes ago. The crew of the SOUTHERN STAR had just launched their two boats, which were now approaching his doomed cruise liner.

“Damn! There will be places for at most a hundred people in those boats. There may well be a mad, panicked rush for places in them if we don’t control this operation.” Knudsen then moved to the open port bridge wing armed with a loudspeaker and started giving orders to his crewmembers who were trying as best they could to control the packed crowd of panicky passengers filling the small bow deck of the ship.

“THROW DOWN ROPE LADDERS OVER THE PORT SIDE AND BE READY TO GUIDE OUR PASSENGERS DOWN TO THOSE TWO LAUNCHES APPROACHING US. I WANT FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO HAVE PRIORITY FOR THE PLACES IN THOSE TWO BOATS. TO ALL WHO CAN HEAR ME, STAY CALM AND OBEY THE ORDERS FROM MY CREWMEMBERS. THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN WILL GET OFF FIRST. IF WE ALL STAY CALM, WE WILL BE ABLE TO SAVE YOU.”

Lowering his loudspeaker, Knudsen made a prayer to himself.

“Lord, please show mercy to all these innocent people.”

Three minutes later, the two launches arrived next to the ship, where the four rope ladders deployed by the crew lay over the inclined left side of the liner’s hull. Knudsen was pleased to see that his third officer, Cynthia Fromm, had sent dozens of crewmembers down the rope ladders, so that they could post themselves along the ladders and thus assist the passengers who would climb down from the bow deck. Knudsen felt a bit better when he saw the first women and children start to board the two motor boats from the SOUTHERN STAR. However, that process quickly proved to be agonizingly slow, with the passengers only slowly climbing down the rope ladders and with more than a few being nearly paralyzed with fear. One bridge officer then shouted to him while pointing at the sky towards the Northwest.

“THERE, CAPTAIN: AN AIRCRAFT IS APPROACHING!”

Using his binoculars, Knudsen looked at the incoming aircraft, hoping that it would be an helicopter, thus able to pick up passengers directly from his decks. However, what he saw left him confused.

“What the Hell is this thing?”

Returning inside the main bridge, he grabbed a hand-held UHF radio meant to be used to communicate with helicopters and aircraft during emergencies and walked back on the open bridge wing, where he first checked that his radio was tuned to the International Distress Air Frequency before talking in it.

“Approaching aircraft, this is the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. Can you help us save at least some of my passengers, over?”

The voice of a young woman then answered him.

“Affirmative, PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. We are capable of vertical flight and can maneuver like a helicopter. I suggest that you be prepared to have passengers board us under the control of your crew when we will extend our aft access ramp. We have capacity for about 160 persons aboard, so I would ask you to organize your passengers into groups of 160 people and to keep tight control over them. Once full, we will fly to the cargo stopped next to you and drop your passengers on its deck before returning to pick more people. Did you understand all this, over?”

“I did! What is your callsign, by the way?”

“We are the Hiller X-06, a prototype VTOL transport aircraft. Just call us HX-06 from now on. Now, start organizing those groups of 150 people: if panic overruns them, then it may make it very difficult to sustain this operation, over.”

“Understood, HX-06! I’m on it!”

Knudsen then raised again his loudspeaker to his mouth.

“LIEUTENANT FROMM, THE APPROACHING AIRCRAFT CAN FLY IN HELICOPTER MODE AND WILL TAKE UP TO 160 PERSONS ABOARD. IT WILL OPEN ITS REAR RAMP AND WILL COME FLY NEXT TO OUR PORT FLANK. START ORGANIZING GROUPS OF 160 PEOPLE AND SEND THEM WITH CREWMEMBERS TO THE PORT SIDE PROMENADE DECK. MAKE SURE THAT ONLY WOMEN AND CHILDREN BOARD THAT AIRCRAFT AT FIRST.”

He saw Cynthia Fromm salute him as a way to acknowledge his instructions. Now feeling renewed hope, Knudsen then sent the members of his bridge crew, who basically could do nothing useful on the bridge, down to the port side Promenade Deck, in order to assist Fromm in keeping control of the evacuation operation.

“OPEN THE AFT HATCH PANEL!”

On the request from Elizabeth Gardner, who was sitting at the aft rescue control station of the SKYTRUCK’s search and rescue module, Robert Stanwick unlocked the multiple retaining points firmly holding closed the large aft upper hatch, then activated the hydraulic pistons of the hatch, making it open upward and exposing the aft rescue compartment to the outside air. Now able to see where they were in relation to the

cruise liner, Elizabeth spoke in her headset, switched to the cockpit communications system.

“Our aft hatch is now opened up. I am taking over control of the aircraft now.”

“Acknowledged!” replied Ingrid on the set. Turning a large knob on the instrument panel of her rescue control station, Elizabeth then took hold of a control stick and of an engine power control lever, gaining effective flight control of the SKYTRUCK. With its rear facing the nearby cruise liner and with a clear view of the Promenade Deck filled with fearful passengers, Elizabeth slowly made her aircraft fly backward while adjusting her flight altitude. Once close enough to the ship, she pushed a button and made their telescopic rescue foot bridge, which was wide enough for two persons abreast and had safety guardrails, extend out by a full six meters past the tail of the SKYTRUCK. Using her headset switched to ‘loudspeaker mode’, Elizabeth then spoke to the passengers and crewmembers of the cruise ship waiting on the Promenade Deck.

“YOU CAN NOW START BOARDING OUR AIRCRAFT. DON’T RUN AND FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS OF MY CREW.”

Not believing their luck, the first women and children, some mere toddlers or babies, started climbing over the ship’s railing, helped by crewmembers, and walked over the foot bridge and into the SKYTRUCK, where Elliot Goulding, John Meredith and Robert Stanwick greeted them and led them at once inside the main cabin of the search and rescue pod, where ninety bench seats were available. Once those seats were full, Meredith made other passengers sit down on the floor between the rows of benches. With many of the rescued passengers being children, they were actually able to pack 184 persons aboard the aircraft before Elizabeth decided to stop the boarding. Using her loudspeaker system, she made an announcement to the frustrated passengers who had been stopped from coming aboard.

“WE ARE NOW GOING TO MAKE A SHORT TRIP TO THE CARGO SHIP STOPPED NEARBY, WHERE WE WILL DROP OFF THE PEOPLE WE NOW HAVE ABOARD. DON’T PANIC: WE WILL BE BACK IN LESS THAN FIVE MINUTES TO REPEAT THIS PROCESS.”

Not bothering to retract the rescue foot bridge, Elizabeth then spoke to Ingrid via her headset.

“We are now full, Ingrid. I’m giving you back the flight controls now.”

“Acknowledged! Flying away now!”

On the bridge of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS, Captain Knudsen felt immense relief as he watched the Hiller SKYTRUCK move away with its first load of rescued passengers. At about the same time, the two motor launches from the SOUTHERN STAR, loaded to the maximum with over a hundred women and children, started their return trip to the cargo ship. While the two small boats took a good three minutes to reach the SOUTHERN STAR and then start transferring their rescued passengers aboard the cargo ship via a lowered access stair, the Hiller SKYTRUCK had time to fly to the cargo ship and drop off its 184 persons to the safety of the cargo ship's deck. The HX-06 was loading a second batch of passengers when Knudsen saw two small dots appear on the horizon. Those two dots progressively grew into two Coast Guard helicopters painted bright orange and red, making Knudsen grin: things were starting to finally look up. His grin however disappeared when he heard a horrible noise of tortured metal coming from inside his ship. He recognized at once that noise: it was some of the internal watertight partitions of the ship giving up to the relentless push from the sea entering it.

"Noo! Noo! Please, God, give us more time!"

In the lead Coast Guard helicopter, First Lieutenant Malcom Sturgis stared for a moment at the strange aircraft holding station next to the port side of the cruise liner.

"What the Hell is that thing? Did you ever see this before, Mack?"

"No, but it bears a strong family resemblance to our Navy PELICANs VTOL assault transports. I bet that this baby was built by Hiller. Whatever it is, it is doing a bang up job in helping evacuate those poor people."

"You're right! Time to do our part here. We will fly a few feet above the bow deck and will lower our rope ladder. It will be a slow process but that's the most we can do right now. Petty Officer Sorentti, open our starboard side door and be ready to lower our rope ladder."

"On it, sir!... Door now opened and rope ladder ready, sir."

"Good! Let's start this show!"

They barely had time to deploy their rope ladder and to greet their two first passengers aboard when the cruise liner's listing to starboard suddenly augmented by a good five degrees, while they heard scary noises coming from inside the ship's hull.

“SHIT! THIS SHIP COULD ROLL OVER AND CAPSIZE AT ANY MOMENT NOW!”

The still over 3,000 passengers waiting on the bow deck to be rescued apparently understood that as well and instantly became a panicked, uncontrolled mob. Five passengers, all men, then tried to grab a hold on the rope ladder of the Coast Guard helicopter, upsetting its balance. Sturgis needed all his expertise as a pilot in order to prevent his helicopter from crashing. However, that also forced him to fly away from the bow of the giant ship, four men still desperately holding on to the rope ladder. The moment he flew sideways to clear the liner, Sturgis and his copilot involuntarily raised one arm in front of them as they started feeling the intense heat from the burning crude oil covering the sea around the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. Just at that moment, the heat and gas pressure from the pierced forward tanks of the MEDINA ignited the oil in the remaining tanks, creating a titanic ball of fire which then rose high in the sky, while the heat wave from the fireball became painful to Sturgis and his crew. The four passengers still holding to his rope ladder, fully exposed to the searing heat and screaming with pain, soon let go their grip and fell down into the sea of burning oil.

“JESUS! THIS IS TRULY HELL!” Shouted the horrified copilot, Mack Hammersfield.

On the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS, Captain Knudsen had to take hold of an open bridge fitting in order not to slide down towards the starboard side of his ship, which was quickly becoming its bottom side. Using his loudspeaker he shouted a last desperate order to his fourth officer.

“LIEUTENANT FROMM, HAVE OUR PASSENGERS STEP OVER THE RAILINGS AND STEP ON THE PORT FLANK OF OUR HULL! MAKE IT QUICK BEFORE WE BELLY UP!”

On the Promenade Deck, the young female mariner officer did her best to control her own fear and shouted at the passengers around her while showing them what to do by helping a young mother and her toddler girl over the railing.

“QUICK, ALL OF YOU! STEP OVER THE RAILING AND SIT ON OUR HULL! WE WILL WAIT THE RETURN OF THE AIRCRAFT THERE.”

Thankfully, most of the passengers kept enough control over themselves to be able to obey her and do as she told them...most but not all. One big, fat man, his face deformed by sheer terror, brutally pulled a preteen girl from the railing, sending her

slamming against the side wall of the promenade, in order to take her place at the railing. Becoming mad with anger on seeing that, she ran to the big man and pushed him off the railing, then went to assist the little girl, who was now crying with both fear and pain.

“Come with me, sweetie: I will help you climb over the railing.”

As she was supporting the girl, the fat man who had tried to take her place came back to try again to go over the railing himself. However, another male passenger stopped him cold with a furious punch to the jaw which dropped him half unconscious to the deck.

“STAY BACK, YOU FAT COWARD, OR I WILL KILL YOU!”

That intervention permitted Cynthia Fromm to push the young girl over the railing and to make her sit on the port surface of the hull, which was now inclined at about 45 degrees.

“Stay on top of the hull and keep a hold on the railing in order not to slide into the sea. The aircraft will soon return to pick you up. Do you understand me?”

“Y...yes, miss!”

Thankfully, the Hiller SKYTRUCK was back next to the ship's hull after another two minutes, ready to load another batch of survivors. Cynthia felt joy on seeing the little girl being part of those passengers able to board the aircraft. The SKYTRUCK was lifting off for yet another trip to the SOUTHERN STAR when the list of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS increased again...dramatically. This time, the cruise liner ended up lying on its starboard side, with its port side now completely out of the water and with its surface nearly at the horizontal. Seeing that, Ingrid decided on a new tactic when she returned from the SOUTHERN STAR and, to the surprise of the crews of the two Coast Guard helicopters, lowered her landing gear and squarely landed on top of the ship's hull, as if it had become a landing pad. Seeing that passengers were now able to board the SKYTRUCK much faster than during the prior boardings, being able to run directly to the aircraft, Lieutenant Sturgis pumped up his fist in triumph.

“THAT'S WHAT WE NEED TO DO OURSELVES! WE'RE GOING TO LAND ON THE PORT HULL, NEAR THE BOW. BRAVO RED TWO, FOLLOW ME!”

With another cargo ship arriving at full speed, both Ingrid and the Coast Guard pilots were soon able to land passengers on two ships, thus accelerating the evacuation effort.

Unfortunately, their luck didn't hold for long, as the liner's rate of sinking increased rapidly some fifteen minutes later. Another five minutes and the PRINCESS

OF THE SEAS was disappearing under the waves, surrounded by a burning layer of crude oil. The people still aboard the liner were then sucked down with the ship. In her cockpit, Ingrid could only look with immense sadness at the site of the sinking.

“So many lives lost. We may have managed to save about one quarter of the people who were on that ship, no more.”

“We did our best, Ingrid.” replied softly Shirley Slade. “Now, let’s think about the ones we were able to save.”

“You are right, Shirley. Since we still have our pod full of people, I believe that we should fly those poor souls to Boston, rather than simply dropping them on one of those ships. I’m going to call the Coast Guard about this.”

After a short radio exchange with the Coast Guard center in Boston, Ingrid was told to bring her survivors to the Logan Airport, where help would await them. As she started flying back to Boston, Ingrid thought about this whole tragedy and how it could have happened. The more she thought about it, the more the possibility of this being a simple accident appeared most improbable to her. The weather was fine, with clear visibility for dozens of kilometers, while the two ships involved were true giants of the seas: they had to be plainly visible from afar to everyone but a blind man.

On arrival at the Logan International Airport, she saw that the promised support was indeed waiting for her: over a dozen ambulances, five buses and four police cars were parked on the tarmac, near the domestic terminal. She also saw what appeared to be a dark blue official car waiting with the emergency vehicles. Going in VTOL mode, she landed smoothly less than fifty meters from the waiting vehicles, then switched off her six turboshaft engines and got up from her pilot’s seat.

“I’m going out to meet the officials waiting for us, Shirley. They will most probably want to hear my part of the story on this tragedy. I will however go see first our survivors: they deserve first priority here.”

“They certainly do, Ingrid.”

On entering the rescue pod of her aircraft, Ingrid found that her passengers had already started to disembark via the aft ramp, to be then escorted by paramedics and police officers to either a bus or, if the survivor was wounded or in a state of shock, to an ambulance. One young woman who was clinging to a toddler boy was still sitting on one

of the bench seat and crying nearly hysterically. Ingrid hurried to her and crouched in front of her, speaking in her softest voice to the woman.

“You and your child will be okay, miss: you are now safely in Boston.”

The woman’s response was to shake her head vehemently.

“I am not okay, miss! I just lost my husband and my oldest child, all that because of that damn tanker ship! It kept veering towards us despite the efforts of our captain to avoid it.”

Ingrid was furiously tempted to ask her about that but decided that the poor woman was already traumatized enough without bombarding her with questions. She thus simply helped the woman to get up, then escorted her to the aft access ramp, where she left her and her child with a paramedic. Seeing a senior officer of the Coast Guard who was standing a bit off her aircraft while watching the survivors disembark from the SKYTRUCK, Ingrid jumped down on the tarmac and walked towards him. That officer obviously recognized her, which was really not surprising to Ingrid, and came to attention while saluting her.

“General Dows? You were piloting this aircraft?”

“I also designed it, Commander. This is the first prototype of the Hiller SKYTRUCK. We were on our way to the Paris Le Bourget Air Show, where we plan to show our new aircraft to potential customers, when we heard the emergency call for help on the radio. So, can you tell me how two such large ships could collide in good weather and in full daylight?”

“It was no accident, General. According to a cargo ship captain who saw the collision happen, the tanker ship deliberately rammed the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS.”

“Do you know where that tanker ship came from?”

“It came from Saudi Arabia and was called the MEDINA, General.”

On hearing that, Ingrid closed her eyes and tightened her fists into tight balls as anger flashed inside her.

“Terrorists! There will be Hell to pay for this, I swear! Do you have a preliminary count of the survivors and of those who are missing and presumed dead, Commander?”

“With the survivors I counted coming out of your aircraft, added to the counts aboard the two ships now carrying survivors, we were able to save some 1,098 people, mostly thanks to you, but a total of 3,530 other persons are missing and presumed dead.”

"Over three and a half thousand people dead... Whoever did this, this constitutes an act of war against the United States."

"It certainly does, General. However, my job now is to make sure that those survivors are properly taken care of. Could you stay in Boston overnight, General, so that I could get your deposition as a witness to this tragedy?"

"Me and my crew will effectively stay here overnight before resuming our trip to France. We will want anyway to do a thorough inspection of our aircraft before flying out again: we pushed our engines quite hard on this impromptu rescue mission."

"That is quite understandable, General. Uh, if I may ask, what could you tell me about your aircraft?"

"I will do better than simply tell you, Commander. Follow me!"

With a curious Keating close behind her, Ingrid walked back inside her aircraft and started describing to him the rescue equipment they passed by.

"This SKYTRUCK is presently fitted with a modular pod customized for search and rescue and waterbomber operations. I designed the Hiller SKYTRUCK with maximum user flexibility in mind, by making the whole center and aft sections easily changed as a single block. This search and rescue pod includes a telescopic, retractable rescue foot bridge, meant to save people stuck in high, burning buildings or on a steep mountain cliff, plus has a winch and rescue basket. Here, to your left, is an hyperbar chamber, to be used to treat divers who suffered a deep dive accident. We are now walking through the main cabin, which contains ninety seats, four medical gurneys, reserves of medical equipment, one kitchenette and two toilet stalls. Oh, I nearly forgot! Under this deck are a centerline belly water scoop, high-power pumps, high-pressure spray heads and four water tanks which can contain up to twenty tons of water, meant to fulfill the role of water bomber."

Keating looked with incredulity around him before giving a stunned look to Ingrid.

"But this is fantastic! It would be the perfect aircraft for us. That you happened to pass by Boston this exact day with such an aircraft must be considered like a miraculous coincidence, General."

"Call it 'Destiny' instead, Commander." replied Ingrid, dead serious.

CHAPTER 8 – SHOCK AND ANGER



09:04 (Eastern Standard Time)

Tuesday, June 12, 2001 'C'

The Situation Room, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

"ROOM!"

The twelve men and two women sitting and waiting inside the Situation Room all got up from their chairs around the long conference table when the Marine guard shouted, announcing the arrival of President George W. Bush. Bush, looking both angry and worried, went to his seat and spoke a few words as he sat down.

"Please sit, ladies and gentlemen, and let's deal with yesterday's awful incident off New York."

Bush waited for the others to be all sitting, then directed his first question to Admiral John Leman, the Commandant of the United States Coast Guard.

"Do we have a firm number on the number of victims in yesterday's incident, Admiral Leman?"

"We have, Mister President! Counted either confirmed dead or missing is a total of 3,530 passengers and crewmembers of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. A total of 1,098 persons, nearly all female passengers and children, were saved before the liner sank. Luckily, retired General Dows, who now works for the Hiller Aircraft Corporation in Port Angeles, near Seattle, was on her way to the Paris Le Bourget Air Show with the prototype of the Hiller SKYTRUCK, a VTOL-capable transport aircraft, and was refueling her aircraft at the Boston Logan Airport when we made our general emergency request for help. Her SKYTRUCK ended up saving the majority of the people which were rescued that day."

A bitter smile appeared on Bush's lips on hearing that.

"Good old General Dows: always ready to help and defend the United States. Do we have details of this collision between the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS and that Saudi tanker ship?"

"We are now pretty sure that this was a deliberate ramming by the Saudi tanker ship and thus most probably a major terrorist attack against our country, Mister President."

Bush next looked at his director of the FBI, Louis Freeh.

"Have you launched an investigation into that incident, Louis?"

"We did, Mister President! While it has barely started, a number of worrying things have already come out. First off, somebody posted a declaration in Saudi medias late last night, claiming the sinking of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS as an action by the Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda. As you may remember, we dismantled over four months ago a network of Al-Qaeda operatives present in the United States and who were preparing at the time a major air hijacking operation. Thankfully, the custodian of the old Athena files in the Pentagon drew our attention to a similar hijacking operation which happened in the 2001 of Miss Laplante's timeline. That allowed us to check for the presence of Islamic suspects taking piloting courses here in the United States. Unfortunately, it seems that yesterday's incident had no parallel in Laplante's timeline, so we got no historical hint about it. The dismantling of their network in the United States probably pushed the leader of Al-Qaida, Osama Bin Laden, in trying something completely new."

"I see! Can we expect more attacks from this Al-Qaeda now?"

"There is presently no way to be sure about it, Mister President, but my guess is that we can expect more terror attacks against our country or against American citizens and interests around the World."

"And where is that damn Osama Bin Laden right now?"

"The latest reports we have place him in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Mister President."

"Afghanistan!" spat Bush with an expression of distaste. "The perfect kind of hole for such a bastard to hide in it. George, what do we know about the operations and organization of this Al-Qaeda, particularly in Afghanistan."

George Tenet, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA in short, looked briefly at a file opened in front of him before answering.

"Unfortunately, not much, Mister President. Afghanistan is presently governed by a hardline Islamist group named the Taliban, who are virulently anti-American and anti-Western and who are supporting Al-Qaeda in their country. As for Saudi Arabia, the country of origin of Bin Laden and of the majority of his followers, it proved in the past to be less than helpful when we tried to get information about the various Islamist extremist groups there. Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organization enjoy in fact the support of many Saudi citizens and officials and my informant network there is very shaky, Mister President. I don't expect much cooperation from the Saudis for our investigation."

"And the tanker ship which rammed the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS? What do we know about its captain and crew?"

"We still haven't have time to investigate that aspect of the incident, Mister President. The only thing we know is that the captain of the MEDINA was a veteran of the high seas with no known penchant for religious extremism. My bet would be on newer crewmembers or passengers on the MEDINA having been Al-Qaeda operatives." Bush repressed his frustration and then looked around at the members of his National Security Council.

"So, to resume things: we don't know much about this terror attack, apart from that this Al-Qaeda claims responsibility for it and that its leader is hiding in Kandahar, Afghanistan. We definitely need more solid information if we want to reply to that attack, which was tantamount to an act of war against the United States. However, I want our forces to prepare in advance for any future actions against this Al-Qaeda. General Sherman, I want you to start organizing and deploying in advance a strong task force of ships, troops and aircraft to the Indian Ocean and Middle East regions, so that we could

be ready to hit those Al-Qaeda bastards hard once we will have enough information to act. Prioritize the use of our Navy, Marine Corps and airborne units for that future campaign.”

“I will get on it right away, Mister President.” replied at once General of the Army Harold Sherman, who had replaced Ingrid Dows as the commander of all American combat forces.

CHAPTER 9 – TO EVERY ACTION, A REACTION



18:33 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, June 13, 2001 'C'

Room # 4, Hôtel Izmir-Café du Nord, 126 Avenue du 8 Mars

Le Blanc-Mesnil, Paris Northeast suburbs, near Le Bourget Airport

Paris, France

"...As a response to this monstrous act of terrorism which cost the lives of over 3,500 Americans, I, President George W. Bush, am declaring that the United States of America is now at war with the terrorist group Al-Qaeda and with Islamic terrorism."

Ingrid, who was listening from her hotel room with her crew to the televised broadcast of President's Bush national address, shook her head in frustration while letting out an expletive.

"SHIT! Why did he have to use those exact words?"

"Uh, what was wrong with the President's words, Ingrid?" asked John Meredith, the second pilot of the Hiller SKYTRUCK. Ingrid answered him while eyeing with a black look President Bush, who was closing his national address prior to taking questions from the reporters assembled in the Oval Office.

"He could have simply said 'terrorism' instead of 'Islamic terrorism'. Now, the Islamic nations who could have helped us against those Al-Qaeda bastards will feel targetted as well and may just withdraw their support from us or, worse, transfer their support to Al-Qaeda. Because of this, we will again pass as the modern version of the Christian Crusaders, bent on destroying Islam. I bet that his more right-wing advisors pushed him into adding those words to his speech."

"Could those Islamic countries really take his words this badly, Ingrid?" asked Elliot Goulding. This time, it was Elizabeth Gardner who answered him.

"You bet they will, Elliot! If my fourteen years in the Philippines taught me something, it is that muslims can be very touchy about any perceived attack against their religion, and 'perceived' is the key word here. This will definitely be felt by many Muslims as an attack against Islam."

"But, over 3,500 Americans just got murdered by Muslim fanatics!" objected Robert Stanwick, the second engineer of the SKYTRUCK. "Why should we sugar-coat our response to those bastards?"

"Because we should have limited our declaration of war to Al-Qaeda, without the need to antagonize all the Muslims around the World, Bob." replied Ingrid, somber. "This extra word may just unnecessarily cost us a lot more lives in the future."

The group of three men and four women then fell silent while listening to President Bush' answers to the questions thrown at him by the reporters in the Oval Office. When the televised report ended, to be replaced by comments from the panel of French newscasters analyzing the speech, Ingrid switched off her television set, then got up from her bed, on which she had been sitting.

"Well, enough with gloomy news! Let's go have supper at the restaurant downstairs. Then, I counsel you all to go to bed early: we will have plenty of work tomorrow, setting up our aircraft stand display."

04:15 (Eastern Standard Time)

Thursday, June 14, 2001 'C'

Assembly hall of the First Battalion/Sixth Marine Regiment

Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, U.S.A.

Greta Visby was standing three paces behind the ranks of her rifle platoon, as parade rules dictated about the usual position of platoon sergeants. As for the

commander of the Third Rifle Platoon of Bravo Company, First Marine Battalion of the Sixth Marine Regiment, Second Lieutenant Mark Whitfield, he stood at attention some four paces in front of his platoon as the battalion commander, Lieutenant colonel Chris Walters, marched into the large assembly hall. The nearly 1,200 men and women of the First Battalion had been awakened in the middle of the night and told to prepare their combat kit for overseas deployment and then assemble in the unit's hall for four o'clock in the morning. Nothing had been said about the destination of their deployment but it didn't take a genius to figure that out, in view of the horrible news about the sinking of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. Greta's bet was on somewhere around the Middle East, in view of who had claimed the attack on the cruise liner. While going to a possible war always should make a sane person consider the possible personal outcomes, Greta felt reassured by the fact that her unit was an experienced, well trained and well equipped one. Furthermore, she knew well most of the members of her platoon and of her company, having fought alongside them in the Caucasus and in Somalia during the five previous years. That unit bond had been further reinforced in the past few years by the new rules concerning postings and unit assignments, rules established by General of the Army Ingrid Dows while she was commander of all American combat forces. Those new rules had basically stopped the senseless and, in Greta's opinion, stupid process of so-called 'ticket-punching', which had forced until then the members of the American military to spend only a couple of years at a specific unit or place before having to move to a new post, dragging their families with them, all supposedly to diversify the experience of the service members. That, in General Dows' well-expressed opinion, made the service members 'Jacks of all trades and masters of none', on top of forcing their dependants to be uprooted continuously every two to three years. That old policy had also cost a fortune in administrative and logistical terms, with tens of millions of dollars spent on moving people and personal belongings around the World every couple of years. Now, the directives were to keep as much as possible military members within their present units when they got promoted. In Greta's case, she had started her career in the Marine Corps as a simple private in the Second Rifle Squad of the Third Rifle Platoon, then had been promoted in succession to private first class and then corporal within that same squad. When she had been promoted in the field in Somalia to the rank of sergeant, she had then taken command of the First Rifle Squad of the Third Rifle Platoon. On being promoted recently to the rank of staff sergeant, she had become the platoon sergeant in the same platoon she had joined as a fresh private six years ago.

Another big plus of the new promotions and postings directives had been a very significant boost in personnel morale, with military members now being able to offer some long-term stability for their families in terms of housing, schools and services. In turn, that boost in personnel morale had translated in less departures from service and thus less needs to train replacements, saving hundreds of millions of dollars every year.

With the battalion having been called to attention by Sergeant-major Richard Fielding at the entrance of Lieutenant colonel Walters in the hall, Greta watched discretely her battalion commander as he took place behind a dais supporting a microphone. Walters looked quickly around his troops before starting to speak into the microphone.

“BATTALION, STAND AT EASE! STAND EASY! I know that this call to assemble has been rather sudden and most early for all of us, but be assured that it was made for very good reasons. While I myself has been told very little about what is going on, I can tell you this: our regiment was ordered by the Pentagon to prepare and depart as quickly as possible for an overseas combat operational deployment. The area we are going to deploy to and our mission have still not been specified to me or even to our regimental commander. We are going to move in the next hour by bus to the New River Air Station, where we will board aircraft which will then fly us to the ships on which we will travel. The word from the Pentagon is that our mission parameters and the details of our deployment will be refined as we sail away from the United States. Our deployment will also stay confidential for the moment, so no phone calls or emails to your relatives and friends will be allowed until further notice. Operational security is thus the order of the day. Once you will have picked up your weapons and a basic load of ammunition and rations, we will load up in buses which are starting to line up outside this hall, then we will go to the New River Air Station. That is all for the moment. Company commanders will now direct their troops to the weapons vaults of our unit quartermaster. MAJOR TRUMAN, PROCEED!”

“YES SIR!” shouted back the deputy commander of the battalion before turning towards the assembled marines. “ALPHA COMPANY WILL NOW PROCEED TO THE ARMORY, FOLLOWED IN ORDER BY BRAVO COMPANY, CHARLIE COMPANY, WEAPONS COMPANY AND FINALLY BY HEADQUARTERS AND SERVICES COMPANY. LET’S MOVE, PEOPLE!”

Seeing that Bravo Company's turn at the armory would be at least ten minutes away, Greta went to her three squad leaders, each standing at the right-side end of their line of soldiers, to speak to them and pass directives of her own.

"Alright, guys! Pass the word to your marines that, once they have their weapons and ammunition and are in the buses, they will start right away to load up their rifle magazines. Let's not waste time by simply staring out of the windows while we roll towards New River."

"Got it, Sarge!" replied Sergeant Ken Nakamura, the leader of First Rifle Squad.

"And remind them that no magazines will be inserted into their weapons during transport. Pilots hate it when they have bullets flying inside their aircraft."

"Gee! I don't know why, Sarge." added Harrison Schmidt, making the others grin. Greta then returned to her previous spot, to wait for their turn to line up at the weapons vault. While she was confident that the marines in her platoon would be up to about anything, she couldn't say the same about their platoon leader, Second lieutenant Mark Whitfield. Whitfield was a brand new marine officer who had graduated from the Navy Academy in Annapolis a mere two weeks ago and had joined the battalion less than one week ago. He had appeared to Greta to be an intelligent and dedicated young man but his total lack of experience was in sharp contrast to that of his predecessor, First lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, who had been promoted to captain and was now in command of Bravo Company. However, as platoon sergeant, Greta's job was precisely to help and counsel this young officer with her own experience of combat and by supervising her three squad leaders. Thankfully, Whitfield had proven to be open to her advice and counsel...up to now.

As she had expected, her platoon's turn at the weapons vault came after another eleven minutes of waiting in the assembly hall for Alpha Company to finish drawing its weapons. Urging on her marines to not waste time and make it quick during the weapons distribution, Greta then watched on as supply technicians waiting in a separate hall distributed to her soldiers various types of ammunition, including hand grenades and rifle grenades, from pallets loaded down with crates. Another team of supply technicians standing next to more pallets loaded with boxes then distributed two days-worth of field rations to each passing marine before the latter left the big battalion building complex and boarded a long line of waiting buses. While Lieutenant Whitfield boarded the first of

two buses carrying their platoon, Greta boarded the second bus and shouted to her marines as the vehicle started rolling.

“ALRIGHT GUYS: START LOADING YOUR MAGAZINES, BUT DON’T SIMPLY THROW AWAY THE EMPTY BOXES. I WILL PASS AROUND A GARBAGE BAG FOR THOSE EMPTY BOXES BEFORE WE ARRIVE AT THE NEW RIVER AIR STATION.”

“DO YOU KNOW WHERE WE ARE GOING, SERGEANT?” asked a young private, making Greta shake her head.

“NEGATIVE! WE WILL KNOW ABOUT THAT ONCE OUR FEARLESS BIGWIGS AT THE PENTAGON WILL HAVE FIGURED OUT WHICH WAY IS LEFT.”

A concert of chuckles and laughter greeted her barb at their higher military leadership, something which helped relax some of the tension in the marines.

The drive to the Marine Corps Air Station New River, situated on the opposite side of the New River, took about twenty minutes, with the long convoy of buses and trucks having to cross a bridge over the Northern Creek on their way, then passing by the city of Jacksonville. When they arrived in sight of the large military airfield, which housed the aviation units supporting the Second Marine Division, Greta’s eyes sparkled at the sight of the dozens of rather strange-looking transport aircraft lined up on the main tarmac.

“Hiller PELICANs assault transports: now we’re talking!”

“Uh, I find those aircraft rather ugly, Sergeant.” said a young private sitting near her. Greta gave him an understanding look while smiling.

“Yes, they are ugly, Private, but they are also very efficient and highly performing machines. You can pack in them a whole rifle platoon, plus a couple of ATVs⁶, take off at the vertical and travel a few hundred miles at over 400 miles per hour before landing at the vertical directly on the objective. It also is an armed transport aircraft, with 30mm cannons, rocket launchers and machine guns to help keep the enemy’s heads down while we scramble out of our PELICANs. I already was part of six previous air assaults in either the Caucasus or Somalia, riding in a PELICAN. That ugly beast will help keeping you and me alive, Private, and that’s the most important thing to know about it.”

“uh, got that, Sergeant.” replied the young marine in a contrite tone. Returning her attention to the aircraft parked at the air station, Greta then realized that there were a

⁶ ATV : All-Terrain Vehicle.

lot more Hiller PELICAN VSTOL transports than she had ever seen in one place. She however quickly understood why that could be.

"Damn! We are not the sole battalion to fly out of here today. This is indeed shaping up to be a major operation."

The next thing she noticed was a long line of small 8X8 ATVs, which were in the process of rolling inside the cargo cabins of the waiting PELICANs.

"Argo MUDMASTERs! Yes! I love those little beasts! Have you ever ridden in one of them, Private?"

"No, Sergeant, but I did use four-wheeled ATVs at my home farm. These look fun."

"They are, Private. More importantly, they will be able to save us from breaking our backs by helping to carry our extra ammunition and supplies. The Argo MUDMASTER is amphibious, can go over any kind of terrain and can carry up to four equipped marines or over 900 pounds of kit or supplies. You can also fit wide rubber tracks around their wheels, making them able to travel over deep snow. Two of them can fit inside a PELICAN, on top of a full rifle platoon."

"Have you driven one, Sergeant?"

"Yes, I did and they are great little vehicles. The Marine Corps was most inspired when it decided a couple of years ago to drastically augment their dotation in our regiments. Before, we had only a grand total of sixteen ATVs for the whole division but, after the Somalia Campaign showed us how useful they were in the air assault role, the Corps shopped around for more and better ATVs. As a result, we now have enough such ATVs to have at least one per squad."

"Argo? I never hear about that company before, Sarge." said another young private.

"It's a Canadian company which specializes in light all-terrain vehicles. We use a lot of Argo ATVs in Alaska, where I am from. We also use a lot another Canadian brand, Bombardier, which by the way invented the snowmobile. Used together, the Hiller PELICAN and the Argo MUDMASTER truly make a winning combination for air assault missions."

"So, you think that we will be doing air assaults, Sarge?"

"That is the most probable mode of combat I can see for this operation, which is probably aimed at the terrorist group which sank the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS and

killed over 3,500 Americans. Those bastards are about to learn what the word 'payback' means."

Her last sentence made the marines around her nod their heads in approval.

Another ten minutes and the convoy of buses and trucks stopped behind the line of parked Hiller PELICANs, letting the marines of the First Battalion disembark with their big backpacks and their weapons. Ground personnel waiting by the sides of the transports then guided each arriving platoon to the PELICAN assigned to it. Greta ended up climbing aboard with her platoon in the fourth aircraft, using its rear cargo ramp and ending inside the five-meter-wide cargo compartment of the PELICAN, where two Argo MUDMASTERS were already parked and chained down. She however stopped for a moment then, surprised by a few things which had changed since the last time she had flown in a PELICAN. She thus looked at the loadmaster and asked a question while pointing at the seats lining both sides of the cabin.

"Hey, weren't the seats organized in a different manner before in the PELICAN?"

"They certainly were, Sergeant. The seating arrangement was changed to a new standard a couple of months ago, as part of a retrofit. Instead of facing inside on canvas seats, you now will be using standard business class commercial seats arranged in pairs facing forward. That new arrangement is both a lot more comfortable, especially for long flights, and also safer in case of hard landings. I hope that you will enjoy your flight."

"I certainly will, Warrant! Gee! I'm going to travel business-class!"

She was about to take off her backpack when Lieutenant Whitfield signaled her to come forward. Obeying him, Greta was then led by Whitfield into the large cockpit area forward of the cargo cabin, where her officer showed her two padded seats set against the back wall of the compartment.

"They have seats reserved for officers and senior NCOs inside the cockpit area. From those seats, we will be able to look outside through these large front windscreens, thus will have a better picture of where we are going."

"Neat!" replied Greta before taking off her backpack and placing it in the large overhead bin situated over her seat. She was also able to fit her rifle into the weapon-holding rack next to her seat. She let out a sigh of satisfaction when she sat down in the well-padded seat, which also happened to have a reclinable back rest.

"Aah! This definitely beats the old canvas seats we had during our Caucasus and Somalia operations. So, do you know where we will be going and on what ship, sir?"

"Fuck knows, Sargeant!" was Whitfield's reply. A bit frustrated by that, Greta suddenly had an idea and asked a question to the pilot of their PELICAN, a Marine Corps aviator.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you know to which ship we will be deploying for our move overseas?"

The aviator, a young and handsome captain, smiled to her while answering her.

"I sure know about that, Sergeant, as me and my whole transport air group will also be traveling on the same ship as you: we are going to fly to the carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE."

"The NEPTUNE? Yes! We are going to travel in first-class!"

"In first class, on a Navy warship?" said Whitfield, not understanding her reaction.

"Indeed, sir! The NEPTUNE is fully up to par to the newer crew accommodation facilities, with individual cabins for everyone aboard and with large messing and services spaces. Its whole upper deck was designed to accommodate a full reinforced marine rifle battalion and there are plenty of holds' space for our combat supplies and vehicles. It also is one mighty powerful puncher, with an arsenal of missiles and guns to supplement an airwing of nearly a hundred aircraft. You will love it, sir."

"If you say so, Sergeant." replied Whitfield, apparently not too convinced.

CHAPTER 10 – THE DICES ARE ROLLING



Le Bourget Airshow.

15:08 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 14, 2001 'C'

Forward cabin of the Hiller SKYTRUCK

Aircraft exposition area, main tarmac of Le Bourget Airport

Northeast suburbs of Paris, France

Ingrid was busy preparing the various data charts and scale models they were going to use during the coming airshow when an apparently excited Elliot Goulding came to her inside the forward cabin of the Hiller SKYTRUCK.

Ingrid! Ingrid! Good news! Jeff Hiller decided to send to us via a charter cargo flight a complete general cargo mission pod for our SKYTRUCK, dismounted for transport. The Douglas GOLIATH carrying the parts of our pod should arrive in about six hours, here in Le Bourget. I already managed to rent space in one of the hangars here, so we will be able to assemble our mission pod out of public sight...and out of any possible rain. A team of eight technicians is also flying in."

"But that's truly great news, Elliot!" exclaimed Ingrid, genuinely happy to hear this. "With a second mission pod available, we will be able to demonstrate the pod exchange procedure for our SKYTRUCK, a design feature which should interest a lot our potential customers. What kind of hangar did you rent?"

"It is a hangar compatible with large airliners but it was presently being used to shelter a number of small private planes and their maintenance services. With Jeff's

authorization, I was able to offer the owner of the hangar a juicy rental fee he could not refuse.”

Goulding’s expression made Ingrid chuckle in amusement.

“The good old American dollar argument: it works nearly every time.”

“Only nearly every time, Ingrid?”

“That’s right! Nobody could buy me.”

“And if you were offered a big, sexy hunk?” replied Goulding sneakily. Ingrid winced on hearing that.

“Uh, maybe that would tickle my fancy. Elliot, you are a devious man, truly.”

“Hey, why do you think that Jeff Hiller named me as his vice-president for sales? Well, I will advise you the moment that our charter cargo flight will arrive.”

“No need for that, Elliot: the Douglas GOLIATH is not the kind of beast that you can miss, unless you’re both blind and deaf.”

“I believe that you helped design it decades ago, right?”

“I did direct the development of its original military variant, the C2000, which was then used to carry to high altitude our first space orbiters, where they were dropped before igniting their rocket engines and climbing to orbit. The Air Force then saw its potential as a super-heavy cargo aircraft and developed a cargo variant of it with a huge cargo cabin able to carry outsized payloads, like aircraft replacement parts or intercontinental ballistic missiles. Even after some thirty years in service, the Douglas GOLIATH is still without rival when it comes to carrying oversized payloads over intercontinental ranges. Mind you, chartering the services of a GOLIATH must have cost Hiller a pretty penny.”

“It effectively didn’t come cheap, but Jeff Hiller decided that sending us a second mission pod for our SKYTRUCK should make our new plane that more attractive to prospective buyers.”

“And he was right about that, Elliot. Well, we are nearly finished here with our airshow preparations. Once we will be finished here, I will lead our team to that hangar, so that we could give a hand to our arriving technicians. Uh, did you reserve hotel rooms for them already?”

“That will be the next thing I will look for. However, with the amount of commercial and government representatives which have been arriving in Paris for the airshow, finding rooms for our technicians won’t be easy.”

“Then look at the lower class hotels nearby, like our own Izmir Hôtel. Those representatives tend to gravitate towards the more luxurious hotels around Paris.”

Those words made Elliot give Ingrid a false scandalized look.

“Are you insinuating that I rented cheap hotel rooms for us just to save money, Ingrid?”

“No! I am saying that you chose the nearest and most practical hotel for us, Elliot. Personally, I would be content with a water-logged slit trench: it would remind me of my good old times in Guadalcanal, in 1942.”

“Guadalcanal, in 1942!” said Elliot, rolling his eyes. “Ingrid, you may have the looks of a teenager, but you are truly ancient.”

“So? Beauty and youth, plus experience: what more could a guy ask for in a girl?”

“Did I also say that you are one perverted girl, Ingrid?”

“No, but thank you for the compliment.”

Chuckling while shaking his head, Goulding then walked away, leaving Ingrid free to finish her present work.

As predicted by Ingrid, the landing of the giant Douglas GOLIATH attracted a lot of attention around Le Bourget, even at that late evening hour. The giant cargo aircraft, featuring Ingrid’s patented diamond box wing design, measured a full 95 meters in length, with a fuselage body diameter of over eight meters. Its two pairs of wings, the forward one swept back and the aft one swept forward, had their tips linked by its two large vertical rudder surfaces, while no less than eight big turbofans engines propelled it. Using the minivan her crew had rented on arrival, Ingrid went with her team to meet the giant cargo aircraft in front of the hangar which Goulding had just rented at the airport. However, she then found out that a small team of French customs officers had beat her to the big aircraft and had already started to inspect its content. Fortunately, all the paperwork seemed to be in order and she was soon able to climb up to the cockpit of the GOLIATH, where she found the four-man flight crew in the process of shutting down their systems for the night. Ingrid smiled on recognizing the pilot of the cargo aircraft: the man had served under her in the Space Corps during the past decade.

“Hey, isn’t it the good Major Lombardi? How are you doing these days?”

“Doing just fine and... My God! You look even younger than the last time I saw you, some ten years ago. Another miracle happened to you, General?”

"Sort of! But I am a civilian now. You can simply call me 'Ingrid'."

"Ingrid it will be. So, you are now the chief test pilot for Hiller?"

"And chief designer as well, Marco."

Lombardi nodded once his head at that.

"I see that flying and aircraft are still fully in your blood despite the years, Ingrid. Uh, may I ask how old you are now?"

"Of course, Marco! I am now 76-years-young and I still am a man-eater."

"That doesn't surprise me, Ingrid: every man in the Space Corps fantasized about dating you one fine day. Unfortunately, the rules forbade such fraternization and they still do."

"Yeah! But let's switch to business. You had no problems getting our mission pod inside your big flying whale?"

"In my GOLIATH? You're joking, right? My plane could gobble twice that kind of load. However, it was just a little bit too wide to fit in one piece, so Mister Hiller had it dismantled in its two main components. With the internal space thus saved, we were able to load aboard as well a crane truck able to help your team to reassemble your pod. Let's go down together to the cargo deck and I will show you."

Using the spiral staircase connecting the flight deck with the cargo deck, they had to climb down the equivalent of two stories before stepping inside the giant cargo hold. Ingrid nodded in satisfaction at the sight of the two parts composing the mission pod for her SKYTRUCK and of the large crane mounted on a heavy ten-wheel truck. The pod's parts had been carefully surrounded with wooded support framing and were solidly chained down in place, like the mobile crane.

"Excellent! My flight crew and the technicians you brought in will now take out the crane and pod parts and carry them into the hangar in front of your plane. On his part, Mister Goulding, the VP for sales for Hiller, will take care of getting you to your hotel. You must be quite tired after such a long flight, Marco."

"That we are, Ingrid. Well, I'll see you again tomorrow morning: me and my crew are dying to see your famous Hiller SKYTRUCK."

"Famous? But it still is only the first prototype for its model and Hiller kept quite discrete about it."

“Discrete? That’s how you describe your heroic rescue of nearly a thousand people out of the sinking PRINCESS OF THE SEAS? Some of the people there filmed your aircraft while it was in action and those pictures are now all over the medias.”

“Oh! I must say that I didn’t have much free time to watch the televised news during the last days. The most I watched was President Bush’ national address the second day after that sinking.”

Lombardi’s expression grew sober at those words.

“I watched it too, Ingrid. Our country is now heading into yet another war, and it could be a long and nasty one.”

“You are right about that, Marco. Let’s just hope that our forces will be able to quash quickly those terrorist bastards.”

Ingrid next shook hands with the eight Hiller technicians who had flown in with the mission pod, all of whom Ingrid knew well, as they worked at her prototype workshop. With the giant clamshell aft cargo doors of the GOLIATH opening up, the work of unloading the parts of the mission pod, using the mobile crane, started in earnest. However it still took a few hours of cautious work before the precious parts were stored inside the hangar, along with the mobile crane. It was close to midnight before Ingrid and her people were able to return to their hotel for a well-deserved shower and a full night of sleep.

14:47 (Washington Time)

Sunday, June 17, 2001 ‘C’

The Oval Office, the White House

Washington, D.C.

George W. Bush was reading a report while sitting behind his presidential desk when his Secretary of State, Colin Powell, was admitted into the Oval Office, closely followed by the Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld. From their somber looks, Bush could immediately guess that they were not bringing in good news.

“What do you have for me, gentlemen?”

“The response of the Taliban to our demand to deliver to us Osama Bin Laden, Mister President.” replied Powell. “Not only did they refuse to give us Bin Laden, they told our ambassador to Pakistan that they were going to defend and support Bin Laden

and his Al-Qaeda terrorist group. When Ambassador Renfrew warned the Taliban that we would then have to use force in Afghanistan, their response was basically to remind him about how many past empires tried to conquer Afghanistan in history. I am afraid that we will now have to mount a major military operation in order to get those Al-Qaeda bastards, Mister President.”

Bush tightened his jaws at those words, then looked at Donald Rumsfeld.

“How is our troop deployment towards Afghanistan going, Donald?”

“Its preliminary phase is already being executed, with a total of six Marine rifle battalions and four airborne battalions on the way via either air or sea, Mister President. More heavily-equipped units will follow up soon but, right now, our air transportation assets are stretched to the limit, while it takes time to assemble and load ships. The big question that is left to answer is: where will those units stage from when time will come to strike Afghanistan? That country is landlocked and is surrounded by Iran, Pakistan and the old Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. Apart from Iran, those countries are not exactly very friendly with us and would probably refuse to let our troops stage from their territories.”

Bush nodded once, having expected that answer, then looked back at Colin Powell.

“Have you contacted the Iranians about getting permission to land our troops and planes in Iran, Colin?”

“Not yet, Mister President. That will be my next thing in the order of the day.”

“And what about Saudi Arabia, or Iraq?”

Powell’s expression soured up further on hearing that question.

“Mister President, from what we know right now, the Saudis can’t be depended on in this. While their government still claims to be our ally, many Saudis, including a number of government officials, either sympathize with Al-Qaeda or are even openly celebrating its attack against us. Don’t forget that the perpetrators of the attack on the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS were Saudis, while Osama Bin Laden himself is from an influential Saudi family. In the present case, we will have to consider Saudi Arabia as a quasi-hostile place, where our troops would be at high risk from terrorist attacks. As for Iraq, the present Iraqi regime is, let’s say, less than friendly towards us and is also a regional adversary of Iran. My State Department is going to contact and push all those governments to gain their cooperation but I am not very optimistic right now.”

“And where are my troops and planes supposed to go in the meantime, Colin?” asked Rumsfeld, a bit annoyed by Powell’s pessimism. “Our Marines can stay on their

ships for the moment but, right now, the nearest places from Afghanistan where our planes can safely land and expect ground support are in Europe and Turkey.”

“Then, Europe and Turkey it will have to be for the moment, Donald. Securing diplomatically landing rights for our forces is neither easy nor quick. It will take at least a week before I can get firm commitments of support from at least a few of those countries.”

“At least a week...” said Bush in a disillusioned tone. “What about long-range airstrikes on Afghanistan? Can’t our strike aircraft reach Afghanistan from our bases in Europe and Turkey?”

“They can, Mister President,” answered Rumsfeld, “but I am still waiting for firm intelligence about where the Taliban and Al-Qaeda are in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the CIA and DIA⁷ are having very limited success in this. Without a precise target list, we would be limited to a program of general airstrikes against Afghanistan, something that will not help build sympathy for us around the region.”

“Well, screw their sympathy!” replied Bush, getting both annoyed and irritated. “They will be either with us or against us! I am not going to let those Al-Qaeda bastards scott-free just because our supposed allies in that region have grown timid. This is a good time to find out who are our real friends there.”

“Uh, understood, Mister President. I will tell my diplomats to get firm commitments from our allies as quickly as possible.”

“And I will continue moving troops, planes and ships towards that region, Mister President.”

“Good! Keep me posted on your progress as we go, gentlemen. Thank you for briefing me on this.”

“You’re welcome, Mister President.” replied Powell before turning around and leaving the Oval Office with Rumsfeld.

⁷ DIA : Defense Intelligence Agency. The military intelligence arm of the American armed forces.

CHAPTER 11 – PLAYING SALESPERSON

09:03 (Paris Time)

Monday, June 18, 2001 ‘C’

V.I.P. lounge of the arrivals terminal

Le Bourget Airport, Paris, France

Alfred Lepage was surprised by the number of persons already present in the V.I.P. lounge of the arrivals terminal, waiting for the Le Bourget Airshow to officially open. In past shows, the various government and corporate representatives wanting to visit the airshow tended to arrive more gradually in the morning. Instead, the V.I.P. lounge was already packed as Lepage showed up to declare the airshow officially opened. He however refrained from commenting on that and spoke up in order to be heard.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I AM HAPPY TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE 44TH EDITION OF THE LE BOURGET AIRSHOW IS NOW OPENED. YOU ARE NOW FREE TO GO DOWN TO THE TARMAC LEVEL AND START VIEWING THE VARIOUS AIRCRAFT ON DISPLAY. PLEASE REFER TO THE SMALL MAP IN YOUR INFORMATION BROCHURES IN ORDER TO DIRECT YOURSELVES TO THE DISPLAYS WHICH INTEREST YOU.”

“IS THE HILLER DISPLAY OPENED AND MANNED?” shouted back an Indian man, making Lepage understand why there were so many people already in at this early hour: to say that the new Hiller SKYTRUCK had made a lot of ink flow in the last few days would have been an euphemism, thanks to the media reports about its spectacular rescue mission off New York.

“YES, THE HILLER STAND IS READY AND WAITING FOR VISITORS. FOR YOUR INFORMATION, HILLER HAS ADDED A NEW FEATURE TO ITS DISPLAY YESTERDAY, A FEATURE THAT IS NOT LISTED IN YOUR INFORMATION BROCHURES. A SECOND MISSION POD FOR THE HILLER SKYTRUCK WAS RECEIVED BY AIR AND ASSEMBLED DURING THE WEEKEND. YOU WILL THUS BE ABLE TO SEE BOTH THE GENERAL CARGO CARRYING VARIANT AND THE SEARCH AND RESCUE VARIANTS OF THE SKYTRUCK’S MISSION POD. BUT I AM

CERTAIN THAT THE HILLER REPRESENTATIVES WILL BE MOST HAPPY TO TELL YOU MORE ABOUT THOSE MISSION PODS. I WILL REMIND YOU THAT A STANDING BUFFET AND BAR WILL BE OPERATING FROM THIS LOUNGE DURING THE OPENING HOURS, ALL WEEK. HAVE A NICE TIME AT OUR AIRSHOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.”

Actually, Lepage’s last sentence was formulated more by customary politeness than by necessity: in the crowd of over 300 persons now heading out to the tarmac, he could see a grand total of one woman. The World aerospace industry may represent the edge of advanced technology but it was still a most sexist one, with very few women represented in it.

At one of the display areas nearest to the arrivals terminal, a sales representative for the Sikorsky Helicopters Corporation smiled and rubbed his hands together on seeing a large crowd come in his general direction.

“Aah, it seems that our new H-75 heavy helicopter will attract plenty of attention today.”

Sikorsky’s chief test and demonstration pilot gave him a dubious look then but didn’t speak: he was already dreading what may follow. The chief pilot was proven right when, to the shock of the sales representative, the crowd of visitors simply walked past the Sikorsky stand, with only a few persons slowing down a bit to eye the H-75 before continuing on.

“But...but, where are they all going like that?” asked the salesman, utterly dumbfounded. That attracted a resigned reply from his chief pilot.

“They are all going to check out the Hiller SKYTRUCK, Mister Forbes. After the kind of publicity generated by its rescue mission off New York, when it saved nearly a thousand people from the sinking PRINCESS OF THE SEAS, we should not be surprised to see Hiller steal the show here today.”

“But our H-75 is an excellent aircraft, with a lot of outstanding qualities.”

“It is, Mister Forbes...for a helicopter. However, the Hiller SKYTRUCK represents something totally new on the aerospace market: an airliner-sized transport able to take off and land at the vertical anywhere in the World while carrying a payload of up to thirty tons at a cruising speed of over 400 miles per hour, and this over intercontinental ranges. In comparison, our H-75 can lift up to twelve tons, has a top speed of less than half that of the SKYTRUCK and has a range of only 700 miles at

best. I am afraid that we will have to be content with the crumbs Hiller will let us have today, Mister Forbes.”

“But...we heavily invested in the design and development of our H-75. We will need to make substantial sales if we want to recoup our expenses.”

“I know, Mister Forbes. I know!” replied the chief pilot in a resigned tone while looking towards the Hiller SKYTRUCK prototype on display some fifty meters away. He then had a thought for himself as he looked at a young woman standing in front of the SKYTRUCK.

‘The legendary Ingrid Dows, God’s General and our top fighter ace of all times. Why couldn’t she have come to work for us instead of for Hiller?’

Standing next to Ingrid, Elliot Goulding smiled in contentment as he watched the crowd of government and corporate representatives walking as a big pack towards their display area, which included the SKYTRUCK, with its search and rescue mission pod attached to it, the general cargo mission pod parked some twenty meters behind the prototype, an example of the latest model of the civilian transport variant of the PELICAN, which had arrived at Le Bourget days before the SKYTRUCK, and one example each of the Hiller AIRCAR and AIR BIKE. Two Hiller representatives posted in Europe were in attendance in order to help him by answering questions about those other models.

“This is going to be a most fruitful day I believe, Ingrid. That unexpected rescue mission of ours off New York seems to have worked miracles for us.”

“It indeed did, Elliot. But let’s not sell the bear’s skin before we have killed it. I will take care of the technical questions and I will let you answer the financial and commercial questions.”

“Sounds fine with me, Ingrid.”

Greeting first the incoming representatives to the Hiller display area, Goulding then distributed copies of the detailed information brochure on the SKYTRUCK and invited his visitors to examine the prototype under Ingrid’s guidance. Ingrid then led the pack of curious representatives in a slow walk around her SKYTRUCK while describing the prototype to them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, our Hiller SKYTRUCK represents in my opinion an unparalleled new capability in the domain of air transport: the ability to take off and land

anywhere in the World, including in places without a functioning airport or airstrip, while carrying a payload of up to thirty tons. While the SKYTRUCK is best suited to short and medium range transport flights to isolated and otherwise inaccessible by air locations, it can also transport over transatlantic ranges a sizeable payload of cargo and deliver it to a precise destination point, be it the parking lot of a factory or an isolated scientific research base in the Antarctic. Furthermore, its patented mission pods system will give customers like you unprecedented flexibility of use, with one air cell able to be fitted with a choice of up to five different mission pods. Thus, a user who would own a SKYTRUCK and would normally use it to transport general cargo could switch overnight to carrying a mixed cargo and passenger mission pod able to accommodate 140 passengers, along with up to seven tons of cargo in Unit Load Devices, to fill a sudden request for passenger transportation to an isolated location.”

Ingrid then looked directly at a representative from Air India who was standing in the front ranks, along with three other Indian men in suits.

“As an example, let’s say that Air India would like to open an air route to the high plateaus of the Kashmir or to the mountains of Nepal, places that are presently only accessible by helicopters and small, short-landing aircraft, in order to be able to deliver by air much heavier payloads than it presently can, along with sizeable numbers of passengers. Our SKYTRUCK, equipped with a general cargo pod, would be able to fly and land on a simple flat surface of fifty meters by fifty meters and deliver payloads like one or two standardized sea containers full of supplies and merchandises, on top of up to 58 passengers. If, let’s say, someone would want to organize a large mountain climbing expedition in the Himalayas, then you could change the general cargo pod for a mixed cargo and passenger pod and then carry to the same 2,500-square-meter landing surface up to 140 passengers, along with plenty of baggage and supplies. In another scenario, if Air India was asked to help establish some isolated base in the Kashmir, then our SKYTRUCK could be fitted with our shelter carrying pod. With that shelter pod, our SKYTRUCK would then be able to winch down onto even a tiny flat spot a customized, fully equipped shelter measuring up to fourteen meters in length, six meters in width and 3.5 meters in height, for a maximum weight on short haul routes of up to thirty tons. Alternatively, it could winch down at the vertical a standardized sea containers filled with supplies and weighing up to 27 tons, or two sea containers loaded with lighter supplies, like in the case of resupplying villages isolated by natural disaster. And all this could be done with a single air cell, using different mission pods of

comparatively low costs. In the case of the Indian government, to make another example, our SKYTRUCK could be used with our customized coast guard mission pod or our search and rescue mission pod to both patrol the Indian coasts, conduct fisheries patrols and respond to emergencies from ships in difficulty. In the case of a major disaster like floods and mudslides, our aircraft could reach isolated pockets of citizens trapped in their homes and either evacuate them or land food and water supplies directly to them. The SKYTRUCK could even rescue mountain climbing teams in difficulty up some mountain slopes, picking them off directly from cliff faces with the help of our search and rescue pod's telescopic aft rescue foot bridge."

From the exchange of stunned looks and smiles among her visitors, Ingrid could see that her presentation was already making a marked effect on them. The Air India man then asked her a question.

"This all sounds nearly miraculous, Miss Dows. How is your SKYTRUCK able to accomplish all this?"

"By using the Hiller-patented lifting body design coupled with pivoting ducted propellers and with six Allison turboshaft engines, each rated at 8,079 shaft horsepower. Those six engines are interconnected together and to the four ducted propellers via drive shafts and hydraulic gearboxes and clutches. Those clutches also enable the pilot to either use all six engines for vertical takeoff and landing phases and then disengage up to four of the six engines for cruising in level flight. That system allows the SKYTRUCK to keep fuel consumption to the minimum and to manage its engine power according to the needs of its flight profile. As you must know, turboshaft and turbofan engines' specific fuel consumption is best at close to maximum regime, while fuel consumption rates gets much higher at lower power regimes. It is thus much more economical in fuel to use only two, three or four engines kept at maximum continuous power than to use all six engines at reduced power. You will find in the brochures we distributed to you charts about fuel consumption rates at various phases of flight and engine usage options, plus other charts about the various payload and range performances of the SKYTRUCK. This flexibility of operation, along with its economical fuel usage, makes our SKYTRUCK a most economical aircraft to operate, even in very difficult environments. Added to its ability to operate and land anywhere in the World, this makes the Hiller SKYTRUCK simply unbeatable in commercial terms, especially for customers who have to deserve isolated spots which are otherwise impossible to reach by air, like some tiny island in the Pacific or a mountain plateau in the Himalayas. Think of it as being like a helicopter with

a top speed of 750 kilometers per hour, a range of up to 12,000 kilometers with a cargo payload of twenty tons if using conventional takeoffs and landings, or a range of a thousand kilometers while carrying up to ten tons on vertical takeoffs and landings missions.”

“What if one or more engine fails in flight, especially during a vertical landing or takeoff?” asked an American representative of Alaska Airlines. “Would such loss of one or more engines destabilize your aircraft and make it crash, Miss Dows?”

“A good and pertinent question, I must say. My answer is that, since all engines and ducted propellers are interconnected via drive shafts, the loss of one or more engines will not cause one of the ducted propellers to stop rotating. What will happen then is that the remaining power available will continue to be evenly distributed to all four ducted propellers. In that case, the pilot will switch from vertical operation to STOL⁸ operation, which demands less power. If he has enough speed and altitude margins left, the pilot could also switch to a conventional approach and landing.”

The next question to her came from the representative of an Australian charter airline.

“What about your system of mission pods, Miss Dows? Does it take a lot of manpower and time to disconnect your mission pod from your SKYTRUCK and to then exchange it for another type of mission pod? In the Australian Outback, we don’t have many sophisticated maintenance facilities at our disposal.”

Ingrid smiled at that question, amused: she knew quite well how basic aircraft maintenance facilities could be like in isolated corners of Australia.

“Frankly, changing a mission pod on our SKYTRUCK is no big deal, mister. A team of six reasonably qualified aircraft maintenance mechanics can do the job inside a standard aviation hangar, and this in less than three hours. The mission pods are fixed to the aircraft main frame via a total of 68 large bolts which are easily accessible from inside each pods. In turn, the shapes of the pod and of its fuselage cradle make it easy to align the pod with the aircraft fuselage. Once the bolts are disconnected from the fuselage, the pod then rises by some thirty centimeters on four retractable and telescopic self-propulsion legs before rolling away by itself from the aircraft. Once the previous pod has rolled out of the way, the new pod rolls in and, using a computerized laser alignment system, mates up with the aircraft, the same way you would line yourself up to mate with a woman in bed.”

⁸ STOL : Short TakeOff and Landing.

A concert of short laughs greeted her spicy comparison before she continued on.

“Once perfectly aligned with the fuselage, the legs of the pod then lower slowly to complete the fit between the two parts, allowing the mechanics to then tighten back those 68 large bolts. We intend to demonstrate this whole procedure to you this afternoon, after our incoming flight demonstration. You will then be invited to go inside and watch as our technicians do that procedure.”

“By God! Who thought about that pod system, Miss Dows?”

“I did! Apart from being the chief test pilot at Hiller, I am also its chief aircraft designer. By the way, this mission pod concept is already fully patented under my name, like the lifting body concept used by Hiller. I have been designing directly or managing the designing of aircraft and spacecraft of all types for over fifty years now. I don't only live outside the proverbial box: I also redesigned that box, ladies and gentlemen. In that same vein, if any of our future customers wish us to produce a customized mission pod to fit their particular needs, then Hiller will be most happy to accommodate you.”

From the looks and nods she then got, Ingrid knew at once that her arguments had hit home.

18:10 (Paris Time)

Friday, June 22, 2001 'C'

Café du Nord restaurant, Izmir Hôtel

126 Avenue du 8 Mars, Le Blanc-Mesnil, Paris

Elliot Goulding looked positively radiant as he joined Ingrid and the other members of the Hiller delegation to Le Bourget Airshow in the dining room of the restaurant sitting under their hotel. He however took the time to sit down opposite Ingrid and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level, while the others bent sideways to listen on.

“The news are truly fantastic for us, guys: Hiller has already secured a total of 184 firm orders for basic SKYTRUCK airframes, plus a total of 406 orders for various types of mission pods, the majority of them being of the general cargo and mixed cargo/passenger variants. We also secured a number of orders in that total for search and rescue pods. We can also expect a lot more orders, either as firm orders or options, to follow as our aircraft proves its mettle around the World. Our SKYTRUCK is already a

commercial success. Jeff Hiller is jumping up and down with joy and promised me that he will start at once to enlarge our production plant in Port Angeles in order to meet the demands for our SKYTRUCK.”

“That is indeed fantastic news, Elliot.” replied Ingrid, made most happy by this. “However, let’s not forget that we still have to show our aircraft to the general public during this weekend. Now that we have customers to buy our SKYTRUCK, we can now wow future passengers for our customers by showing in public what our aircraft is capable of.”

Heads nodded around her at those words. Shirley Slade then looked at Ingrid, a question on her lips.

“Now that you have developed and proved the worth of the SKYTRUCK, on what will you concentrate your attention next, Ingrid?”

“At first, I expect to be kept busy by having to train the pilots and technicians sent by our customers for the SKYTRUCK, a task in which you and Libby will be able to help me. Then, once the production line for the SKYTRUCK will be fully operating, I intend to start a project for a jet variant of the SKYTRUCK, able to fly at high subsonic or transonic speeds while still able to take off and land vertically. However, I suspect that before this could happen we will be hit by new winds of war. I can already feel those winds gathering around us.”

CHAPTER 12 – THE WINDS OF WAR

11:25 (New York Time)

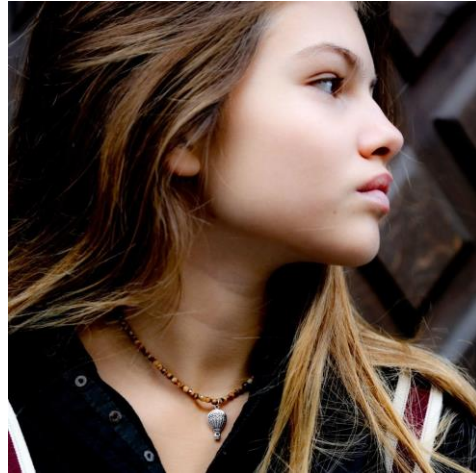
Monday, June 25, 2001 ‘C’

‘The International Fabrics Supplies Store’

Corner of 6th Avenue and 39th Street,

Garment District, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.



Nancy was thanking her luck for having found this particular boutique today as she roamed around the rows of tablets on which a bewildering variety of fabrics and sewing accessories were on display. Apart from offering lots of choices in fabrics, most of them imported from overseas, the boutique asked what Nancy found to be relatively reasonable prices for its products, at least by New York standards. While performing in public with her band, practicing music and singing and writing new songs and musical pieces kept her fairly busy, she had found a few years ago a new hobby which appealed to both her fertile imagination and to her visual appreciation of beauty: fashion dress-making. However, that hobby was just that, a hobby, and she had no plans to launch herself into the Haute Couture world as a fashion designer. The few designs she had put together up to now had been strictly for her personal use, with her outfits often ending being worn by herself or her band members during their public performances. Today, she was shopping for something truly special, something with which she planned to make a dress which she could wear at the next music awards show in which she was hoping to be invited with her band as a performer. The American Music Awards and the Grammy Awards shows, to be held respectively in November and February, were particularly on her mind and she actually had some fairly good hopes of being invited to them. If that turned out to come true, then she firmly intended to make a splash on the red carpet by wearing something of her own design that would wow the crowds.

Taking her time to look at every roll of cloth from up close and often touching them to evaluate their softness, Nancy suddenly stopped in front of three particular rolls of fabrics which had just caught her eyes: the light from the overhead neon lamps had

made something glint on those rolls of fabric. Looking closer and reaching out to touch the first of three rolls, made of some kind of semi-transparent golden tissue, Nancy saw that the fabric was sprinkled with thousands of tiny golden flakes which reflected light as if they were tiny stars. The fabric was also very soft to the touch.

“Oh my! This is beautiful!”

Looking at the two other rolls which had attracted her attention, she saw that they were basically of the same kind of fabric than the golden one, except for their colors: one was made of silvery fibers, while the other was made of pink fibers, with both fabrics glinting under the light like the golden one. Reading the stickers attached to the three rolls, Nancy saw that they were imports from Italy. She also saw that their price was quite steep. She then hesitated about buying them: while her band was doing good business and was already quite popular, she was no millionaire. However, the utter beauty of those fabrics finally made her grab all three rolls, each of which were large enough to make at least one full-length dress. Going to the cashier near the entrance with the rolls of fabric in her arms, Nancy put down the rolls on the counter and smiled to the middle-aged saleswoman.

“Could I recuperate my haversack, which I left with you when I entered your shop? I will need it to stuff those rolls in it after paying for them.”

“Of course, miss! You did choose well, miss: those pieces of fabric are truly beautiful. We received them from Italy only a few days ago and in only a limited quantity. They are end-sales stocks from a firm which recently went out of business there. That’s one reason why we are selling them at such low prices.”

Nancy nearly chocked on that last sentence from the saleswoman: ninety dollars per square yard, a low price? She however did not comment on that out loud and paid for her purchases, then stuffed the rolls of cloth, now wrapped in paper, inside her large haversack, passing its carrying strap over her head and across her chest before walking out of the store. As she walked down 6th Avenue, she was already thinking about how she could use her new cloth to best effect. It was definitely best made for full-size gowns rather than for some short and sexy outfit. On the other hand, she already had a few ideas about how to produce a gown that would be both appropriate for formal occasions and be sexy as well.

Nancy was slowly going down 6th Avenue while browsing at the shops’ window fronts when she started hearing female cries for help. Her senses immediately on full

alert, she quickly located the origin of the cries: they came from half a block away, near the junction of 6th Avenue and 37th Street. She could also see some kind of small crowd congregating at that same point. Nancy broke into a near run while cutting her way through the pedestrian traffic, heading towards the calls for help from what sounded like a young woman or a girl. She started having a bad feeling when she heard a few people in the growing crowd seemingly encourage whatever was happening. In contrast, she couldn't see or hear anyone protesting or doing something about it. That made her angry and she started pushing her way none too gently through the crowd of onlookers, ignoring the protests of those she had to push out of the way. When she arrived in the first ranks of the crowd, Nancy's anger redoubled at what she could now see: two men, one in his twenties and another one slightly older, were beating up and kicking a small woman who was rolled in a ball on the sidewalk, trying to protect herself from the blows while screaming for help. Of the some thirty people now looking on that scene, nobody seemed to be ready to help the woman, while too many were cheering on the two thugs.

"STOP THIS, YOU BASTARDLY COWARDS!"

The two men stopped their beating for a moment while snapping their heads to look at her with a mix of contempt and animosity. The older man then spat angry words at her.

"MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, BITCH! THAT RAGHEAD IS ONLY GETTING WHAT SHE DESERVES. HER KIND MURDERED OVER 3,500 AMERICANS."

Now downright enraged, Nancy stepped forward and violently pushed back the older man, making him trip and fall on his back.

"I AM MAKING THIS MY BUSINESS, YOU RACIST ASSHOLE! SCRAM, BOTH YOU AND YOUR FRIEND, BEFORE I TEACH YOU A LESSON IN CIVIC MANNERS."

The reply she got then was an attempt by the younger man to punch her with a right hook to her face. Nancy easily stopped his fist before it could connect with her head, then squeezed it with all of her supernatural strength, making the bones in the hand crunch with an audible noise and making the man scream in pain. The older man, having gotten back on his feet, then also tried to hit her, with an attempted kick to her right knee. However, his left foot was apparently stopped by an invisible force and the man was then projected high into the air, also by some invisible force, to fall back screaming down on the concrete sidewalk from a height of five meters. That man's head impacted hard on the concrete, knocking him unconscious. While still holding the shattered right hand of the younger attacker, Nancy then looked around her with a severe expression on her face.

“WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE YOU, TO SIMPLY WATCH TWO COWARDLY RACISTS BEAT UP A YOUNG WOMAN? SHAME ON YOU!”

“SHE’S JUST A RAGHEAD MUSLIM AND SHE DESERVED THE BEATING!” shouted back an obese mature woman. Extending her right arm, Nancy used her mental telekinetic powers to pull that woman towards her, with the woman ending with the front of her dress in Nancy’s grip and with Nancy drilling her eyes with an angry stare.

“Then, you are no better than those two thugs, miss.” said Nancy before shouting out while looking around at the crowd surrounding her. “IF YOU ARE NOT READY TO HELP THIS WOMAN, THEN LEAVE, NOW!”

Both her tone of voice and her demonstration of supernatural powers and strength convinced the onlookers to obey her and disperse, with only a few onlookers standing somewhat farther, along the shop windows, staying to see what would happen next. The dispersal of the crowd then allowed Nancy to see two New York policemen who were approaching at a run. Still holding the crushed hand of the younger attacker in her grip, Nancy approached the woman lying on the sidewalk and examined her quickly: she was now crying with pain and she had blood coming out of a nasty cut to her forehead. She was also holding her left side, indicating that she possibly had suffered broken ribs. The young woman, who could be in her mid twenties, was conservatively dressed with a long, loose gown and was wearing a hijab, or islamic shawl, over her head.

“Don’t move yet, miss: I will heal you. Don’t be afraid of me: I am a half-angel.” Applying one hand to the woman’s body, Nancy then concentrated and started glowing in unison with the young Muslim. The two incoming policemen slowed down, then stopped as they watched that scene with disbelief. The younger policeman’s right hand started to go for his pistol but his senior partner stopped him from drawing out his weapon while watching Nancy and the Muslim woman glow.

“Don’t draw your gun, Lester: she’s the White Angel. Go check that man lying unconscious on the sidewalk while I take care of that other man.”

As his partner moved to check on the knocked out thug, the senior policeman slowly approached Nancy and the thug she was still holding by one fist, then waited until Nancy stopped glowing before asking her a question in a soft tone of voice.

“What happened here, miss?”

“I heard female cries for help and saw a crowd form up here, so I rushed in to see what was happening, Officer. Once close, I saw those two men beat up that young

woman while screaming racist rants, calling her a 'raghead'. Nobody in the crowd around seemed ready to help that poor young woman, with some even encouraging those two thugs while they punched and kicked her, so I told those thugs to stop at once. Their response was to attack me, which was when I used force to subdue them. I believe that you recognized who I am, Officer, correct?"

"Correct, Miss Dows. You may now release the hand of that man, so that I can cuff him. LESTER, CUFF THAT ASSHOLE TOO!"

"Alright, but he is seriously knocked out, Bill. We may need to call an ambulance for him."

"Make it for both of those thugs, Officer: I crushed this one's right hand to splinters after he tried to punch me in the face."

The senior policeman gave her a respectful look before he took out a pair of steel handcuffs and put them on the younger thug's wrists, making him shout out in pain.

"AAAH! My hand! It hurts like hell!"

"You will hurt even more if you don't hold still, asshole. Now, lie face down on the sidewalk and don't move."

The younger thug obeyed him and laid down on his belly, leaving the senior cop free to go see the young Muslim woman, who was evidently shaken by her experience and who had stood up on her feet with Nancy's help.

"Are you okay, miss? What happened exactly?"

The woman, who was quite pretty, answered him in a good but somewhat accented English.

"I...I was walking up Sixth Avenue, heading towards my family's home, when those two men started following me while throwing insults at me. I tried to flee them by walking faster but they still followed me, then caught up with me after I had crossed the intersection. That was when they started punching me. I fell on the sidewalk and they then continued to punch and kick me, watched by that crowd. I asked for help but nobody did anything but watch, until this young woman intervened."

The Muslim woman then looked at Nancy with reverence.

"You performed a miracle on me, miss. Who are you and how did you heal me?"

"My name is Nancy Dows, but many in New York call me 'The White Angel' because of the mass healings I performed in the recent past years. I actually am a half-angel, miss."

The young woman knelt at once in front of her on hearing those words.

"May Allah be praised! You must have been sent by him."

Nancy slowly shook her head at that, realizing how tricky her next words could sound for the woman.

"I am sorry, miss, but Allah had nothing to do with this...or with me. I represent a spiritual entity I call 'The One'. However, The One doesn't wish to be worshipped or prayed to: it simply wants Humanity to progress and to show compassion and tolerance. It also didn't create the Universe, or even this planet. It was formed along with the Universe. Personally, I do not believe in or support any organized religion, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism or any other religious faith."

As her statement left the Muslim woman confused and hesitant, the senior policeman used that chance to speak to both her and Nancy.

"Ladies, I will have to ask you two to come to the police precinct, where I will ask you to fill a deposition about this incident. Miss, do you want to press charges of aggravated assault against those two men?"

The young Muslim woman, still quite scared by her experienced, looked at Nancy, who nodded her head once. The woman then looked back at the senior policeman.

"Yes, I will press charges, sir."

"And I will gladly testify about those two thugs, Officer." added Nancy, making the cop nod his head with satisfaction.

"Excellent! Let me read their rights to these two assholes, then I will get a patrol car to pick you up and bring you to the Midtown South Precinct for your depositions."

With the two policemen busy with the two thugs, Nancy was free to speak with the young Muslim woman and presented her right hand for a shake.

"As I said, my name is Nancy Dows. I reside in Washington but am on a shopping tour in Manhattan today."

"And my name is Aisha Pasravi. My family owns a small restaurant near here."

"You're of Iranian descent?" asked Nancy, using Farsi. Her question both surprised and pleased the young woman.

"You can speak Farsi? And how did you gess that I was of Iranian blood?"

"Your name is typically Iranian, Aisha. As for speaking Farsi, I was an Iranian man, a musician living in Isfahan two incarnations ago."

"Two incarnations ago? You mean..."

"That I can remember my past incarnations, all of them, Aisha."

“That’s incredible! You must tell me more about them.”

“Later, after we will have visited the police precinct and will have made and signed our depositions.”

“Then, we could do that at my family’s home, if you want. I would really love to present you to my parents.”

“I will be happy to do so, Aisha.” replied Nancy while smiling to the young woman.

13:52 (New York Time)

The Pasravis’ apartment, above the ‘House of Safron’ restaurant West 35th Street, Garment District, Manhattan

The moment that Aisha Pasravi opened the door of her family’s apartment, a woman in her early fifties ran at once to her, coming from the kitchen, while nearly shouting in Farsi.

“AISHA! I WAS GETTING WORRIED FOR YOU! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?”
However, the mature woman suddenly braked to a halt on seeing Nancy, who was following behind Aisha.

“Aisha, who is that girl?”

In response, Aisha smiled to her mother while patting Nancy’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Mother: this is Nancy Dows, a friend. She saved me from a pair of racist thugs who attacked me on the street as I was coming back home. We just returned from the police station, where we filled depositions against my attackers. Is Father here?”

“No! He is presently working downstairs, in our restaurant.” answered the mother before looking at Nancy and nodding in salute to her. “Welcome to our home, miss, and thank you for having helped my daughter.”

“It was the least I could do, madam.”

“Well, we better go sit down in the lounge, so that you could tell me exactly what happened. Would you like some tea or coffee, Miss Dows?”

“A cup of tea will be fine, Madam Pasravi.”

“Then, I will go boil some water right away. Aisha, could you lead your friend to the lounge?”

“Of course, Mother!”

As her mother disappeared in the kitchen, Aisha led Nancy to a small lounge near the entrance and sat with her in one of the two sofas furnishing it. Looking around the lounge as she sat down, Nancy could see that, while the furnishing had a bit of an exotic touch to it, it was mostly of modest manufacture and was well used. It was evident that Aisha's family was not rich, or even well-to-do. From what she had been able to see of the restaurant situated under the apartment, the House of Saffron was quite small and obviously catered to the working class rather than to a rich clientele.

"So, were you born here in the United States, Aisha?"

"No! I was born in a small village in Northeast Iran and me and my parents emigrated to the United States some fifteen years ago. We have since gained our U.S. citizenship. My younger brother Ali, who is sixteen, is presently attending school near here. He should return at around five. He also has American citizenship. By the way, my mother's name is Amina, while my father's name is Reza."

Nancy nodded her head in acknowledgement, then stayed silent until Amina Pasravi came into the lounge, carrying a tea service tray, which she put down on a low table situated between the pairs of sofas. She then poured the first cup for Nancy before serving her daughter and herself, finally sitting in the sofa facing the two young women.

"So, what happened exactly, Aisha?"

Aisha, to whom Nancy had spoken to while they rode a taxi to here, then told her mother how she had been attacked by two racist men and was then saved by Nancy's intervention. However, as Nancy had asked her to say, she painted over the supernatural details about Nancy's intervention and simply said that she had alerted policemen to the attack while interposing herself. At the end of Aisha's story, her mother nodded her head while smiling to Nancy.

"You are a brave and compassionate girl, Miss Dows. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having protected my daughter."

"It was the least I could do, madam. I reside in Washington and was in Manhattan to do some shopping. Are such acts of racist hatred and violence common against Muslims in Manhattan?"

"Not as much as in some other parts of this country, miss. However, the instances of anti-Muslim violence have risen sharply since the terrorist attack by these Al-Qaeda bastards against the cruise liner which sank off New York two weeks ago. What really riles me is the fact that Al-Qaeda is as much anti-Chiite as it is anti-Christian.

They consider us Shiites as blasphemers and heretics, according to the strict fundamentalist version of Islam preached by the Wahabites, the predominant sect in Saudi Arabia. Yet, we are too often put in the same basket with those intolerant haters by most American citizens."

"I must recognize that the great majority of Americans understand or know little about Islam, or about any other religion but their own, being mostly Evangelical Christians or Catholics. American Jews also often suffer from their ignorance and prejudices."

"And what faith do you adhere to, miss, if I may ask?"

"I do not adhere to any organized religion, madam. I simply follow a moral code which emphasizes compassion, generosity and tolerance. I would describe myself as a Humanist."

Amina Pasravi again nodded her head at those words.

"A most respectable philosophy, miss. You indeed lived by it today by helping my daughter. I must confess that, while most Iranians are religiously tolerant people, or at least were when we left Iran fifteen years ago, some more radical clerics are now pushing for a less tolerant attitude towards other beliefs. The Shah and his security forces have been able up to now to keep those radical clerics in check but I worry that those clerics may one day push Iran over towards intolerance and religious fanaticism."

Nancy visibly sighed at those words.

"It would be a sad thing indeed if it happened. The Persian culture has a long and rich history. Now, war could happen at its doorstep, in Afghanistan, if I could believe the more recent news about the United States vowing to chase Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan."

"I know! The Taliban, who presently rule Afghanistan, are even more fanatical and intolerant than those Saudi Wahabites. Unfortunately, they also have lots of weapons and know how to fight. It could be a very hard and bloody war, especially if American soldiers make the mistake of underestimating them."

Nancy felt somewhat depressed on hearing Amina Pasravi's words. Unfortunately, underestimating the enemy, especially when that enemy was of a different ethnicity, had been a way too common trait of the American military and of American politicians throughout history. Nancy then wished that Ingrid would still be at the helm of the American forces, so that she could prevent such underestimation of the enemy.

09:34 (Washington Time)
Thursday, June 28, 2001 'C'
Situation Room, The White House
Washington, D.C.

George W. Bush took the time to sit down in his presidential chair before looking at the men and women assembled around the long conference table of the White House's Situation Room.

"Please sit down, ladies and gentlemen, and let's start this reunion of the National Security Council."

The twelve men and one woman sat down and opened the files they had brought with them, ready to give their individual reports to the President. However, Bush was again the one to speak first.

"As you all know, I have publicly promised to the American people that we would wage war on this Al-Qaeda terrorist group and would punish it for the attack on the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. Now, over two weeks after this tragedy, I believe that we have to act decisively...soon! I want to know where we are right now and when we could start striking those bastards. General Sherman, where are we in terms of military deployments and preparations?"

General of the Army Harold Sherman, who had succeeded Ingrid Dows at the head of all the American combat forces, answered Bush while making a World map with blue markings appear on the large wall display screens of the Situation Room.

"Mister President, we have a number of strike packages either on the way towards Afghanistan or already in place in friendly countries of the region. At sea, we have two nuclear carrier strike forces, the USS NEPTUNE Task Force and the USS WILLIAM F. HALSEY Task Force, each carrying a regiment of marines. The NEPTUNE Task Force, which includes three GUADALCANAL-Class amphibious landing ships, two MONTANA nuclear cruisers and five tankers and logistical support ships, is now in the Indian Ocean after rounding Africa and will be in position off the Iranian coast in three days. The HALSEY Task Force, which includes the HALSEY, the carrier INDEPENDENCE, four amphibious landing ships, three nuclear cruisers and six tankers and logistical support ships, departed from our West Coast, crossed the Pacific and is now about to enter the Indian Ocean after transiting the Strait of Malacca. It should join

the NEPTUNE Task Force on station off Iran in four days. Together, those two strike forces will be able to strike targets in Afghanistan with long-range missiles before launching an air assault with two full regiments of marines. In Europe, our Air Transport Command is still busy ferrying troops, vehicles, equipment and supplies of the 82nd Airborne Division and of the 101st Airborne Division from the United States to our bases in Germany and Italy, from which those two divisions will stage air assaults on Afghanistan in the initial attack phase against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Accompanying our airborne troops will be a number of Navy S.E.A.L. teams and Green Berets Special Operation Groups tasked with precision assault landings against point targets, once we have enough detailed intelligence to permit such pinpoint attacks. In terms of pure airpower, two of our heavy bomber squadrons and six fighter-bomber squadrons have now moved to our bases in Europe and Turkey and are ready to strike Afghanistan and support our troops once they will have landed. With all these forces, we should be able to strike Al-Qaeda and the Taliban very hard and to destroy Al-Qaeda on the ground in a decisive manner within a week. However, my main worry right now is our limited amount of detailed intelligence on the locations of Al-Qaeda militants and command centers in Afghanistan. Without such detailed intelligence, our strike will go in nearly blind, forcing us into having to physically sweep and search vast areas, often in difficult mountaineous terrain, something that could cost us a lot of troops, Mister President.”

Bush nodded once, then looked at the director of the CIA, George Tenet.

“What kind of intelligence have you been able to obtain about Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, George?”

“A lot less than I would have wished for, Mister President. Unfortunately, our intelligence assets in place in Afghanistan are very limited and the sources available in the region are either unreliable or of dubious value. The one thing that I can say is that Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda command center is situated in Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban. The NSA⁹ has been able to locate its general location within Kandahar by intercepting a number of telephone calls between Bin Laden and his main lieutenants. As for the locations of the Taliban forces in Kandahar and around Afghanistan, the picture we have right now is quite foggy: the Taliban is mostly a light infantry and guerrilla force with no large bases, heavy weapons or sophisticated electronic systems and is thus quite difficult to pinpoint on the ground. Unfortunately, I

⁹ NSA : National Security Agency. The American agency charged with the detection, interception and decyphering of electronic signals and communications from hostile sources.

do not expect to obtain much more intelligence than at present, due to our lack of Humint¹⁰ assets and of electronic signatures, Mister President.”

Bush clearly showed dissatisfaction at that answer but he also was able to understand the reasons for that lack of accurate intelligence. That was when his national security advisor and sole woman present in the Situation Room, Condoleezza Rice, spoke up.

“About this lack of intelligence and about our overall plan to attack Afghanistan, may I say something, Mister President?”

“Go ahead, Condoleezza.”

“Well, Mister President, after the attack on the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS, I went to consult the old Athena Files kept at the Pentagon, to see what they could possibly tell us about Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Afghanistan. What I read was frankly troubling. First, understand that in the universe from which Nancy Laplante came from, which I will call ‘Timeline A’, Al-Qaeda had also attacked the United States, by hijacking a number of airliners and then crashing them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. That attack killed over 3,000 Americans in the year 2001 of Timeline ‘A’. The reaction of your counterpart there was to attack Afghanistan, with the goal of capturing or killing Bin Laden and of destroying Al-Qaeda. The United States of Timeline ‘A’ then invaded Afghanistan that same year, with many of our allies from NATO also sending troops to support us. As a Canadian reserve intelligence officer and war correspondent, Nancy Laplante went to serve in Afghanistan and reported from there many times, something that contributed to the large and detailed volume of information on the war in Afghanistan that I found in the Athena Files. That information is in my personal opinion still very relevant to our present situation, as many of its aspects are similar to what we see happening now. I analyzed that information in depth in the course of many days and was able to extract from it a number of lessons critical for our present situation, lessons which could possibly save us from a lot of grief.”

George Bush, like the other men around the table, bent forward to better listen to her, his interest aroused.

“Go on, Condoleezza.”

“Please don’t take umbrage to what I will say, Mister President, but your Timeline ‘A’ counterpart, along with his military and political advisors, committed a number of serious mistakes during what was then called ‘The War in Afghanistan’ and ‘The War on

¹⁰ Humint : Human Intelligence. Intelligence sources based on the use of clandestine agents, informers and observers in place in a targetted country.

Terror'. Nancy Laplante even wrote a number of lengthy articles on them as a war correspondent, highlighting the mistakes we made then. By 2012 'A', the year when she was abducted and transported back in time to 1940 England against her will, the war in Afghanistan was still going on after eleven years and was proving to be a costly and frustrating conflict for us, while Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had managed to survive our attacks and were waging a bloody guerrilla campaign against our troops. Here are the main lessons I drew from my analysis, points that I believe to be very relevant and important to us. First off, the big mistake your counterpart did was to stay in Afghanistan after forcing Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to hide and wage a guerrilla campaign against us. We then tried to rebuild Afghanistan according to our own concepts of democracy and installed a government friendly to us in the place of the Taliban. After eleven years, that attempt to rebuild Afghanistan was basically failing, thanks to endemic corruption and incompetence on the part of the new Afghan administration and to our own failure to understand the psyche of the country and of its inhabitants."

"And what is wrong in trying to bring democracy to another country, Condoleezza?" asked Karl Rove, Bush' senior political advisor. Rice, who didn't like Rove much, gave him a dubious look.

"What is wrong with that? The same that made our previous attempts at so-called 'nation building' in other countries costly and embarrassing failures. Fortunately, in our own timeline, we were lucky in having Ingrid Dows, Nancy Laplante's adopted daughter, who served as presidential advisor to successive presidents for fifty years, from 1948 until 1998. In her capacity as presidential advisor and as a frontline general, Dows counseled our Presidents into avoiding many grave mistakes. Her most notable achievements in that aspect were, in historical order: turning Japan into our ally in 1948; the prevention of what was called in Timeline 'A' 'The Vietnam War', which the United States lost after ten years of fighting and over 50,000 of our soldiers killed; the stopping of the fighting between Jews and Arabs in Palestine in 1953; the defeat of Stalin's attempt at conquering Europe in 1955; the prevention of a series of illegal clandestine actions in the 1960s by the then director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, who wanted to 'reshape' a number of countries in Latin America via political assassinations and fake revolutions; the prevention of another CIA harebrained scheme, in collaboration with the British, meant to destabilize the Iranian government of Prime Minister Mossadegh in order to gain control of the Iranian oil, a scheme that eventually blew in our face when hardline clerics led a revolution in Iran which transformed what was then an ally of us

into a long-term enemy; the prevention of an Arab-Israeli conflict in 1976 and, finally, her role in killing the Kremlin coup leaders who were threatening a nuclear war on us in 1989. I won't mention here all the wars and conflict Ingrid Dows won on our behalf as our top fighting general and military commander. So, excuse me, Karl, if I have more confidence in her political judgment than in yours."

Seeing that Rove was about to angrily fire back at Rice, George Bush pointed an index at him and spoke in a firm tone to him.

"She's right, Karl, so clam up and listen to her. You may continue, Condoleezza."

"Thank you, Mister President. As I said, our main mistake was to stay too long in Afghanistan for the wrong reasons. Another big mistake was to underestimate the capacity of the Taliban to wage a guerrilla war against us, using such tactics as suicide attacks, roadside bombs and road ambushes. Also, we suffered a lot because of our inability or unwillingness to pressure Pakistan into stopping its harboring of both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, which they were providing with safe havens along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. On all this, Nancy Laplante's personal opinion is that we should have gone into Afghanistan strictly to destroy Al-Qaeda, then withdraw before the Taliban could organize a guerrilla campaign against our troops. In her opinion, our attempts at rebuilding Afghanistan as a democratic society was doomed from the start due to its traditions and hard-held religious and social beliefs. To resume all this, Mister President, we should go in fast and hard, destroy Al-Qaeda and then get out. Nobody in history was able to ever take and hold on to Afghanistan in the past, which is why it is nicknamed 'the graveyard of empires', and we won't succeed either despite all our military might, Mister President."

There was a long silence as Bush digested Rice's words. He then nodded his head once and looked at General Sherman.

"General, draw a plan for a lightning in-and-out campaign in Afghanistan, with the sole goal being the destruction of Al-Qaeda."

Somehow, that brought an embarrassed look on Sherman's face.

"Uh, such a plan already exists, Mister President: General Dows wrote it as part of her series of operational military contingency plans meant to face a variety of potential threats, like her Megiddo Four Plan, which saved us in 1996 from a treacherous Russian attempt to destroy us by firing nuclear-tipped missiles from submarines located next to our coastlines. That plan is actually called 'Afghan Exorcism'."

Bush was left stunned for a moment, then broke out into a short laughter before pointing an index at Sherman.

“Then, we will go with that ‘Afghan Exorcism’ plan. Don’t hesitate to consult in private with General Dows if any of its points proves unclear or in need of more working up.”

“Uh, yes, Mister President!”

CHAPTER 13 – THE INFERNO OF WAR



06:18 (GMT)

Thursday, July 5, 2001 'C'

Flag conference room, nuclear battlecarrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE

On station 800 kilometers south of the coast of Iran

Indian Ocean

Vice Admiral Mack 'Big Mac' Benson nodded in satisfaction when the last two of his subaltern expeditionary task force unit commanders entered the flag conference room of his flagship.

"Welcome, Captain Rodman and Commander Wentworth. I am sorry to have called you to the NEPTUNE at such an early hour but I just got our operational orders from Washington, which arrived three hours earlier by aircraft, along with stocks of military maps and charts relevant to our mission."

"We understand, sir." replied Michael Rodman, the captain of the supply ship USS PROVIDENCE. "Sorry for the late arrival: I stopped on my way in to collect Commander Wentworth on the USS SAN JOSE. Her ship's aircar was down due to a minor mechanical issue."

Benson nodded again at those words. The Navy variant of the Hiller AIRCAR had proved to be a huge success in service and a most useful asset by greatly simplifying and speeding ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore liaison and personnel transport at sea. Before, one had to either prepare and use an onboard helicopter or a motor boat when needing to visit another ship or go ashore. Now, you simply needed to roll an AIRCAR out of its garage and fly off towards your destination, a bit like you would call in a taxi at home. The Hiller AIRCAR also had the big advantage over a helicopter of being much smaller in size and also being much simpler to maintain than a helicopter. As a result, nearly every U.S. Navy ship larger than a minesweeper carried at least one AIRCAR, often tucked in a corner of a ship's helicopter hangar. The other big winner in this was of course the Hiller Aircraft Corporation, which had been and was still making a fortune by building and selling by the hundreds its various models of VTOL vehicles to the American military.

"I understand. Please, take place at the table and we will start this command meeting."

Waiting until Rodman and Wentworth had taken seats around the conference table, Benson then spoke in a calm, deliberate tone while looking at his task force subalterns.

"Again, thank you for coming at such an early hour, ladies and gentlemen. As I stated before, a CMV-28 VTOL transport aircraft delivered three hours ago our detailed mission orders and operational plans, along with large stocks of field maps, photo-maps, naval charts and intelligence information booklets pertaining to our mission. Those stocks are presently being divided into packages which will then be delivered to your respective ships. You will also be provided at the end of this meeting with a smaller set of maps and charts, sets which will allow you to start your detailed tactical planning concerning our objectives in Afghanistan. Now, about our mission, as stated by Washington. It is called 'AFGHAN EXORCISM' and its goal is for the rapid and brutal hunting down and destruction of the Al-Qaeda elements sheltering in Afghanistan, including its commander and founder, Osama Bin Laden. Since the governing Taliban government refused to hand over those Islamist terrorists and has vowed to protect and support them against us, the Taliban will also get its well-deserved lumps from us. However, and this is a primary premise of Operation AFGHAN EXORCISM, our forces will not linger inside Afghanistan for longer than needed to destroy Al-Qaeda and will leave as soon as the job is completed. This is to avoid becoming stuck into a long-term quagmire with no predictable end in sight. There will thus be no such thing as 'nation-

building' by us in Afghanistan. We will go in, knock the crap out of the Taleban and Al-Qaeda and then get out."

"Gee, I was expecting a more encompassing mission from our present Republican government, sir." said Rear Admiral Stuart Reynolds, Benson's task force deputy commander and captain of the battlecarrier USS WILLIAM F. HALSEY. Benson couldn't help smirk at that remark.

"I too had expected a more extensive and longer mission but, in the letter from General of the Army Sherman that came with our orders, our combined arms commander stated that this plan was originally drafted as a contingency plan some two years ago by General Dows."

"General Dows? She was able to predict the need for us to go fight in Afghanistan?"

"General Dows was able to predict many things apart from this, Stuart. Remember how she had a whole defensive operational plan ready in detail when the Russians tried to nuke our country via a fleet of submarines stationed next to our coasts?"

"I sure do! That MEGIDDO FOUR plan was pure genius and saved our country from a nuclear hell."

"It indeed did! I will ask all of you to keep this top secret and not mention it to your subalterns, but General Sherman said in his letter that, according to the old ATHENA Files kept at the Pentagon, the United States of the original timeline known to Nancy Laplante also suffered a devastating terrorist attack by Al-Qaeda this same year as us, which is why General Dows deemed necessary to write a contingency plan in case we also suffered an attack by Al-Qaeda. But I digress. Let's now look at the main lines of our mission plan."

Before continuing, Benson made a large map of Afghanistan and of the countries surrounding it appear on the projection screen of the conference room.

"The plan states that two factors will complicate our mission. First, Afghanistan is a land-locked country, some 300 miles from the nearest coast, which belongs to Pakistan. It is surrounded to the West by Iran; to the North by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and to the East and South by Pakistan. This thus means that direct landings from the sea is impossible. In terms of air access, only Iran can be described as a friendly country, with the other countries surrounding Afghanistan unlikely to allow us to overfly them on our way to attack Afghanistan. Our freshly arrived instructions do

state that Iran has secretly allowed us to overfly its territory but has asked us to be discrete about it, as their internal situation with their own religious zealots is a bit delicate at this time. We can thus reach Afghanistan by air via Iranian airspace, either from the Indian Ocean or from our bases in Turkey. This means an air assault mission, with only air resupply available to the forces we will use in Afghanistan.”

Lieutenant colonel Ken Morita, the commander of Marine Air Group 26, made a grimace on hearing that.

“That will severely tax our aircraft fleet and will also mean a huge aviation fuel bill for this operation, Admiral. I hope that we will keep the size of the invasion force to a manageable minimum.”

“And we will, Colonel. We will employ only light forces for this operation, with the sole exception being a few artillery units brought by air into Afghanistan once we will have secured a few local airfields.”

“And what is the second factor which is complicating our mission, Admiral?” asked Colonel Paul Wilkinson, the commander of the Sixth Marine Regiment.

“The dispersed state of the enemy and our lack of detailed intelligence about where Al-Qaeda elements are located in Afghanistan. This will in turn mean that we will have to strike a number of widely dispersed locations in the country, and this with only minimal intelligence to work with. However, the Pentagon promised us that they will do everything to provide us with more solid intelligence on the enemy.”

“And what kind of opposition can we expect in Afghanistan, Admiral?” asked Lieutenant Colonel Chris Walters, the commander of the First Battalion of the Sixth Marine Regiment, which was embarked on the NEPTUNE. His question brought a sober look on Benson’s face.

“I can already tell you that our mission will not be a simple walk in the park, Colonel Walters. The Taliban, which has vowed to protect and support Al-Qaeda, may not have an integrated air defense system like one we would expect from, say, the Russians, but they have plenty of light and medium anti-aircraft guns, supplemented by some man-portable air defense missiles. We can thus expect some dense heavy machine gun and cannon fire when our aircraft will approach to land our marines. Our airborne troopers who are now in Turkey can expect the same during their air assault. Complicating our mission is the fact that both Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters don’t wear standard uniforms, instead using local civilian garbs, and can easily hide within the local population and melt back in it after attacking us. We can also expect a lot of ambushes

and hit and run tactics, plus possibly suicide attacks by enemy fighters wearing explosive vests. Enemy recognition will be a big problem for our troopers and we certainly don't want to start firing indiscriminately around when coming under fire. Fire discipline will have to be enforced if we don't want to antagonize the whole local population against us."

Benson's exposé left his subalterns rather somber as they realized how tricky this mission was going to be. Commander Kiwi Kawena, the task force intelligence officer, was the next to ask a question.

"Can we hope to find some reliable allies on the ground in Afghanistan, sir?"

"Yes! The Taliban may control most of the country but their extremely rigid interpretation of Islam and their harsh treatment of women and minorities did bring them quite a few local enemies, especially in the North of the country, close to the border with Tajikistan. The CIA is presently working to gain some local support for us in that region."

"So, do we actually have an operational plan for this mission or will we have to improvise, Admiral?" asked Wilkinson.

"The plan AFGHANISTAN EXORCISM does include a list of targets to strike and a coordinated overall operational plan. It will be up to us to decide how exactly our troops will take their objectives. The key here will be a precise coordination of all our forces, in order to deliver a sudden, massive blow from the air on the enemy, followed immediately by the landing at the vertical of our troops. Our job in the next few days will be to study the maps and reconnaissance air photos of our objectives and to plan coordinated airstrikes and troop landings in Afghanistan. D-Day for the start of the operation is in four days, so we need to get to work, ladies and gentlemen."

19:49 (GMT)

Friday, July 6, 2001 'C'

Musculation room, Marines fitness center

Upper Deck, USS NEPTUNE

Second Lieutenant Mark Whitfield had real trouble not to stare at his platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant **Greta Visby**,



while practicing in a sitting position with a pair of small dumbbells. Greta Visby was on her back atop an exercise low bench, doing benchpresses with sixty kilos of weights. Her efforts made her whole body tense up, showing her impressive muscles for a woman, including a proverbial sixpack and very strong legs. Yet, the young blonde's body was also most sexy, with large hips and firm breasts of more than average size. From his position opposite her station across the narrow alley, Whitfield had a direct view of her crotch and belly as she pumped up and down the heavy set of weights. As a result, Whitfield was developing a serious erection despite his efforts not to hoggle her. In that, the young officer was not alone in the musculation room, as Greta was the sole woman exercising along with the fourteen men present. Afraid that Greta was going to notice his attention towards her, Whitfield decided to create a diversion by asking her a question that he had meant to ask her for some time.

"Excuse me, Sergeant, but could I ask you something about your past combat experience in Somalia?"

"Go ahead, sir." replied Greta while continuing her exercise.

"Well, I was told at an information meeting this morning that the Islamist extremists we fought against in Somalia were affiliated with this Al-Qaeda terrorist organization. I thus suppose that they may have similar tactics and fighting styles. What can you tell me about them?"

Putting back in place her weighed bar on its support hooks after completing her twelfth benchpress, Greta then sat up on her exercise bench to face her platoon commander.

"The Al Shabab militia is effectively an outshoot of Al-Qaeda and has the same extreme, intransigent interpretation of Islam than Al-Qaeda and Saudi Wahabites. They consider women as inferior beings who need to be controlled by men, consider other, more moderate sects of Islam, like the Chiites, as blasphemers and regard non-Muslims as infidels worthy only of death. You thus can't argue with them, as they won't listen to you. You also can't trust their word, as they believe that a promise made to an infidel is worthless. In terms of fighting, they are fanatics, ready to die in what they consider a holy war against us non-Muslims and expecting as a reward to go to Paradise, where virgins are waiting to reward them. You may rightly laugh at such ridiculous beliefs but that makes them eager to fight and to even conduct suicide attacks against us. I was nearly killed in Somalia when a lone extremist driving a pickup truck blew as it raced towards my squad's checkpoint. Thankfully, I was able to kill him while he was still some distance from me, making him release his grip on his dead-man switch

and triggering the explosion of his car bomb. The blast threw me back but, fortunately, I was not hit by shrapnel from the truck. When it comes to these Al-Qaeda bastards, I expect the same from them as from the Al Shabab. Thus, expect suicide bombers, either on foot and wearing an explosive vest, or in a vehicle loaded with explosives. Expect also to have them hide in a crowd while wearing civilian clothes, in order to be able to get close to us before attacking. Roadside command-detonated bombs, anti-tank mines and road ambushes are also to be expected from them. They will rarely conduct what we consider a traditional infantry assault, since their fighters are poorly trained in standard military tactics, and will prefer guerilla-style ambushes and long-distance sniping. In Somalia, the Al Shabab used a lot of modified pickup trucks with heavy machine guns and even 23mm cannons or recoilless rifles mounted in the back. I fully expect the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban fighters to use such trucks, which we called 'technicals'. Expect them as well to use machine guns, mostly of Russian manufacture, as well as light and medium mortars. In Somalia, the rifle of choice for them is the Russian Kalashnikov, while the RPG-7 anti-tank rocket launcher is another popular weapon. Those same weapons are also widely used in Afghanistan, according to the information booklets we received yesterday."

By then, Whitfield had noticed that the other marines exercising in the room had stopped their exercises and were now listening to Greta with obvious interest, something that pleased the young officer: those marines were proving that they were taking this mission seriously and were eager to learn what they could about the enemy they were about to face. Greta also noticed that and continued on.

"To resume what I expect from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, we are going to face fighters who, while generally poorly educated, will fight with fanatical resolve and will be ready to die in a fight against what they consider infidels. Their word definitely can't be trusted and you can expect the worse from them if you let yourself be captured. They will favor guerilla tactics, roadside ambushes and suicide attacks and will often merge with the civilian population before attacking. Many Americans think little of such Islamist extremists because they don't have sophisticated weapon systems and don't follow standard tactics but we would make a grave mistake by underestimating them as fighters. We may have dominance of the air but Afghanistan is their country and they know it well, while we don't."

"And how did the general population in Somalia behave with you and other marines, Sergeant?"

“Most Somalis only wished to be able to live in peace and prosper, like most people on this planet. Unfortunately, the Al Shabab militia and the local warlords had most of the weapons and controlled the population via strong-arm tactics and even terror, kidnapping, torturing and killing those who either opposed them or sympathized with us. Women and girls in particular were victims of their abuses and I expect the same situation with Afghan women and girls. I met plenty of Somalis who were decent, likeable people and we gained a lot by respecting them and protecting them against extremists and militiamen. Our main problem in Afghanistan will probably be to be able to distinguish between normal Afghan citizens and disguised Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters.”

Whitfield nodded his head as Greta finished speaking: everything she had said made a lot of sense.

“Thank you for your advice, Sergeant: it was most useful to me.”

“You’re welcomed, sir. Do you know what is the particular mission or target our platoon will have in Afghanistan, sir?”

“Our regimental and battalion command staffs are still studying the information we have on Afghanistan, thus I can’t really answer your question right now. I should be able to answer you better in a day or two.”

Greta sighed on hearing that.

“Damn! The suspense is killing me. Well, we will take whatever they will give us, sir. As for our marines, they are both willing and ready for action. I think that I will go have a shower and then go back to my cabin. I intend to go to bed early tonight: we will all need to be well rested when the time will come to jump into combat. If there is something that war taught me, it is that you have to catch your sleep whenever you have a chance to, as you won’t know when your next sleep will be.”

“A good philosophy, Sergeant. I myself will go to bed early tonight. Have a good evening.”

“You too, sir!” said Greta before getting up and starting to walk towards the female locker room of the fitness center. Whitfield watched her go, admiring at the same time her firm, well rounded butt, and wishing he could have a shower with her. However, he chased away that thought at once: such a thing would have been both highly inappropriate and contrary to military discipline. Still, he told himself that Greta Visby was certainly a very appetizing girl worthy of a serious look.

13:08 (GMT) / 17:38 (Afghanistan Time)

Saturday, July 7, 2001 'C'

Marine force command post, U.S.S. NEPTUNE

"Good news, men: the target list assignment has been finalized, so the suspense for us is now over."

The words from Lieutenant colonel Chris Walters, commander of the First Marine Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, made the senior marine officers standing around the map table of the ship's marine force command post either smile or nod in contentment. Using a laser pointer, Walters then continued to speak while designating various areas and spots on the detailed map of Afghanistan fixed on top of the table.

"If we go first to the larger picture for this operation, which is by the way called 'Afghan Exorcism', the Pentagon has roughly divided Afghanistan into five main operational zones, each to be dealt with by a specific division or regiment. The 82nd Airborne Division will take care of the Kandahar area and of the Southeast of the country, which contains many of the most important objectives for us in Afghanistan, while the 101st Airborne Division will occupy Kabul and its surrounding area. By the way, for your info, Kabul is not the capital of the so-called 'First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', which was established by the Taliban in 1996 after they seized control after a long civil war. When they took control of the country, the Taliban decided to move the capital from Kabul to Kandahar, which is their spiritual birthplace and the center of their leadership. That is why the Southeast region is most important for us and drew much of our assets. On its part, the Tenth Light Infantry Division will take the northern part of the country, which has a mostly mountainous relief and which borders Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. As for the First Marine Regiment, it will take the Southwest and West regions of the country, which borders Iran. Finally, our regiment will take the Northeast part of Afghanistan, which includes the mountain ranges and passes shared with Pakistan. This may sound to you like a secondary job but it isn't, far from it. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda gets much of their support and new recruits from Pakistan, where the Northwest part of the country is predominantly of Pashto ethnicity, and where many Al-Qaeda training camps and recruiting centers are situated. Our main mission in the Northeast area will be to block the mountain passes linking Afghanistan with Pakistan and thus prevent any retreating enemy fighters from fleeing

across the border. Our job will as well be to prevent any Taliban or Al-Qaeda reinforcements and supplies from Pakistan from entering Afghanistan.”

“What about the Pakistanis themselves, sir?” asked Major Roberto Santiago, the commander of the battalion’s weapons company. “I read that they are actively helping and supporting the Taliban, even though they keep denying it. Could the Pakistani Army intervene and try to protect the Taliban?”

Walters gave Santiago a most sober look.

“Washington is fervently hoping that the Pakistanis won’t intervene militarily in this operation but the possibility still exists that they could do so. We suspect that, if they do try to help the Taliban, it will be in an underhanded way, using their military intelligence service, called the I.S.I., to provide support to the Taliban by giving them supplies, weapons and intelligence information on us. We will thus have to be ready to repeal them if it comes to that. Now, let’s cover the detailed operations plan for our battalion. Like for the other main units of our expeditionary force, we will strike in three waves. The first wave will consist of missiles and aircraft strikes on the most dangerous or important objectives, especially Taliban and Al-Qaeda known command centers, barracks and training camps. However, the main and regional airports will be spared from missile strikes, as we want to seize them intact. Then, minutes after the missile and air strikes, our first wave of troops will effect surprise vertical assault landings, in order to physically take control of our objectives. The third wave will consist in the ferrying by air of our heavier support units, equipment and supplies, using the second wave VTOL transport aircraft, plus heavier transport aircraft coming from Turkey and Europe. Here, I must again impress on you that this is meant to be a relatively short campaign centered on the destruction of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization and the elimination of its Taliban ally. There are no plans for so-called ‘nation building’ or long-term occupation of Afghanistan. Now, for the part that you were most impatient to learn about: who goes where and does what.”

The officers around the map table bent forward to better see as Walters used his laser pointer to designate specific points around the Northeast region of Afghanistan, which bordered Pakistan.

“Our first wave of troops from our regiment will take the airports of Jalalabad and Khost, so that they could be used by our second wave of troops and equipment, and will assault the known locations of Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership centers, training camps and barracks. There will be also two Navy S.E.A.L. teams in support of our battalion.

Those S.E.A.L. teams will be landed on top of the mountain passes of the Spin Ghar range, south of Jalalabad, in order to prevent any Taliban or Al-Qaeda fighters from fleeing into Pakistan, or, in reverse, from getting reinforcements and supplies from Pakistan. Now, about our own battalion's sub-units. I and the battalion command team will land in Jalalabad Airport, where we will establish our command post next to our regimental command post. Major Santiago, your weapons company will be parceled out evenly between our three rifle companies prior to leaving the NEPTUNE, so that it could provide some heavy weapons support to them. However, I want most of your antitank platoon to go in support of Bravo Company, which will be tasked with taking the Afghan border post and surrounding area at the western entrance of the Khyber Pass. If the Pakistani Army or major Taliban reinforcements react to us and try to push through with armed columns, then your antitank teams will have the main task of stopping and pushing back those columns."

"Understood, sir!" replied at once Santiago. Walters then went on, looking in turn at the commanders of his Alpha and Charlie rifle companies.

"Major Hill, your Alpha Company will take position on the left flank of Bravo Company and will deploy to interdict any infiltration or enemy withdrawal through the mountains. Your border separation with Bravo Company will be the Kabul River, which flows on the northern side of the main road from Jalalabad. Captain Vernon, your Charlie Company will occupy the foothills on the right flank of Bravo Company and will prevent enemy infiltration through that area. After this briefing, you will get enough tactical maps and photo-maps marked with our unit boundaries and areas of responsibility to provide them to all your squads and platoons. Before I close this meeting by giving you the actual timings of the operation and your radio callsigns, I want to give you a word of caution. Our enemy may look uneducated, under-equipped and poorly trained to you but this is their country and they know it well. They are also religious fanatics and will be ready to launch suicide attacks against us, on top of waging a guerrilla war on us. Don't underestimate them and take them seriously. Don't repeat the mistakes the British did during the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839."

Walters felt satisfaction in seeing that all of his officers apparently took his advice on this subject seriously.

01:02 (Afghanistan Time)**Monday, July 9, 2001 'C'****Flight deck of the battlecarrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE**

"COME ON, GUYS! STEP UP THE PACE AND GET ABOARD: BEAUTIFUL, SCENIC AFGHANISTAN IS WAITING FOR US."

A concert of laughs from the marines of Third Rifle Platoon/Bravo Company greeted Greta's joke, who was standing behind the tail of one of the 36 Hiller PELICAN 'A' lined up on the flight deck of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, ready to lift off. One young marine then replied to her joke with a question.

"HEY, SARGE, WILL WE BE ALLOWED TO BUY SOUVENIRS OVER THERE?"

"YES, BUT THEY ONLY ACCEPT PAYMENT IN BULLETS AND GRENADES."

"GREAT! I GOT LOTS OF THOSE ON ME."

"THEN, TELL THEM TO KEEP THE CHANGE, RICHARDSON."

More laughter ensued and the 43 marines of Third Rifle Platoon gingerly climbed inside the PELICAN via its rear cargo ramp, to then take the seats lining the sides of the cargo cabin, in which two Argo MUDMASTER all-terrain-vehicles loaded with supplies and ammunition were already sitting, solidly fixed to the floor by chains. Once all of her marines were aboard, Greta also climbed inside and took a seat near one of the ATVs after taking off her bulging backpack. She shouted out more instructions to her marines as she buckled her seat's safety belt.

"REMEMBER: KEEP YOUR WEAPONS UNLOADED UNTIL I SAY OTHERWISE. NO MAGAZINES ON YOUR RIFLES! CHECK YOUR WEAPONS NOW!"

She watched attentively as her marines checked that their weapons were empty. Riding along with her platoon were six men from the battalion's weapons company antitank platoon, armed with two of the new HGL-105 rocket launchers. The HGL-105 may have looked like many of the other antitank rocket launchers in service around the World but Greta knew that it had a few outstanding features of its own, having fired one of them once during a familiarization course on heavy weapons of the Marine Corps. For one, it used the same kind of long-recoil pneumatic buffer than the one in the 60mm grenade launcher attached to her .243 caliber M1986A2 assault rifle. That allowed the firing of a projectile without any of the backblast signature or rear danger zone typical of traditional

rocket launchers. It still left a rather hefty recoil to be absorbed by the shooter but, in Greta's experience, that felt recoil was quite manageable. A second outstanding feature of the HGL-105 was the large size of its projectile, which had a caliber of 105mm and was much larger than that of most other portable rocket launchers. That large caliber in turn allowed the projectile to have a very powerful shaped-charge warhead, able to pierce the armor of about any existing tank. The third special feature of the HGL-105 was that it fired what was more than a simple rocket projectile, yet was not as complex and expensive as a guided anti-tank missile would be. Once fired out of its container/launch canister by a small initial charge, the HGL projectile flew out for about ten meters before its booster and sustainment rocket motor kicked in. That greatly reduced the amount of recoil needed to be soaked up by the gunner and also reduced greatly the firing signature of the weapon, while also allowing it to be fired from inside an enclosed space, like from inside a house or bunker. However, the main feature on launch was that, on pressing the trigger, a set of gyroscopes started to spin at high speed a fraction of a second before the firing of the initial launch charge. Those gyroscopes in turn registered the precise axis on which the weapon's aiming scope was pointed at just before launch, then kept the projectile down that aiming axis after firing and while correcting for the effect of wind, using a set of cruciform canard surfaces near the nose of the projectile. That kind of simplified guidance package, while costing much less and being more reliable than a fully guided sensors package, allowed the gunner of the HGL-105 to simply aim directly at a fixed target and then fire. The projectile was then going to fly towards that aiming point with no need to correct for distance or windage, even up to its maximum range of 2,500 meters. When fired at a moving target, like a rolling tank, the gunner had to evaluate by how much deflection he needed to aim his launcher before firing, with an effective range against moving targets being around 1,000 meters. All this made for an easy to use, dependable and powerful weapon with effective ranges approaching those of a fully guided missile, and that at a much lower cost. On top of all that, the HGL-105 could fire a variety of projectiles apart from its antitank shaped charge warhead. That variety included a Fuel-Air-Explosive, or F.A.E., warhead of devastating effect against bunkers, caves and buildings, a ground flare illuminating projectile and a high-explosive/fragmentation round for general purpose use. With two such weapons assigned to support her rifle platoon, Greta was quite confident that her marines were going to be able to face about any kind of threat once at their objective, the Afghan border post at the entrance of the Khyber Pass.

Up on the air control bridge of his carrier, Vice Admiral Mack Benson watched with apparent impassivity as the 36 PELICAN 'A' VTOL transports carrying his 1,200 onboard marines lifted off one by one at the vertical from the flight deck of his ship. In reality, he was very conscious of the dangers his marines were going to face in Afghanistan and fervently wished that as few of them as possible were going to become fresh casualties of war. However, he had already seen too much about war in his Navy career to believe that his pious wish would come true.

03:16 (Afghanistan Time)

Combat Information Center (C.I.C.) of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

On station in the Sea of Oman

Looking one more time at the C.I.C.'s wall clock showing the time in Afghanistan, Vice Admiral Benson then looked at his flag operations officer and nodded his head once.

"Radio the fleet: pass the order to fire our bombardment missiles now."

"Aye, Admiral!"

Navy Captain Grossman in turn gave an order to his fleet weapons officer, who then pressed a large button, sending a computerized command around the warships of the fleet. Ten seconds after pressing the button, the first of 56 Long-Range Bombardment Missiles erupted at the vertical from its Mark-2000 Vertical Launch System with a mighty roar and a long plume of rocket flames. The LRBM then leaned towards the Pakistani coast and Afghanistan, soon switching from its initial booster solid rocket motor to its air-breathing cruise ramjet engine, while deploying its folded short wings and continuing towards its designated target at Mach 3.2, guided by its inertial navigation system coupled to a GPS receiver. The 1,900 kilometers between the U.S.S. NEPTUNE and the LRBM's target were covered in less than 33 minutes, at which time that LRBM entered a terminal dive while still under ramjet power. The one-ton concrete-piercing warhead of that missile slammed at the near vertical into its target, the regional Taliban headquarters and barracks in Jalalabad, at a velocity of close to 1,600 meters per second. Easily piercing in succession the roof and two concrete floors of the building before digging itself down to the basement, the LRBM penetrated further into the ground by another thirty meters before its big warhead exploded. The rare Afghans living around

the headquarters building and who were not asleep then saw the whole building and its surrounding annexes blow up into the air in thousands of pieces, as if propelled upward by the eruption of a volcano. Nobody in that Taliban complex, which included the regional barrack for Taliban fighters, survived that monstrous blast, most of them killed instantly while still sleeping. Then, the whole area started to be deluged by pieces of concrete masonry and other debris, gravely damaging dozens of houses and commerces and killing or wounding over forty people. At nearly the same moment, three more LRBMs impacted in and around Jalalabad, destroying the house of the local Taliban leader and two training camps used either by Al-Qaeda or Taliban fighters, the two later targets falling victims to LRBMs equipped with F.A.E. warheads which killed with their blast overpressures nearly all the fighters present in those camps. Less than five minutes later, the shocked inhabitants of Jalalabad then started hearing a number of powerful-sounding propeller aircraft approach their city and airport.

In the PELICAN 'A' carrying her and her platoon, Greta physically felt the powerful blasts from the LRBM detonations, with her aircraft shaking momentarily from the shock waves. Seeing that the marines of her platoon reacted with some muted dismay to those blasts, she then shouted out loud at them to reassure them.

"DON'T WORRY GUYS: THESE WERE THE FIRST CANDIES WE SENT TO THOSE TALIBAN AND AL-QAEDA BASTARDS. WE WILL SOON BE ABLE TO DELIVER MORE GIFTS OF OUR OWN AT THE BORDER. OOYAH, MARINES!"

'**OOYAH!**' replied in unison the 49 men in the cargo section.

In the cockpit of her PELICAN 'A', the copilot suddenly pointed forward at a small building visible through his heads-up-display, which was switched to night vision mode.

"THERE'S THE AFGHAN BORDER POST! WE ARE NOW 600 YARDS FROM IT."

"I'm starting our descent now. Transitioning to vertical flight mode." said in turn the pilot. He then made the four ducted propellers of his aircraft pivot gradually to an horizontal position, making the PELICAN slow down while starting to come down from its previous altitude of 300 meters. The aircraft was about to land on its extended landing wheels when a pickup truck-mounted heavy machine gun positioned next to the border post hut opened fire at the PELICAN. The first burst missed it cleanly, but the second one grazed it, while the third one hit it squarely. Three heavy 12.7mm slugs penetrated

the front of the cockpit area and continued inside the aircraft. Thankfully, two of those slugs, fired from a level lower than the aircraft, soon flew out of the PELICAN through its top surface without hurting anyone and causing only minor damages. However, the third slug hit lower than the two other slugs and shattered a few of the flight instruments before hitting Second Lieutenant Mark Whitfield in the head and nearly decapitating him. The front gunner of the PELICAN, who had been barely missed by that slug, gagged when he looked at what was left of Whitfield.

“JESUS! Lieutenant Whitfield is dead!”

While the pilot kept concentrating on completing his landing, the copilot had a quick look back at Whitfield, then looked angrily at the nearby border control hut.

“You’ll pay for that, you bastards! Here, have a ration of your own!”

Aiming quickly the two 35mm cannons of the PELICAN ‘A’, which had a limited capability to be aimed in azimuth and elevation, he then pressed the trigger of his aircraft’s main weapons, sending twelve high-explosive fragmentation shells towards the border control hut and the pickup truck parked next to it. The hut, made of dried mud bricks, basically disintegrated into dust and chunks of bricks, while the pickup truck exploded into a fireball, its fuel tank hit. The pilot then shouted into his headset’s microphone.

“MARINES, DEBUS¹¹!”

In the cargo cabin, Greta, still unaware of the death of her platoon commander, unbuckled her safety belt while shouting at her marines.

“YOU HEARD THE MAN! OUT, OUT, OUT!”

Once up from her seat, Greta took five seconds to put on her backpack, then went to help the drivers of the two ATVs in undoing the chains holding the vehicles to the floor, while the first marines started running out by the rear cargo ramp or jumped out via the two side doors. Once the two ATVs were free of their chains, Greta followed her marines by jumping out via the left side door of the cabin. She landed on a dry, semi-hard ground and found herself in near darkness, while tracer bullets flew around, either fired by her marines or by a few enemy fighters who were still alive. Lowering in position the pair of night vision goggles fixed to her helmet, she looked around to quickly orient herself and check on her marines, then ran towards what was left of the border control hut, intent on directing the charge of her marines. At that time, she didn’t think about where Lieutenant Whitfield could be, confident that the young officer was directing

¹¹ Debus : Military jargon for order for the passengers of a military vehicle or aircraft to get out at once.

another part of his platoon into action. The noise from the propellers of her PELICAN then surged as the VTOL transport lifted off in a hurry once all the marines had gone out of it. One Taliban hiding behind one of the barrels full of dirt and rocks forming the border chicane tried to shoot at it, firing a burst from his AK-47 rifle but missing it by a wide margin, not having phosphorescent rifle sights visible in the dark. Greta, who was running in his general direction, then fired a burst from her own rifle, peppering the barrels protecting the Taliban and making him duck down behind them. Firing short bursts every few seconds while charging the chicane, Greta forced her enemy to keep his head down until she was less than forty meters from the barricade, then stopped abruptly and raised her rifle's night vision scope to her eyes, ready to fire again. The Taliban, not hearing bullets ping against the barrels anymore, thought that this was his chance and popped up from behind the chicane and started levering his AK-47. Greta was only waiting for that precise moment and fired three rounds into the man, hitting him in the upper torso and head and killing him. The firing around her then died down quickly, as all the Taliban fighters present at the border post were now apparently dead. Taking a few deep breaths to calm herself down, Greta looked around her and saw only marines moving or running around. She then activated the microphone of the headset she wore under her helmet and which was connected to the small pocket radio tuned to her platoon's frequency. Up to now, she had only heard on it the three squad leaders of her platoon speak in short sentences on it but had not heard once Lieutenant Whitfield on the radio.

"Bravo Blue Six, this is Bravo Blue Seven, over."

Hearing no response, she repeated her call a few seconds later. However, the answer she got was not from the callsign she expected, as it came from the pilot of the PELICAN which had transported her platoon into Afghanistan.

"Bravo Blue Seven, this is Mike Alpha Two Six Three: Bravo Blue Six is dead. He was hit by a heavy machine gun bullet during our landing. I am now bringing his body back to the carrier, over."

Greta paused for a second, hit hard by the death of her platoon commander: Mark Whitfield had proved himself to be an intelligent, decent and caring officer during the short time he had been with the regiment. She however swiftly composed herself and replied to the PELICAN pilot on her radio.

"Understood, Mike Alpha Two Six Three. Advise Higher that I am now in local command, over."

"Acknowledged! Mike Alpha Two Six Three, out!"

Greta then switched to a second radio tuned to the frequency of her company and used its handset to speak in it.

"Bravo Six, this is Bravo Blue Seven, over."

This time she got a nearly immediate answer from Captain Kenneth Gomer, her previous platoon leader, who had been promoted a few months ago to the command of Bravo Company.

"Send, Bravo Blue Seven!"

"Bravo Six, from Bravo Blue Seven: Bravo Blue Six is dead, killed during our landing. I am now in local command, over."

There was a two-second delay before Gomer replied to that.

"Bravo Blue Seven, I acknowledge. Do you have control of your objective, over?"

"Affirmative, Bravo Six! I will soon send you a full situation report once I will have checked on my men, over."

"Understood, Bravo Blue Seven. Hold firm in place and do not let anyone through except unarmed civilians. Bravo Six out!"

Switching back to her small platoon radio, Greta went to crouch behind the protection of the border road chicane, in case an enemy sniper would be around, and spoke in her headset's microphone.

"All Bravo Blue callsigns, this is Bravo Blue Seven. Report your situation, over."

As per standard procedures, the squad leaders answered her in numerical order, with the commander of the First Squad, Sergeant Ken Nakamura, replying first.

"Bravo Blue one: all clear, no casualties. We are holding the right flank, over."

"From Bravo Blue Two: no casualties. We are holding the barricade, over."

"From Bravo Blue Three. All good! Left flank clear, over."

Satisfied, Greta then spoke again in her radio.

"To all Bravo Blue callsigns, from Bravo Blue Seven: Bravo Blue Six is dead. I am now in charge. Bravo Blue Black Element, join me near the border control hut, over."

The platoon guide, Sergeant Terence Green, answered her at once.

"On our way, Bravo Blue Seven."

Satisfied, Greta got up on her feet but kept crouching low behind the barrels of the chicane while walking towards the ruined border control hut. While passing by him, Greta patted the shoulder of Sergeant Joshua Stern, the leader of the Second Squad.

"Nobody but unarmed civilians will go through the border until further notice, Joshua. Make sure that you have at least one HGL-105 team in direct support of your squad."

"Got it, Greta!" replied Stern, a good friend of Greta and an NCO she had full confidence in. Satisfied, Greta continued towards the destroyed border control hut, arriving there as the two ATVs assigned to her platoon arrived there as well, carrying Sergeant Green, the platoon messenger, Corporal Kim Lee, and the Navy Corpsman attached to the platoon, Petty Officer Second Class Janet Reno, also known as 'Big Mama', a big, robust black woman with gentle manners that belied her tough looks. Kneeling down behind the ruined hut, Greta took the time to put down her backpack on the ground before looking at her small platoon command element.

"Lieutenant Whitfield was killed during our landing and I thus took over command of the platoon. No other casualties were signaled to me within our platoon and I got orders to hold this border crossing until further notice. We will unload the ammunition and water from our two ATVs here, behind the back wall of this hut, so that our ATVs could be available on call to take care of eventual wounded men and to bring up ammunition. Contrary to the rest of the battalion, no second wave is expected here at the border post. Janet, use Corporal Lee to help you pitch up a first aid tent behind that big rock over to our left, thirty yards away. Terence, go around with some small arms ammunition and have our men refill their magazines, then take four men from our First Squad and go establish a security post 300yards to our rear, in case that some Taliban fleeing from Jalalabad shows up. We don't know what could hit us next or from which direction."

"Got it, Greta!" replied her platoon guide before walking to his ATV, imitated by Janet Reno and Kim Lee. Greta was soon alone behind the ruined hut, free to analyze the situation of her platoon. While the task of our platoon was simple enough, her sub-unit was probably the one facing the biggest threat, as the reaction of the Pakistanis to the capture of this border post was still uncertain. Since the situation was now quiet, she used the next few minutes to reload the now nearly empty magazine inserted in her rifle, then went around to see what kind of weapons and supplies the dead Taliban had left behind. She actually found the bodies of six Taliban fighters, one burned to a crisp

inside the destroyed pickup truck. While the heavy machine gun mounted in the truck was charred, with its ammunition having cooked off in the fire that had consumed it, she was able to retrieve four intact AK-47 rifles, plus one Soviet-manufactured PKM 7.62mm medium machine gun. That last find brought a smile to her lips: the PKM was a good, reliable weapon with respectable firepower and she found four ammunition boxes for it next to the weapon. She also happened to be familiar with its use and care, having encountered and reused many such captured weapons in Somalia. As she searched the ruins of the border control hut, she also found one RPG-7 portable rocket launcher, another weapons she was familiar with, along with three reload rockets in their carrying backpack. Bringing the captured weapons and ammunition behind the hut occupied her next half hour, by which time the Sun was about to rise over the horizon. Looking east towards the Pakistani border post, some 300 meters away down the road, she saw that the Pakistani border guards there understandably appeared nervous and showed themselves as little as possible while observing her and her marines with binoculars. Them watching her was fine with Greta, as long as they didn't do anything stupid. If they did, then it would become THEIR problem. The distant noise of an intense firefight coming from the direction of Jalalabad then made her turn her head in that direction. Apparently, despite the punishing rain of bombardment missiles targetting their known command posts and barracks, the Taliban had still plenty of fight left into them, something that didn't really surprise Greta: her experience with religious fanatics in Somalia had shown her that, while unsophisticated, such fighters didn't give up easily. However, the commanders of those fighters had generally proven to be much less eager as fighters themselves, often thinking of themselves as 'too important' for their organizations to willingly enter combat. She thus deduced that her border crossing could well see some Taliban or Al-Qaeda commanders show up soon, intent on finding safety in Pakistan. If that happened, she was going to be happy to greet them in the right fashion.

05:24 (Afghanistan Time)

Afghan side of the border, west of the Khyber Pass

After touring the positions dug by her marines during the last couple of hours and seeing that they had done as well as possible in this mostly rocky ground, Greta looked

at the Pakistani border post, 300 meters away to the East, and took a decision before going to the leader of her platoon's Second Squad, Sergeant Joshua Stern.

"Josh, I'm going to pay a short liaison visit to those Pakistani border guards, so that I could reassure them and avoid any accidental misunderstanding."

"Are you sure, Greta?" asked Joshua, concern on his face. "What if they simply shoot you?"

"Then, you will be free to blow the shit out of their border post. Just put your squad on full alert, in case those Pakistanis get to suffer a case of terminal stupidity."

On those words, Greta slung her rifle from her left shoulder and walked through the border chicane, heading towards the Pakistani border post. The Sun had been up for about half a hour now, so the Pakistani guards were able to see her clearly. Keeping her rifle slung, Greta calmly walked down the poorly maintained asphalt road, watched by eight uniformed Pakistani Border Corps soldiers crouched behind their own chicane and sand-bagged positions. Behind them, a line of waiting civilian trucks and other assorted vehicles had already started to form up, apparently waiting to cross the border and enter Afghanistan. Part of the last instructions she had received from Lieutenant Whitfield before he was killed in the PELICAN was the directive that the civilian vehicle traffic could proceed through the border in both directions, as long as every vehicle and person was searched for weapons before being let through. Thankfully, the Pakistanis didn't panic and held their fire, even though they still were pointing their weapons at her. Greta finally stopped a mere four paces short of the first chicane, made of old barrels full of gravel, and spoke out in a firm voice.

"Does any of you speak English?"

Nearly at once, one of the Pakistani soldiers got up from behind the second line of barrels forming the chicane and replied to her in a heavily accented English.

"I do! I am in command of this border post. What do you want, woman?"

Greta bit her tongue in order not to remark on the way the Pakistani had addressed her and answered him in a polite but firm tone.

"I wish to discuss our mutual situation here and to clarify a few things between us. Would you mind stepping forward a bit, so that we don't have to shout to each other?"

Finding her request to be a reasonable one, the Pakistani walked from behind his line of barrels and past the first chicane, stopping two paces in front of her, his own rifle also

slung from one shoulder. Seeing that the man wore the shoulder epaulettes of a junior officer, Greta came to attention and saluted him.

"Staff Sergeant Greta Visby, of the United States Marine Corps. May I have your name, sir?"

Impressed by the politeness shown by her, the man returned her salute and answered her in his accented English.

"First Lieutenant Ismael Khan, of the Border Corps. Where is your officer?"

"I am in command of my unit, Lieutenant." replied Greta, not wanting to tell the Pakistani more than he strictly needed to know. Her answer unsettled a bit the Pakistani, no doubt because he was not accustomed to see a woman in charge of anything but a household. However, he quickly regained his composure and asked her another question.

"What is happening inside Afghanistan and why are American soldiers here, Sergeant Visby?"

"What is happening is that the United States has decided to respond to an act of terror committed by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, an act that cost the lives of over 3,500 American civilians. Since the Taliban government refused to deliver to us the Al-Qaeda leaders sheltering in Afghanistan and vowed to protect and support them, the United States' government was left with no choice but to come and get those terrorists and their supporters right here, in Afghanistan. However, I can assure you that the United States has no hostile intentions towards Pakistan. We will not attack you as long as you don't attack us."

The lieutenant, who was maybe 25-years-old, about the same age as Greta, nodded his head once.

"Good! Do you Americans plan to stay in Afghanistan and take over the country?"

Mentally hoping that nobody in Washington would do such a stupid thing, Greta shook her head in response.

"We will stay in Afghanistan only long enough to ensure that all the members of Al-Qaeda hiding in it will be found and either captured or killed, along with any Taliban who would defend them. Once that is done, we will leave. Can you pass my words to your superiors?"

"I will do so, Sergeant. As you can see, a number of trucks and cars are waiting to cross over to Afghanistan. Will you let them go through? We conduct a lot of

commerce and exchange of goods between our two countries. Also, a lot of Pakistani citizens have family members or friends in Afghanistan.”

“We are ready to allow them through, but only after searching them for weapons and ammunition. You may advise them that the situation inside Afghanistan is presently difficult, with fighting still going on between us and the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. If they choose to go through, then we can’t guarantee their safety.”

“We understand. We have been listening to the noise of fighting coming from Jalalabad for a few hours already. Will you allow Afghan traffic to also cross the border?”

“Yes, but again after we search it for weapons and ammunition. You may allow the first vehicle through once I am back on the other side of the border, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. You are most reasonable.”

Greta then saluted again the Pakistani, who saluted back before she pivoted on her heels and started walking back to the ruined Afghan border post. Joshu Stern let out an audible sigh of relief once she was back behind the Afghan border chicane.

“Damn! You scared me about you, Greta.”

“Man of little faith.” she replied with a smile. “You should know by now that I can bullshit with the best of them. Now, I have arrived at an understanding with the Pakistani post commander, a Lieutenant Ismael Khan, to allow through civilian vehicles and pedestrians after they are searched for weapons and ammunition. I will direct the searches with two of your men while I will let you be on standby to react to any hostile move.”

“But, that could expose you to possible suicide-bombers, Greta?”

“So quickly after the start of our invasion? I don’t think so. Besides, I will not ask anything from our men that I am not ready to do myself. I need to show goodwill to these Pakistanis in order to keep the situation here under control.”

“As you wish, Greta.” replied Joshua in a resigned tone. “You may take Vinetti and Rodriguez to assist you to search vehicles.”

“Excellent! We will do the searches in front of the border chicane. That way, you will be able to react quickly and effectively in the case of any treachery.”

Letting Joshua call up to him the two marines designated to assist her and giving them a short set of instructions, Greta then looked at the Pakistani border post and waved one arm high, signaling to the Pakistani guards that they could let through the

first of the vehicles lined up behind their chicane. That first vehicle turned out to be an old, grossly overloaded British-made truck that had seen better days. It apparently carried bags of grains of some sort and had two men sitting in its front cab. Greta let the truck advance to some ten meters of the border chicane, then motioned it to stop and walked to the driver's window. The driver, a bearded man in his forties, rolled down his window and presented his passport and a document to her before speaking in a fair English. That made Greta thank the fact that Pakistan was an ex-member of the British Empire and that English was probably taught as a second language in Pakistani schools.

"Here are my papers, miss. I have a load of first quality Basmati rice headed for Kabul."

"I like Basmati rice!" replied Greta, smiling to the man. "I will have to ask you and your passenger to step out, so that you could be searched for weapons. If we find nothing, then you will be free to continue on to Kabul. Be advised that you may encounter some fighting between here and Kabul."

"What about custom duties? The Taliban border guards always asked us to pay duties on our way in."

Greta replied to his with a big grin.

"You are in luck today, mister: you won't have to pay duties today. We relieved the Taliban border guards of their duties and we are not into briberies."

The driver had a quick glance at the six dead bodies lying under blankets near the ruined border control hut, then dismounted from his cab, imitated by his passenger. Greta let one of her two marines search the driver, then the cab, while her other marine searched the passenger, a young man who turned out to be the eldest son of the driver. With no weapons found on them, Greta made her marines search quickly the back of the truck, where they saw only bulging bags of rice. The driver was then allowed to get back into his truck with his son after Greta gave him his papers back.

"Have a nice trip and be careful about any fighting you may encounter, mister."

"Thank you! May Allah be with you, miss." replied the driver before restarting his truck and drive it around the chicane.

The next vehicle to go through was an old Ford pickup truck loaded with fresh produces. Greta found a man, a woman and two young children sitting in the front of the truck. Unfortunately, none of them spoke English but Greta compensated for that by using sign language with them to make them step out. Letting her two marines search

the driver and his preteen son, she searched herself the woman and her young toddler girl, whom she found to be quite cute. Greta gently kissed the child on her forehead before handing her back to her mother and waving goodbye to the family, who was too happy to continue on their journey.

The search of the next six vehicles to come from the Pakistani side went without a hitch, with Greta finding no weapons in them. However, that changed when she saw in the distance a small convoy of pickup trucks coming from inside Pakistan and jumping the queue of waiting civilian vehicles. A quick look at them with her binoculars made her shout out an alarm.

“ARMED TECHNICALS!¹² STAND TO, MARINES!”

Waving urgently to the driver of the truck she had been inspecting to go through without delay, Greta then ran back behind the line of protective barrels and unslung her rifle while shouting orders.

“SLOW AIMED FIRE ONLY AT MY COMMAND. TARGET THE DRIVERS AND GUNNERS IN PRIORITY. WE DON'T WANT TO SPRAY BULLETS AROUND THOSE WAITING CIVILIAN VEHICLES.”

Joshua Stern helped her in that by designating to each man of his squad a specific target among the six incoming vehicles. Greta could now see that the trucks flew large black flags bearing Arabic words on them. From her pre-departure briefings, she recognized those flags as being Taliban flags. Five of the trucks carried heavy machine guns, each manned by men wearing black turbans, while the sixth truck mounted a short-barreled multiple rocket launcher. This was some serious firepower coming at her.

“INCOMING TALIBAN TECHNICALS! WAIT FOR MY ORDER TO OPEN FIRE!”

To the credit of the Pakistani border guards, their lieutenant jumped in front of the incoming pickup truck as they were some fifty meters from his border post and waived at them to turn around. However, the Taliban fighters ignored him and simply drove past him. Seeing that, Greta shouted more orders to her marines.

“REMEMBER: AVOID FIRING AT THE PAKISTANIS. AIMED SEMI-AUTOMATIC FIRE ONLY WHEN I WILL SAY SO.”

¹² Technicals : Popular term among American soldiers to designate vehicles, typically pickup trucks, modified by the addition of a heavy machine gun, light cannon or other heavy weapon mounted in the back of the vehicle.

Her marines, now nervous but still determined, obeyed her and held their fire for the moment. Greta then saw the pickup armed with a multiple rocket launcher veer off the road and roll for about twenty meters before stopping short of the border, with the men aboard the truck jumping out while the other trucks of the convoy started driving around the Pakistani chicane. She understood at once what the Taliban were planning to do and shouted out again.

"HGL-105 GUNNER, ENGAGE AT ONCE THIS PICKUP TRUCK WITH MRL¹³ STOPPED AT ONE O'CLOCK FROM OUR POSITION. MARINES, OPEN FIRE ON THE INCOMING TECHNICALS WHO WILL CROSS THE BORDER."

The first rifle shots from her marines rang less than two seconds later, with a muffled 'BANG' followed by the roar of a rocket motor from the HGL-105 missile one second later. The Taliban who were now in the process of pointing their 104mm MRL never had a chance to finish pointing it before the 105mm warhead of the HGL-105 hit the windshield of their truck and exploded, turning their vehicle into a flaming heap of twisted metal and killing all five Taliban fighters around it. As for the five other Taliban pickup trucks, they were systematically targetted by marines with well-aimed rifle fire as they were speeding past the Pakistani border chicane. In turn, their acceleration mostly ruined the aim of the machine gunners standing precariously in the back of the trucks, making their own fire erratic. However, that still meant that lots of 12.7mm and 14.5mm heavy slugs flew around, with many of them impacting against the barrels of the chicane. On her part, Greta carefully aimed her own rifle and shot in succession two of the gunners standing in the back of the incoming trucks, then aimed at the surviving Taliban fighters who then hurriedly jumped out of their out-of-control vehicles before they could crash into the roadside irrigation ditches, their drivers killed by bullets to their heads or upper torso. After a mere minute of firing, Greta and her marines ceased fire, all their targets now down. Greta let out a sigh of relief after that, in order to calm herself down and slow down her heartbeat.

"Hell! I understand now what the British called 'The Mad Minute'¹⁴ in World War One. CEASE FIRE, MARINES!"

¹³ MRL : Multiple Rocket Launcher.

¹⁴ The Mad Minute : Expression describing mass rapid rifle fire by British soldiers working up the bolts of their .303 Lee-Enfield rifles during trench battles in World War One. Trained British soldiers could then fire an average of one shot every two seconds, resulting in mass rifle fire which appeared like machine gun fire to the Germans.

Using the optical combat scope on her rifle, Greta then slowly scanned the scene in front of the Pakistani border post, examining carefully the Taliban lying around to make sure that they were all dead. She did see two of the Taliban move slightly, being obviously wounded. She urgently shouted to her marines when she saw that Lieutenant Khan and four of his men were walking around their chicane in order to go check out the wounded Taliban.

“WEAPONS TIGHT¹⁵! WEAPONS TIGHT! DON’T SHOOT AT THE PAKISTANI BORDER GUARDS!”

Fervently hoping that her marines would obey her and thus avoid an unfortunate misunderstanding with possible tragic consequences, Greta watched with her binoculars as Khan and his soldiers approached the Taliban lying around on and close to the road and checked them out. While she was a bit surprised to then see Khan shoot dead the two wounded Taliban, she was satisfied to see that: the Pakistani officer had good reasons to want to punish the Taliban for their foolish acts, which had endangered both his men and the Pakistani civilians waiting behind his barricade. Her marines apparently agreed with her, pushing yells of approval on seeing the execution of the wounded Taliban. That in itself brought relief to Greta: it now seemed that her marines and the Pakistani border guards were playing from the same page of music when it concerned the Taliban. Feeling more relaxed now, Greta started a quick tour of her platoon’s positions, checking on her marines and making sure that they both reloaded their magazines and also drank from their water bottles, in order to prevent dehydration. Lieutenant Khan earned further appreciation from Greta by showing initiative, using one of the waiting heavy civilian trucks to push the wrecked Taliban vehicles off the road, then letting that truck roll towards the Afghan border post, where Greta obliged it by waving it through without inspection. That was the signal for the civilian traffic to resume through the border.

The first civilian vehicles to arrive at the border post from the Afghan side did so about one hour later, in the form of a long line of often old and battered cars or pickup trucks, nearly all of them packed with people of all ages and with piled up personal possessions. Greta understood at once what they represented.

¹⁵ Weapons Tight : Military order to hold fire until contrary notice. ‘Weapons Free’ meant you were free to fire at will.

"The first Afghan refugees from this war." she said to herself while watching the first car approach. "Innocents are always the first to suffer in a war." Looking at Joshua Stern, she pointed the incoming vehicles to him.

"We will have to split our attention in both directions. Use one of your two fire teams to check the incoming Afghan traffic while using your other fire team to search the Pakistani traffic. However, be extra careful when checking vehicles coming from the Afghan side and pull aside any suspicious ones: we may start to see fleeing Al-Qaeda or Taliban members and I expect them to try to hide their true identity. I will stand watch against vehicles which will try to rush through."

She tapped her rifle-mounted 60mm grenade launcher as she spoke her last words, making Joshua grin.

"You want to have a replay of your 'Calamity Jane' moment in Somalia, Greta?" Greta smiled back at that allusion to the time when she had stopped an armored car carrying a Somali warlord by firing a 60mm grenade into its windshield while standing in the middle of a local street.

"Why not? I have to cultivate my image as a badass girl, no? Make the cars from the Afghan side stop some distance from the chicane, so that we could react in time to any surprise move."

"Got it!" replied Joshua while giving a thumb's up signal.

On top of assigning one of his two fire teams of four marines to check the traffic from the Afghan side, Joshua decided to stay with that team and personally direct it: Greta was right about the possibility of Al-Qaeda or Taliban leaders trying to flee to Pakistan and catching or killing those leaders was after all one of the main goals of this military operation in Afghanistan. Standing a few paces off the road, he scrutinized with the help of his binoculars the incoming vehicles as they were still over fifty meters away, in order to be able to warn in advance his men if he noticed something suspicious. Some forty minutes later, he suddenly saw what was definitely looking suspect to him: contrasting with the collection of old, battered and dirty cars and trucks which had been heading towards the border crossing, a big Mercedes-Benz sedan with tinted windows was rolling towards the border post, following some twenty meters behind an old pickup truck in which Joshua could see a whole Afghan family. An alarm bell went up in his head as he examined from a distance the big car, which contained four persons. He thus shouted out to Corporal Eddy Mastriano, the leader of his first fire team.

“HEADS UP, MARINES! I SEE A BIG BLACK MERCEDES-BENZ SEDAN APPROACHING. IT LOOKS SUSPECT AS HELL TO ME. BE READY FOR ANYTHING.”

Mastriano reacted at once by starting to walk along the side of the road to approach the said Mercedes-Benz sedan. Apparently, whoever was in that car got spooked by this, as the sedan's powerful engine suddenly roared to full power, while its driver veered to the right and accelerated, starting to jump the queue of waiting vehicles. Both Joshua and Mastriano reacted to that by raising their rifles and firing a burst of automatic fire at the Mercedes. To Joshua's consternation, his bullets hit the windshield of the car but only created a few stars in it rather than shatter the glass.

“FUCK! IT'S AN ARMORED CAR! SHOOT THE TIRES, QUICK!”

Corporal Mastriano didn't have time to do that before he had to hurriedly jump out of the way in order not to be run over by the big car. Joshua himself had to jump out of the way while firing his rifle but his move threw off his aim and he didn't succeed in hitting the tyres of the black Mercedes, which sped by him while rushing towards the border chicane. Joshua didn't shoot again at it, as his fire would endanger the Afghan civilians packing the vehicles by which the Mercedes was now rolling by, possibly as a deliberate tactic to prevent the Marines from firing at it. Greta, alerted by Joshua's shouts and then by the firing, had only a second to evaluate the situation and react to it. Taking three quick steps away from the road and putting one knee down on the ground, she aimed her rifle at the front side of the Mercedes and fired her 60mm grenade launcher, which was loaded with a dual-purpose explosive fragmentation and shaped charge warhead. With her marines now over thirty meters from the Mercedes and with her point of aim on one side of the armored sedan likely to prevent her grenade from hurting civilian bystanders, her projectile hit the front right-side door of the Mercedes and exploded. As she had hoped, the armor of the car soaked up the blast and fragments from the explosion, with the car's body shielding the civilian vehicles behind its left side, while the shaped charge plasma dart easily penetrated the armor of the Mercedes. That dart of super-hot gas and the overpressure from the blast instantly killed all the occupants of the sedan. With nobody left to drive it, the Mercedes started slowing down while veering to the right, out of control. Greta had to jump out of the way to avoid the barreling car but immediately started to run behind it, wanting to catch it as soon as it would stop. A large rock some twenty meters to one side of the border chicane finally did the job, brutally stopping the car in a loud noise of crunching metal. Cautiously approaching the

Mercedes with her rifle up and pointed at it, Greta saw no movement inside, with the four occupants slumped towards the front. Her dilemma was now how to open one of the doors of the sedan, as they were probably locked from the inside. Trying one of the door handles confirmed her fear about that but she still had one way to get in the car. Bracing herself solidly and pointing the muzzle of her rifle from a distance of less than thirty centimeters from the top front corner of the rear left window of the Mercedes, Greta fired at the window in full automatic mode while holding firmly her rifle, so that her bullets would keep striking the same small area of the window. She knew that armored car windows could resist the impacts from a few rifle bullets but that concentrated, prolonged firing would eventually shatter the plexiglas. Emptying one of the two joined magazines inserted in her rifle heavily damaged the corner of the window but did not fully shatter it, so she quickly switched magazines and fired another 25 .243 caliber bullets in it. This time, her firing managed to create a hole in the window large enough for her to insert her left fist and forearm inside.

“Joshua, cover me while I unlock that door, just in case somebody is still alive inside.”

“Go ahead, Greta: I have you covered.”

Reaching for the door lock button and pulling it up, Greta then pulled the door open while getting out of Joshua’s aim. A cloud of acrid smoke rose out from inside the car before they could see that the four occupants inside were dead, blood coming from their ears, a typical effect from a high pressure blast wave. All four men were bearded and wore turbans and traditional Afghan men’s robes. Greta also saw at least two Kalashnikov automatic rifles, one of them a shortened AKSU-74 sub-machine gun variant.

“Bingo! Those assholes were definitely not innocent bystanders. I will now search them to see if they have any papers on them, so that we could identify them.”

She started with the older-looking man, the one armed with the AKSU-74, a favorite weapon of Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders. Not finding anything directly on the dead man, she then took out of the car a briefcase lying beside the man and, putting it flat on top of the roof, opened it. What she found inside that briefcase was a collection of documents in Arabic, which she couldn’t read, a large amount of cash money in Afghan and Pakistani currencies and a Pakistani passport. Opening the passport, Greta saw that it pictured the man she had just searched. Since, as per usual international conventions, the passport bore information in English on top of Urdu, she was able to finally put a name on her victim.

"Ayman al-Zawahiri, born in Egypt. That name tells me something but our intelligence guys will definitely need to examine this and the papers in the briefcase. Joshua, continue to search the other occupants while I call this in. However, keep your fire team's attention on checking out the cars from inside Afghanistan."

As Joshua gave a few quick orders to his marines and then went to open the other doors of the Mercedes, Greta took a couple of steps back and put fresh twin magazines on her rifle before activating her company-level radio.

"Bravo Six, this is Blue Bravo Seven, over."

She got an answer after a two-second wait.

"From Bravo Six, send, over!"

"From Blue Bravo Seven: we just stopped an armored Mercedes sedan which tried to rush through the border post. I have four dead men inside and will need somebody from Golf Two¹⁶ to come and examine the documents I found inside the car, over."

"Good work, Blue Bravo Seven. Can you identify the occupants, over?"

"Right now, I have one Pakistani passport in the name of an 'Ayman al-Zawahiri'. We are still searching the car for more papers, over."

When Captain Kenneth Gomer spoke again, it was with clear excitement in his voice.

"Did you say 'Ayman al-Zawahiri, over?'"

"Affirmative, Bravo Six."

"You may have caught a big fish today, Blue Bravo Seven. Preserve everything from inside that car and wait for someone from higher to come to your location to examine your catch, over."

"Understood, Bravo Six, out!"

Hooking back the handset of her company-level radio, Greta looked again at the older dead man in the Mercedes, frankly intrigued by the words from her company commander.

"So, you are a big fish, hey? I wonder who you are really, you asshole. Well, have a nice time in Hell while we wait for the intelligence guys."

To Greta's surprise, it took less than forty minutes before a militarized variant of the Hiller AIRCAR landed near her border post, with three persons then stepping out of it

¹⁶ Golf Two, or G2 : radio callsign for the military intelligence officer of a unit.

and walking towards her and the wrecked Mercedes. She quickly recognized one of the three marines coming to her as being Major Roger Snider, the intelligence officer for the Sixth Marine Regiment.

"Wow! This looks like I truly hit the jackpot today." she said to herself before coming to attention. She however did not salute Snider, since they were on an active battlefield. Instead, she shook hands with the big redheaded man.

"You came here real quick, sir."

"I needed to, Sergeant Visby. Do you know who Ayman al-Zawahiri is?"

"Uh, the name rang a bell but I don't really know why, sir. I suppose that he is an enemy big cheese, sir?"

"You suppose correctly, Sergeant. Could I see the papers you captured? I brought a linguist with me to translate them."

"Just follow me, sir." said Greta before walking to the Mercedes, on top of which still rested the captured briefcase. She then presented to Snider the passport found in the briefcase.

"Here is the Pakistani passport I found inside that briefcase, sir. That briefcase was next to the older occupant of the car, who sat in the rear left seat."

"Thank you, Sergeant!"

Snider opened the passport presented to him and eyed the picture and name inside. When he looked back at Greta, it was with glee in his eyes.

"Who stopped that car, Sergeant?"

"Me, sir: I hit it with a 60mm grenade."

"Then, I can tell you that you killed the number two commander of Al-Qaeda, Sergeant. While you may become rightly proud about that, I would counsel you not to brag about it around you, especially in Afghanistan: that would paint you as a specific target for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban."

Blood rushed to Greta's brain on hearing that but she quickly managed to regain her composure.

"Understood, sir!"

"Good! I will now go through the content of that briefcase with my linguist. You may resume your border post duties, Sergeant."

Greta nearly felt giddy as she walked away from the wrecked Mercedes, leaving Snider and his two assistant free to check it out.

"The number two of Al-Qaida... Wow! This certainly makes my day!"

CHAPTER 14 – A RISKY CONTRACT

14:39 (West Coast Time)

Tuesday, July 17, 2001 ‘C’

Prototype design department

Hiller production plant, Port Angeles

Washington State, U.S.A.



Having been alerted by a call from Jeff Hiller, the owner and CEO of the Hiller Aircraft Corporation, Ingrid was on hand in front of the large building housing the Hiller Port Angeles production plant, prototype workshop and design department when Jeff Hiller's personal AIRCAR landed on the tarmac next to the building. Ingrid was not surprised to see that Jeff Hiller, an enthusiastic aviator and accomplished pilot, had been piloting his craft. However, she was surprised to see an Air Force lieutenant general in full uniform also step out of the AIRCAR. She went forward to meet the two men halfway, stopping once facing them from two paces away. To her surprise, the Air Force officer saluted her at rigid attention, prompting her to salute back.

"Uh, I am retired from the service, General, and am now a civilian. No need to salute me."

"A twice recipient of the Medal of Honor always deserves to be saluted, General Dows." replied the officer, smiling to her, before shaking hands with her. "Lieutenant General George McMillan, from the Pentagon Combined Services Procurement Division."

"Welcome to Port Angeles, General. To what do I owe your visit here?"

"To discussions we opened with Mister Hiller about a procurement contract for an initial batch of your incredible SKYTRUCK, General. Do you have a place where we could talk in complete privacy?"

"My office in the design section should do: it is in the most secure section of this complex and is separate from the design section's open workspace. Please follow me." As the trio was entering the production plant building, Ingrid looked sideways at Jeff Hiller.

"How long ago were you informed by Washington of that intent to procure our SKYTRUCK, Jeff?"

"How about three hours ago, Ingrid? It seems that the Pentagon is resolved to keep this offer under wrap for the moment. General McMillan was the one who first informed me of it after arriving at our corporate headquarters in Firebaugh."

"Well, whatever their reason is for being discrete about it, the important thing for us is that they want our SKYTRUCK."

"Exactly!"

Once in her office, Ingrid invited Hiller and McMillan to sit with her around a low coffee table set in one corner, next to a set of large windows giving a view of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, visible a few kilometers away.

"So, gentlemen, tell me about this procurement proposal."

As she had expected, General McMillan was the one to answer her first.

"Well, it all came up as a result of our AFGHAN EXORCISM operation in Afghanistan. Early on, we were hoping that a couple of countries, notably Iran, would allow us to bring in equipment and supplies by road into Afghanistan. However, to our chagrin, none of them accepted to let us use their country as a rear supply base. Even getting permission to overfly them was like pulling a tooth out. Up to now, only Iran and Turkey accepted to let us fly from them or over them to get to Afghanistan. As a result and despite our large present fleet of air transport aircraft, we are now finding ourselves short of the types of tactical transport aircraft we truly need to support our invasion force there. We particularly are short of VSTOL aircraft able to carry payloads of more than fifteen tons and land them in small or rudimentary airfields. Our only present aircraft able to do such missions is our C-90 ATLAS but, due to its size and relative lack of agility, it has proved very vulnerable to enemy fire of any kind. This was not made public but we have lost to date three C-90s to ground fire, with another four sustaining damage. We have since restricted our C-90s to operations to and from the few international airports in Afghanistan. Our other VSTOL transport aircraft, be they C-21s, CMV28s or PELICANs, are fine to deliver various supplies to our forward units but none of them can carry vehicles bigger than medium trucks or light armored vehicles. When we looked at the possible candidates able to fill our operational needs, only one stood out: your

SKYTRUCK. A decision was thus taken to order as an IOR¹⁷ an initial batch of sixteen Hiller SKYTRUCKs, with possibly a lot more as options.”

“But, for us to build those sixteen initial aircraft for you and for conducting the training of their future crews will take months, General.” objected at once Ingrid. “We are still in the process of finishing to build our second prototype and our SKYTRUCK still has not been certified for commercial service. We still have months of test flying and flight hours to accumulate before it could be certified.”

“True, but you do have one SKYTRUCK that I consider fully operational: your prototype, which demonstrated its capabilities so brilliantly during the rescue of the PRINCESS OF THE SEAS. Right now, we have a crying need for it for a specific mission that no other aircraft can fulfill right now. I am talking about the transportation to Afghanistan of the vehicles of the two Marine Corps regiments presently fighting in Afghanistan. Those vehicles are embarked aboard our battlecarriers NEPTUNE and WILLIAM F. HALSEY and our initial plan for them was to carry them by sea to the Iranian coast via the landing craft based on those two battlecarriers and on other landing ships of our fleet now on station in the Sea of Oman. Unfortunately, the refusal of Iran to let us land those vehicles in their country has resulted in them being stuck aboard our ships, with no aircraft able to both land on a carrier and lift those vehicles all the way to Afghanistan. What we would like is for us to contract Hiller for the rental of your prototype SKYTRUCK, so that those vehicles could finally be delivered to our marines in Afghanistan.”

Ingrid nodded slowly her head at that: McMillan’s request made a lot of sense. However, she could see a big problem with that already.

“And who will fly it to Afghanistan, General? No Air Force or Navy pilots are qualified to fly our SKYTRUCK. Hell, only me and three other test pilots at Hiller are fully qualified to fly it at the present.”

Somehow, that brought a malicious grin on McMillan’s lips.

“I fully realize that, General. I came to ask you and your test pilots if you would be willing to fly for us during this conflict, and this for at least the time needed to carry those vehicles stuck on our ships.”

Stunned by this, Ingrid looked at Jeff Hiller, who nodded his head to her.

¹⁷ IOR : Immediate Operational Requirement. A clause that supercedes most normal administrative steps in the procurement of a specific type of military equipment judged essential for a military operation.

"I told General McMillan that, on top of accepting to produce on an urgent basis sixteen pre-series SKYTRUCKS for the United States armed forces, I would let him ask for your service and that of your assistant test pilots. So, what do you say to that, Ingrid?"

Ingrid was thoughtful for a moment before looking at McMillan.

"You do realize that we are civilians, and not military fliers, or at the least not current military fliers, General. Furthermore, one of my three assistant test pilots qualified on the SKYTRUCK never served in the military and has exactly zero experience of combat. From what you told me earlier, Afghanistan is not a very friendly environment for transport aircraft and forcing or enticing a civilian pilot with no military experience to go fly there would be irresponsible and also something I would refuse to condone."

"And what kind of combat or military experience do your two other test pilots have, General Dows?"

Ingrid gave a most sober look to McMillan while answering him.

"The two test pilots I am talking about are veterans of World War 2 who started flying in combat in 1942 as part of the Fifinellas, the combat air unit I created. One of them, Shirley Slade, flew as my wingman in the Pacific and eventually left the service as a full colonel in command of a jet fighter wing. The other pilot concerned, Elizabeth Gardner, also flew as a fighter pilot in the Pacific and retired as a lieutenant colonel in charge of a fighter squadron. Both of them then went to work as commercial pilots in the Philippines until one year ago. I then had Mister Hiller hire them as test pilots, so that they could take some of the weight off my shoulders."

"But, they would be way too old for flying into a combat zone today, General Dows." protested at once McMillan, making Ingrid shake her head in response.

"Normally, you would be correct, General. However, know something that is not general knowledge: both of them were rejuvenated by me one year ago and now look as if they are in their very early twenties. They are dedicated patriots, brave women and first-class pilots and I am certain that they would say 'yes' to your request for their services. As for me, you also have a 'yes' on my part. Now, one final question: do we fly in as simple civilian pilots under government contract or would you like to temporarily reactivate us as military pilots?"

"Uh, you are really catching me unprepared with that question, General Dows. I will have to ask General Sherman about this. Mind you, if he agrees to reactivate you,

then I doubt that you would like to end up with simple junior officer ranks pinned on you, right?"

"Hell no! Me, a retired General of the Army, back as a captain and liable to be led around by men with less than one fifth of my military experience? Forget that! The same would go for my two friends."

"Uh, could I use a phone to call the Pentagon, General?"

"Go right ahead and use the phone on my work desk, General. In the meantime, me and Mister Hiller will go see my two friends to ask them their opinion about this."

Ingrid and Jeff Hiller then left the office and went downstairs to the prototype workshop and hangar, where Ingrid knew she would find Shirley and Elizabeth. Both of the women were effectively there, supervising and helping the technicians busy doing some maintenance work on their SKYTRUCK. Contrary to many contemporary civilian commercial pilots, both Shirley and Elizabeth had learned out of necessity to help maintain their aircraft during their military service in a number of past wars. Thanks to their decades of service experience together, all three women were very close friends indeed. Shirley Slade first saw Ingrid approach and smiled to her at once.

"Hi, Ingrid! What pushed you to leave your upper floor nest to come and see us here?"

"An unexpected contract proposal from the Pentagon which may interest you and Elizabeth. Libbie, could you join us for a moment?"

"Sure!" replied Elizabeth Gardner, who put down her small wrench before joining Ingrid and Shirley under one of the ducted propellers of the SKYTRUCK. With Jeff Hiller staying a couple of paces away while listening to them, Ingrid then repeated to the two women what General McMillan had told her. As she had fully expected, both Shirley and Elizabeth eagerly accepted the offer to fly in support of their country, with Elizabeth then asking one question.

"Will we fly as civilian employees of the Department of Defense, Ingrid?"

"I still don't know and neither did General McMillan. He is presently talking by phone with the Pentagon to clarify that point. We should know soon what Washington decides about us."

"Uh, I'm going back up and see if he has finished his call, girls. You can wait here in the meantime." said Jeff Hiller before walking away. Once alone with her two friends, Ingrid lowered her voice to a confidential level.

"Do you girls still have your leather flying vests from your time with the Fifinellas, girls?"

"Of course we do, Ingrid!" replied Shirley in a falsely indignant tone. "How could we throw away or even lose such a precious souvenir?"

"Excellent! We may just have a chance to carry them again while in a combat zone."

"Should we dust off our service ribbons as well? asked Elizabeth, making Ingrid nod once.

"Of course! You think that three Fifinella veteran pilots like us would walk naked in front of a bunch of rooky Navy and Marine Corps pilots?"

"Hum...naked... that would be quite a spicy moment, no?" asked Shirley, a malicious smile on her lips, making both Elizabeth and Ingrid chuckle in amusement.

CHAPTER 15 – FIFINELLAS BACK AT WAR



Shirley Slade

Elizabeth Gardner

Ingrid Dows

09:50 (Afghanistan Time)

Sunday, July 22, 2001 ‘C’

Air control bridge of the battlecarrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE

On station in the Sea of Oman, south of the Iranian coast

“HILLER SKYTRUCK IN SIGHT AT FIVE O’CLOCK, LOW, SIR!”

Captain (Navy) Peter Sandoval, Commander Air Group (CAG) on the U.S.S. NEPTUNE pointed his binoculars in the direction indicated by one of his air watchmen and nodded his head on seeing a growing dot low on the southeast horizon.

“Got it! You have good eyes, Petty Officer Sunnyvale. Hmm...this SKYTRUCK sure looks a lot like our own PELICANS, but bigger. Mind you, both were designed along similar lines. AIR CONTROLLER, TELL THE SKYTRUCK TO LAND ON THE AFT PORTION OF OUR PORT SIDE RUNWAY.”

“YES SIR!”

Going to one of the internal telephones on the air control bridge, Sandoval called the Combat Information Center, or C.I.C., where he knew that Vice Admiral Benson was, getting him in seconds.

“Admiral, this Sandoval, on the air control bridge. The SKYTRUCK we have been waiting for is now in sight and on approach for a landing on the aft part of our port runway.”

“Excellent! Our marines in Afghanistan were getting anxious about finally getting their support vehicles. I will go up on the flight deck to greet the crew of that

SKYTRUCK: I really want to see from up close that new aircraft and I could also use some fresh air and real sunlight for a change.”

Sandoval chuckled at that admission.

“We all could, Admiral.”

Putting down the telephone’s handset, Sandoval returned his attention on the approaching VSTOL transport, which was now less than a mile away and slowing down. It definitely looked like a PELICAN on steroids but it did have a few distinguishing features, starting with its two groups of three turboshaft engines glued to each side of the wing profile-like fuselage. He watched it with interest as the aircraft pivoted its four ducted propellers to a near horizontal position as it transited from conventional flight to vectored flight. Another minute and the big aircraft, measuring nearly forty meters in length and thirty meters in total span, including the ducted propellers mounted on its sides, landed smoothly just where it had been told to land.

“Nice, smooth landing. That pilot is a pro. I am going down to go talk with the crew. Lieutenant Wissmeyer, you have the air watch.”

“Aye, sir!” replied the young female officer.

Going to the cage containing the downward spiral staircase and one elevator lift, Sandoval decided he needed the exercise and started climbing down the spiral staircase, doing so at a quick pace but also while holding one hand to the safety rail. He actually arrived at the level of the flight deck at about the same time as Vice Admiral Benson, meeting him as the latter emerged from the elevator cabin.

“The SKYTRUCK landed only one minute ago, Admiral. I must say that it is quite an impressive aircraft. If it is as good as they say it is, then it will prove tremendously useful to our marines in Afghanistan.”

“Agreed! It was high time that we found a way to get those vehicles to our marines. Is it a Navy or Air Force crew which is piloting it?”

“I think neither, Admiral: it bears a civilian registry and is painted with the logo of the Hiller Corporation. They must be company pilots working for Hiller, sir.”

Benson nodded his head on hearing that.

“Then, they are quite balsy to have accepted to fly into a war zone like Afghanistan. We can’t count anymore all the times our aircraft have been fired at with all kinds of guns. Remind me from where this SKYTRUCK flew out from to join us.”

“They left their airfield near Seattle early yesterday and flew West, with refueling stops in Guam, the Philippines, Jakarta and Mumbai, sir.”

“Hell, that’s quite a long trip, especially in a propeller aircraft. This crew must be dead tired. I will make sure that they are assigned cabins, so that they can rest before loading up their aircraft and flying to Afghanistan.”

“Their aircraft will also need a thorough maintenance inspection check after such a flight, Admiral. Thankfully, this SKYTRUCK uses the same type of turboshaft engine than the one we use in our PELICANs, but uses six of them instead of two.”

Before going outside on the flight deck, the two officers put on safety helmets equipped with ear protectors, then stepped out of the central superstructure of the battlecarrier and onto the vast, 39,500 square meter surface of the flight deck. Those who first saw the tremendous size of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE always wondered why it was made this huge. To that, Sandoval could answer with a few points. First, while the NEPTUNE looked much bigger than the previous models of American nuclear carriers, its mass was actually only slightly higher because it was mostly a large, empty steel box built around its vast internal aircraft hangar, which was capable of accommodating over a hundred aircraft. In contrast, the hangars of the earlier models of carriers were less than a third in volume compared to the one in the NEPTUNE. As a result, those carriers had to keep up on their flight decks the majority of their aircraft, leaving them exposed to the elements. With its huge hangar space, the NEPTUNE could and did in the past sail straight through a typhoon without fearing for its embarked aircraft. To the argument that the NEPTUNE must have cost a lot more to be built because of its apparent size, Sandoval would respond that it actually cost no more than that of a previous model, due to its hull being built mostly with flat steel plates, rather than with the curved plates used to build earlier carriers. Curving thousands of thick steel plates to build a classic monohull carrier necessitated a lot of work by highly-paid shipyard workers, which meant more construction time and higher costs. The mostly flat, inward-inclined hull sides of the NEPTUNE, apart from being simpler and cheaper to build than a conventional hull, also had the added tremendous advantage of making it a stealthy ship, with radar waves bouncing away at angles rather than bouncing back towards the emitter radar. Lastly, the huge size of its flight deck had a good reason to it. Its two 470 by 30-meter parallel runways were long enough to allow most of its embarked aircraft to fly off without the need to use one of the NEPTUNE’s catapults. Being much longer than the oblique flight deck of conventional carriers, its two runways also allowed for much safer, less stressful

landings by jet aircraft, thus saving a lot of wear and tear to those aircraft and drastically reducing the landing accident rate compared to a conventional carrier. Another way used to lower its construction cost had been to make it capable of fully independent operations by giving it a powerful armament of its own, thus rendering the usual escort flotilla of a carrier unnecessary. The money saved by not having to build as well an escort force of two cruisers and six to seven destroyers and frigates was actually enough to pay for a second battlecarrier. Those Russian and Chinese fleets which had tried to sink the NEPTUNE in the past wars of the 1990s had learned the hard way that an unescorted NEPTUNE-Class battlecarrier was no vulnerable big target, contrary to its appearances. The fact that its main battery was made up of vertical-launch missiles, whose launch silos were hidden under its flight deck, had fooled many of its enemies into grossly underestimating its firepower, a mistake that had cost them dearly. Those same enemies would be shocked if they ever learned that the armament of the NEPTUNE had recently been upgraded and reinforced by adding newer types of missiles to its vertical-launch battery, by replacing its single 127mm gun turrets with new twin 127mm gun turrets and by adding two high-power laser turrets, which greatly enhanced its close protection against missiles and aircraft and which could also deal with swarms of small motor boats. All in all, the NEPTUNE was fully worthy of its name as King of the Seas, in Sandoval's opinion.

As they approached the Hiller SKYTRUCK, which had landed on the aft-most quarter of the ship's port side runway, both Sandoval and Benson were able to appreciate the size of the big VSTOL transport, which made the ship's own Hiller PELICANs look like its little children. However, the similarities in design concepts was clearly apparent. Seeing a large aft cargo ramp open, the two Navy officers walked towards the rear of the big aircraft and arrived at the foot of a five-meter-wide cargo ramp as a group of six women were walking down the ramp. Benson noticed at once that all six women wore old-style Air Force pilots' brown leather jackets with unit patches and name tags stitched on them. He then had to stop dead in his tracks on recognizing the young woman leading the group of female aviators.

"Holly shit! It's General Dows!"

He then promptly came to attention and saluted Ingrid, imitated by Sandoval.

"Welcome aboard, General! I was not expecting you as part of the crew of this aircraft."

"I designed this prototype, so who else would be more qualified to pilot it into a war zone, Admiral Benson?" replied Ingrid while returning the salute. "At ease, please!" Lowering his right arm, Benson then eyed the round, colorful unit insignia stitched to the leather jackets worn by the six women.

"The Fifinellas, the 99th Composite Wing? But it was disbanded a few years ago, when the need for an exclusively female air unit was deemed to be superfluous."

"You are correct, Admiral." replied Ingrid, some bitterness showing in her tone. "It was disbanded while I was in Space, travelling between Jupiter and Saturn, and I still could kill the asshole Air Force Chief of Staff who took that stupid decision. All of the members of my present crew are veterans who served proudly with the Fifinellas during past wars and I thought appropriate for us to dust off our old unit leather jackets for this new war."

Benson, like Sandoval, detailed the multiple rows of medal ribbons clipped to the left chest area of the jackets. While Ingrid Dows wore by far the largest number of medals, the five women following her were no greenhorns when it came to combat, with the least decorated still wearing a triple row of ribbons.

"Wow! Quite a crew you got there, General. Uh, your crewmembers are wearing medal ribbons from the First Korean War and even some from World War 2, yet they look way too young to be veterans of these wars. How come?"

"They may look young now but the youngest of them is in reality 59. I rejuvenated all of them, the way I was myself rejuvenated. Right now, I would easily fit in a junior college class, yet I am 76 years old. Shirly Slade, to my left, is actually eighty-years-old and was one of my wingmen while fighting as a fighter pilot in the Pacific as part of the original Fifinellas. She eventually retired with the rank of colonel and was in command of a fighter wing. The same applies to Elizabeth Gardner, who is also eighty-years-old and who retired as a lieutenant colonel in charge of a fighter squadron. My flight engineer, Carmen Morena, joined the Fifinellas in the 1960s and fought in the Second Korean War and the China-Taiwan War. I hired her for Hiller when she retired from the Air Force. My assistant flight engineer, Britney Strong, served for 26 years with the Fifinellas and retired when the Fifinellas were disbanded. I recently hired her for Hiller, as I did with my loadmaster, Janet Morton, who worked as loadmaster on about every type of Air Force transport in service during the last three decades. We may not be a proper military crew but we have plenty of war experience in the air to use for this present job."

"And under what terms are you serving in this war, General?" asked Sandoval. "A temporary DoD contract?"

"Correct, mister! While the Pentagon is renting from Hiller the use of this aircraft, it is also paying for its maintenance, fueling and crew salaries. As for the length of this contract, it is basically for as long as needed to support our troops in Afghanistan, within reasonable limits. I believe that we really shouldn't stay in Afghanistan for more than a few months at most. Longer than that will mean that we basically failed in our primary mission of destroying Al-Qaeda. Hiller put the Pentagon on notice that, after six months here, the corporation will need us back in Port Angeles, so that we could continue our work there."

"I agree with you that the faster we get out, the better it will be, General." said Benson. "Could we see the inside of your cargo cabin, so that we could know how much it could contain?"

"Certainly, Admiral. Follow me and I will tell you about the capabilities of my SKYTRUCK while my friends do a quick inspection of our aircraft."

Benson and Sandoval followed Ingrid up the wide cargo ramp and soon stepped into what could be described as a cavernous aircraft hold. Sandoval couldn't help exclaim himself while looking around the hold.

"Woah! This must be the largest aircraft hold I ever saw. And it is also of respectable length and height."

"The hold of our general cargo pod is seven meters wide by 18.5 meters-long, not including the cargo ramp, and its free height is 3.75 meters. Basically, if a vehicle can legally circulate on an American highway and pass under overpasses, then it can fit inside this hold."

Seeing that Sandoval was trying to mentally convert her measures from meters to feet, Ingrid crossed her arms and looked at him with sarcasm.

"When will Americans learn to use the metric system, instead of this antiquated and confusing Imperial system? The United States must be the last advanced country on Earth to still utilize the Imperial system."

"Hey, you are suppose to be an American, General!"

"Born and raised in Germany until the age of fifteen. Even the British saw the light and now use the metric system. Oh well, let's forget about that. Do you know

which of the vehicles stored on this ship are the most urgently needed by our marines in Afghanistan?"

"We have a priority list written by the commander of our marine regiment, General. What they need the most right now are their command post vehicles, which contain their encrypted radios and satellite communications gear. Right now, they have to make do with an odd assortment of stand-alone radios, something that is impacting on their tactical efficiency."

"Then, we will start with those vehicles. Once those will have been delivered by us, we will then ferry the rest according to your priority list. Know that my SKYTRUCK can carry up to fifty tons over medium distances, taking off in short mode and then landing at the vertical at the delivery point. Your ship's runways look more than long enough for me to do a short takeoff or landing, and this without the need to use either a catapult or arrester wires."

"That will definitely simplify things at our end, General. However, I suppose that your crew will want to rest a bit after your long trip from our West Coast, before starting to ferry vehicles to Afghanistan."

"You suppose wrong, mister. We have sleeping bunks and a small lounge with kitchenette aboard our SKYTRUCK and we relayed ourselves during our trip. We even have a bathroom with shower stall inside. However, we certainly will take the time to have a good, hot meal before leaving. We are getting a bit tired of eating sandwiches and microwave meals. Has Navy food improved during the last five years?"

"Not really, General." replied Benson, grinning. "However, our cooks are decent at cooking meats, even though I wouldn't counsel their so-called Beef Bourguignon to you."

Ingrid shook her head in mock despair at his reply.

"When I think that I was eating some of the finest French Cuisine a few weeks ago, while I was attending the Le Bourget Airshow in Paris."

12:26 (Afghanistan Time)

Navigation bridge, U.S.S. NEPTUNE

"HELM, TURN INTO THE WIND! GO TO MAXIMUM SPEED!"

On Vice Admiral Benson's orders, the big battlecarrier turned to port while it accelerated progressively to its top speed of 42 knots. Next, Benson called Captain Sandoval, on the air control bridge.

"Captain Sandoval, launch the SKYTRUCK!"

"Right away, Admiral!"

A few seconds later, the big VSTOL transport, its own engines at full power, released its brakes and started rolling down the port side runway of the battlecarrier, accelerating quickly. Benson nodded his head in approval, impressed, when the SKYTRUCK, loaded with 55 tons of tactical vehicles, lifted off from the runway well before getting to the bow.

"A clean takeoff in less than 400 yards... Impressive! Hopefully, these brave ladies will not get fired at once over Afghanistan."

Benson was however not too optimistic about that. Despite benefiting from heavy air and missile support, the American troops in Afghanistan had been fighting hard and incurring casualties at a mounting rate while pursuing surviving Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters who were using guerrilla tactics against the American soldiers. Three of the precious PELICANs originally embarked onboard the NEPTUNE had already been lost to ground fire, with four more damaged to a varying extent. As Benson was reflecting mentally on these losses, an ensign came to him with a message fixed to a clipboard.

"Sir, we just got the latest consolidated situation report from Afghanistan."

"Thank you, Ensign!" said Benson while taking the offered clipboard. He then read quickly the three-page message and frowned when he got to a paragraph describing the latest incidents and American casualties: Four soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division had been killed and five more seriously wounded when a suicide bomber disguised as a woman had blown himself up at an American checkpoint. This business of suicide attacks was decidedly proving to be both deadly and very difficult to counter and was also hitting hard the morale of the American troops fighting in Afghanistan. While the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were suffering heavy losses to date, they seemed to not care a bit about their own losses or about the Afghan civilians caught in the middle, and continued to play cat and mouse with American soldiers.

15:13 (Afghanistan Time)

Afghan-Pakistan border post west of the Khyber Pass

During the last thirteen days since she had landed with her platoon at the Afghan border post, Greta had seen the volume of vehicular traffic and number of people crossing the border increase progressively from both sides of the border. While the majority of the traffic coming from Pakistan consisted in trucks loaded with goods intended to be sold in Afghanistan, the traffic from the Afghan side consisted more and more of Afghan refugees fleeing the fighting in their country. Those Afghans typically were packed as whole families in old cars and pickup trucks, while a few used motorcycles or even animal-pulled carts. All the while, Greta and her marines had to deal with all that humanity without the help of a translator and she often had to become creative with her sign language. In return, she had become quite adept at reading the attitudes and reactions of both Afghan and Pakistani civilians passing through the border. She had also learned quickly about some of the local mores and customs and could now speak a very few common words in Pashto and in Dari, the two main languages in this part of Afghanistan. As for the Pakistani civilians she checked out, they thankfully were often able to speak at least some English, especially in the case of commercial truck drivers. Greta was reflecting mentally on all that when one particular person coming on foot from the Afghan side attracted her attention. It was apparently an Afghan woman wearing a Burka, a long and loose robe with closed hood which hid the body and face, with only a small mesh screen allowing the wearer to see. Greta positively despised those burkas, which in her mind were the perfect image of how Afghan women had been treated by the Taliban: as inferior beings with little personal rights and who needed to be accompanied by a male family member if they wanted to get out of their houses. Greta had seen plenty of women wearing burkas pass through but there was something unusual about this one: she was by herself, without a male escort, while walking and carrying on her head a large basket. Looking at Joshua Stern, who was standing a few paces from her, Greta whistled at him to attract his attention.

“Josh, keep an eye here while I go check something out down the incoming file of pedestrians.”

Greta then flipped off the safety on her rifle while walking towards the woman in a Burka and signaling her to step out of the line of pedestrian and to walk a few paces to one side. As she did so, Greta’s suspicions grew: no man in the lineup tried to accompany the woman, who was quite tall for a female Afghan. Greta then noticed the shoes worn by the woman: they were hiking boots and not sandals or slippers. While her left arm was up, holding her basket in position on her head, her right arm was down along her

side, nearly completely covered by the long sleeve of her burka. Greta was still able to see that her fist was closed on something, instead of being opened. Now frankly alarmed, Greta motioned to the woman to stop where she was, then stepped in front of her in order to pat her down. Greta had to let her rifle hang across her chest by its carrying strap in order to free both of her hands for the search. That was when the 'woman' suddenly raised her right arm while shouting in Arabic in a distinctly male tone of voice.

"ALLAH U AKB..."

The suicide bomber, whom the 'woman' had to be, did not have time to finish his shout before Greta surprised him by the speed of her reaction. Not having time to grab back her rifle and point it, Greta instead closed her left fist around the bomber's right hand and pressed hard while putting her thumb across the top, preventing the raised thumb of the bomber from pushing down on what now appeared to be a hand detonator's button. Greta was helped in that by the fact that she was actually a bit taller than the bomber and that, thanks to her hard exercising program, she was uncommonly strong for a woman. In turn, the bomber tried to push her away with his left hand but Greta grabbed him with her right hand and glued herself to him, then ferociously bit through the mesh face opening of the burka the nose of the bomber with all her strength. The shout of the bomber then changed into a loud scream of intense pain, also in a male tone of voice. With the man's nose still between her clenched jaws, Greta then kned the man hard in the groin with her right leg, making him bend his knees from the pain. Once the man was down on his knees, Greta, who was still pressing closed his right hand and biting his nose, leaned hard against him, making him fall on his back while his legs were still under his torso. With the man now in a very difficult posture and still unable to detonate his bomb, Greta unholstered in a flash her personal pistol, which was on her right hip, and pressed its muzzle against his throat, firing once. The 9mm bullet went clean through the man's throat, exiting via the back of his neck after severing his spinal chord and killing him instantly. Her heart now beating furiously from the sudden flow of adrenaline that had shot through her veins, Greta opened her jaws and let go off the man's nose, which she had nearly cut off with her teeth, then used both of her hands to very cautiously open the dead man's hand and take away the hand detonator, revealing in the process a wire that ran inside the burka's right sleeve. She had the detonator in her own hand when Joshua Stern ran to her and stopped next to her, mortally worried.

"You're okay, Greta?"

"I am...now. However, I came this close from getting blown away by this suicide bomber. I now have control of his hand detonator. Pull up his burka and find his bomb, then disconnect the detonator wire from it."

Seeing that two other marines were running towards her, Greta shouted at once at them.

"STAY AWAY! THERE IS A BOMB HERE!"

She then watched on as Joshua pulled up the burka worn by the bomber, revealing a camouflaged uniform under it, along with a vest strapped to his torso. A good dozen blocks of plastic explosives were contained in pockets of the vest, with each block having a detonator stuck in it and with wires connected between the detonators and the main ignition wire. Joshua pulled one by one the detonators from the blocks of explosives before pulling on the main ignition wire, pulling the detonators out of the dead man's sleeve. Greta then gave him the hand detonator she was still holding and watched with immense relief as Joshua walked to a safe distance before putting down the collection of detonators behind a large rock. As Joshua was coming back towards her, Greta let out a deep sigh of relief and wiped the cold sweat on her forehead, then got on her feet. She found that her legs were now shaking, thanks to the nervous shock caused by her desperate fight.

"God! This was a close one, Josh."

"How did you get suspicious about that man, Greta? And how did you manage to prevent that suicide bomber from detonating his explosive vest?"

"When I saw a lone woman wearing a burka and apparently unescorted by a male relative, that triggered suspicions in me. As to how I managed to prevent him from triggering his bomb, I used a trick my Krav Maga¹⁸ instructor, who is an ex-Israeli paratrooper, described to me about how to deal with a suicide bomber. His trick worked, so I guess that I will owe him a beer...or twelve beers."

Joshua stared at her for a moment with what appeared to Greta to be complete and utter admiration.

"Greta, you must be the toughest and bravest woman I ever met."

"Thanks for the compliment. Now, let's drag that piece of shit away from the road, so that we can continue our work."

She then looked at the Afghans pedestrians and vehicle passengers, who were frozen by stupor while staring at her.

¹⁸ Krav Maga : Israeli form of martial art invented by an Israeli soldier and adopted by the Israeli Defense Forces.

“ALRIGHT, THE SHOW IS OVER! CONTINUE TO PROCEED TO THE BORDER POST.”

Hiding the fact that her legs were still shaky, Greta then helped Josha pull the body of the suicide bomber away from the road.

CHAPTER 16 – UPWARD MOVE

09:03 (Washington Time)

Thursday, August 9, 2001 'C'

Office of the Commandant of the Marine Corps

The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.



General Joseph Shumann, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, slowly put down on his work desk the report he had just read, thoroughly impressed.

“Damn! How could I not approve this?”

He then grabbed his pen and wrote a line at the bottom of the report before signing it, watched by his aide, who was standing at attention in front of his desk. Shumann stared for a moment at the document he had just annotated and signed, then took a decision and handed the report to his aide.

“Make sure that this is actioned in a speedy fashion, Major. Also, arrange for a transport for me to Afghanistan for next week. It is high time that I visit our brave marines who had been fighting there for a month now. By the way, has the Hiller Corporation’s SKYTRUCK completed the deliveries of support vehicles between our carriers and our marines in Afghanistan?”

“It is still flying delivery missions as we speak, sir. Even though its transport capacity is impressive, we had hundreds of vehicles of all types stuck aboard our three carriers and seven amphibious landing dock ships. Unfortunately, the refusal of Iran to allow us to land those vehicles by sea and then drive them to the Afghan border threw a big wrench in our logistical support plan. We still have to deliver by air directly into Afghanistan all the supplies and equipment needed by our troops there and the Air Force is running ragged trying to keep up with the needs of our field units. We certainly could have used a dozen or two of those Hiller SKYTRUCKs for this operation but only one of them, the prototype is in service at this time. A second prototype is being built and should become available in a couple of weeks.”

"A couple of weeks... Long enough for us to suffer more casualties in combat. Those fucking Taliban and Al-Qaeda bastards may have been hurt badly by our initial strikes but they are nothing but resilient. Very well, Major. Have this actioned at once."

"Yes, General!"

18:18 (Washington Time)

Friday, August 10, 2001 'C'

'The D.C. Five' mansion, Woodland Drive Northwest

Washington, D.C.

Sarah Weissmann, who was watching with Nancy and the rest of the band the evening news on television, quickly noticed the somber expression on the face of her band leader.

"Is something wrong, Nancy?"

"Yes, Sarah: our brave troops are fighting and dying in Afghanistan, while I am here, living in peace and comfort. Even my mother is over there, doing her part by ferrying vehicles and equipment to our marines while taking big risks to her and her crew."

"But, what could we do, Nancy?" asked Carmen Estrada. "We are musicians, not soldiers."

"What we could do is to help the morale of our soldiers, Carmen. Right now, we don't have any major concert scheduled for this month or for the first half of September, as we are presently concentrating on practicing our tunes and writing new songs. I have in mind of going to Afghanistan and sing to our troops. I would immensely appreciate if you girls would accept to accompany me there, so that we could do full-fledged concerts. I know that there will be substantial risks for us by going to Afghanistan but I believe that we need to do our part in helping our country in this war. Besides, while this is not a factor for my decision to go, the publicity our band will gain by visiting our troops can't hurt. So, what do you say, girls?"

Taken a bit short by this, Sarah, Carmen, Erika and Lucy looked at each other, finally coming to a silent consensus.

"We will be glad to go with you, Nancy." said softly Lucy to her sister by adoption. "How will we go there, though? Commercial flights to Afghanistan are presently suspended because of the war there."

"I think that I will enlist the help of someone I know at the Pentagon, in order to get seats for us in one of the military transports ferrying supplies to our field troops. I however intend to do this without asking for a paid contract by the DoD. We will do this strictly as an unpaid gig and we will only ask the Pentagon to provide for our transportation, food and lodging. And if lodging in Afghanistan means a tent, then I will happily live in the same conditions as our soldiers do."

16:29 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, August 15, 2001 'C'

The D.C. Five's mansion, Washington, D.C.



"GET READY, GIRLS! OUR TRANSPORT TO ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE IS HERE!"

As her shouted announcement made her band members scramble to get their pieces of luggage, Nancy went to the main entrance door and opened it as a young Marine Corps lieutenant in camouflaged uniform was climbing the steps of the porch. Behind him, in the driveway of her mansion, two big militarized four-door GM pickup trucks with covered rear boxes were parked, with two marine drivers waiting beside their vehicles. Both vehicles also towed covered trailers, making Nancy nod in appreciation: those would be more than enough to carry all the band's musical instruments and acoustic amplification systems in their transport chests and protective cases, plus the band's personal luggage. She then smiled to the young marine lieutenant now facing her.

"Welcome to our mansion, lieutenant. All our things are packed and ready to go. Could your two drivers come and help us carry out our stuff? By the way, I am Nancy Dows, the leader of the D.C. Five band."

"And I am First Lieutenant Jeffrey Kyle, sent by General Shumann to serve as your military liaison officer and guide during your tour in Afghanistan."

Nancy's smile widened at those words: the young officer was very handsome and having him with her band for the duration of her tour would be nice. The two drivers were also young and fit marine enlisted men. All in all, a nice start to what was in her mind an important trip. Turning around briefly, Kyle waived to his drivers to come join him in at the door, then faced back Nancy, hiding with difficulty his admiration at the incredible beauty of the singer he was assigned to help and escort.

"Being a musical band, I supposed that you have plenty of musical instruments to carry to Afghanistan, Miss Dows."

"We certainly do, along with audio amplifiers and speakers, but your trucks and trailers should easily contain all of our stuff. But please, come in, you and your drivers. Our luggage and instruments are in the main lounge, to the left down this hallway. We will help you carry them to your trucks."

"No need for that, miss: we can handle them by ourselves."

"Wait until you see what we have with us, Lieutenant. We even have an upright piano in the lot. And don't think of us as weak girls: we are accustomed to carry our instruments around while on tours. My own strength could surprise you."

Kyle gave her a cautious look, understanding that she was referring to one of her superpowers as a half-angel, something widely known for years now by the American public. In fact, it was hard for him not to feel humble in front of such an exceptional being. However, Nancy did her best to make him relax by widening her smile and stepping out of the way to let in the three marines, then escorted them to the vast lounge of the mansion, where a large pile of suitcases, musical instrument cases and carrying chests occupied the center of the room. Nancy then quickly presented her band members to the marines.

"Girls, this is Lieutenant Jeffrey Kyle and his two drivers. They were sent by General Shumann and will accompany and escort us during our tour in Afghanistan. Lieutenant, may I present my band to you? From left to right, you have Lucy, my sister by adoption and band violin player, Erika Lang, our drummer, Carmen Estrada, our guitarist and dancer and, finally, Sarah Weissman, our pianist. Alright, let's move this stuff out, people!"

Kyle quickly saw that Nancy had not exaggerated about her physical strength, as she more than helped him and his two drivers to carry out the band's piano with the help of a hand truck. As they were loading the luggage and instruments on the trailers and trucks, Kyle saw that a police patrol car had parked along the street facing the mansion, with the two policemen inside looking at his group.

"Uh, is there a reason for those cops to observe us like this, Miss Dows?"

"They are actually here at my request, Lieutenant. I advised the local precinct that we would be absent from Washington for a couple of weeks and asked them to check regularly on our mansion, in order to deter possible burglars while we are gone."

"A most reasonable precaution, miss: there has been a lot of house burglaries in the Washington D.C. area during the last few years."

"And I plan to be cautious as well while in Afghanistan, Lieutenant. I hope that General Shumann will not object to us carrying concealed pistols during our time there."

"Uh, I don't believe that he will mind that, although this is a bit of a surprise to me. How proficient at pistol shooting are you, miss?"

"We were all trained by my mother, retired General Ingrid Dows, who has quite a few firefights under her belt, so no need to worry about us, Lieutenant. We also packed five rifles with our instruments, just in case. We are more than capable of defending ourselves, Lieutenant, but your presence and that of your drivers is still welcomed during our tour."

As she spoke, Nancy single-handedly lifted the big, heavy crate containing her upright piano and put it on the trailer's rear gate, then pushed it inside, where one of the drivers finished placing it in the back before securing it in place with a movers' strap. Kyle had difficulty not to let his jaw drop wide open at this incredible demonstration of physical strength. Nancy then grinned to him.

"As you can see, we are not exactly defenseless young women, Lieutenant. I killed my first enemies, a bunch of mafia thugs who had kidnapped a school friend, at the age of five. As for my four band members, while they don't possess superpowers, I did awake in them the souvenirs from their past incarnations and all of them were warriors at one time or more in the past."

"Uh, I see, miss!" said Kyle, quite overwhelmed by now. A few minutes more and everything had been loaded and secured in either the trailers or the back boxes of the trucks, allowing the group to get in the vehicles. Nancy and Lucy got aboard the pickup truck carrying Kyle and one of his drivers, while Sarah, Carmen and Erika went into the second truck. Erika Lang, sitting next to the driver of her truck, couldn't help shout out as they started to roll.

"AFGHANISTAN, HERE WE COME!"

After some 35 minutes of driving through Washington, the two pickup trucks arrived at one of the access gates of Andrews Air Force Base, where armed military policemen systematically checked their papers before letting them enter the base. As it was the base where the presidential air transport fleet was located, Nancy could easily understand the reasons for this tight security, especially now, with the country at war

with Islamist terrorists ready to conduct suicide bomb attacks. She smiled to herself when she saw the big jet cargo aircraft they soon approached.

“A good old Douglas C-152G GLOBEMASTER, a fine and efficient transport aircraft.”

“You do know your aircraft recognition well, Miss Dows.” remarked Kyle in response.

“I’d better do, Lieutenant: my mother helped design this aircraft, along with nearly all our first generations of jet aircraft. The ‘G’ is the latest variant of the GLOBEMASTER, right?”

“Correct, miss. While its basic design has not changed over the decades since it first came into service, its engines and electronics were upgraded a number of times as it went. The C-152G is still the workhorse of the Air Force when it comes to general air cargo transport. By the way, you will be travelling to Afghanistan with General Shumann and his work party, along with a small pool of reporters who will cover his visit to the marines fighting in the country.”

“Do you think that we could be allowed to accompany him during his tour, Lieutenant? My band really wants to help support the morale of our troops, all over Afghanistan.”

“I will pass your request to the general, miss. Your sense of patriotism and support of our troops is to be commended. Our first destination in Afghanistan will be Jalalabad, where the command post of the Sixth Marine Regiment is operating from. Then, General Shumann plans to visit the command post of the First Marine Regiment, in Herat. Afterwards, I will arrange for your band to visit the 82nd Airborne Division troops in Kandahar, the 101st Airborne Division troops in Kabul and the 10th Light Infantry Division troops in the North, in Mazar-I-Sharif. If I may give you a word of caution: be careful when you will be in Kandahar. It is the spiritual birthplace of the Taliban and was the capital of their Emirate before we came in. Much of the toughest fighting has been in and around Kandahar. Also, know that the Taliban had banned public music, so, as female musicians, you will constitute a clear target of choice for them.”

“I will remember that, Lieutenant. Thanks for the warning.”

The two pickup trucks and their trailers soon were guided inside the large cargo hold of the C-152G by a loadmaster and made to stop in line with five other light trucks,

one of which flew the pennant of a four-star general. Nancy gave that pennant a doubtful look while pointing it to Kyle.

"I hope that General Shumann does not plan to keep flying this pennant while in Afghanistan, Lieutenant. It would be like waving a red cape at a bull."

"Don't worry about that, miss: General Shumann is no idiot. He flew his pennant in order to go through the Washington traffic but it will be taken off well before we land in Jalalabad. Talking of General Shumann, here he comes, miss!"

Shumann, a big and robust man in his fifties, was smiling widely when he shook hands with Nancy.

"Miss Dows, I am sincerely thrilled to see that you and your band volunteered to come support the morale of our troops in Afghanistan. Your courage and patriotism is to be commended."

"My courage is nothing compared to that of our fighting men and women, General. May I ask you if you had a specific reason to go to Afghanistan now? I haven't seen any of our other generals or of our politicians visit Afghanistan yet."

Shumann bit his tongue in order not to tell her what he really thought about that subject, instead giving Nancy a sober look.

"I do have a special reason for this visit, on top of wanting to meet with my fighting marines. I intend to decorate and promote one of them for bravery in combat."

"Then, I would love to be present when you will do that, General."

"Uh, be aware that I was planning to conduct the ceremony right in the frontlines, at the northeastern border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It could be a bit dangerous for you and your band."

"We are ready to assume any risks if that means that we would be able to entertain and support our troops, General."

Shumann slowly nodded his head, impressed.

"Decidedly, you are a truly special girl, Miss Dows."

"Of course I am, General: I am a half-angel after all." replied Nancy, a grin on her face. "So, how long will be our flight to Afghanistan?"

"It will be a long one, miss, as we will have to cross the Atlantic and then make refueling stops in Spain and then Turkey before landing in Jalalabad, in the Northeast region of Afghanistan. Expect a trip of about eighteen hours, including refueling stops."

"I don't mind that, General. It will give me plenty of time to meet and talk with your pool of civilian reporters. I already know one of them: Miss Christiane Amanpour.

She interviewed me once in New York a few years ago. But before I do that, I would like to present my band members to you.”

“I would be delighted to meet them, Miss Dows.”

Nancy then took a few minutes to present her four band members to Shumann before going to the forward passenger cabin of the C-152G, which contained 36 comfortable airliner-style padded seats. There, she sat next to Christiane Amanpour, who broke into a happy grin and shook her hand.

“Miss Dows, it warms my heart to see that you and your band joined this tour of our troops in Afghanistan. You certainly do honor to your reputation as a brave and caring young woman.”

“Thanks, Christiane, and please call me simply ‘Nancy’. Talking about honor to my reputation, do you know why General Shumann is the first of our generals to visit Afghanistan and why none of our politicians did so up to now?”

Amanpour lowered her voice before answering her.

“Well, while I am not going to accuse our generals of cowardice, many of them say that they are too busy directing and supporting the fighting to take time for organized tours. As for our politicians, let’s say that many of them have mouths larger than their courage, especially our members of Congress. But don’t repeat my words to others: I may get refused interviews in the future if you do.”

“I will be mum, Christiane. General Shumann just told me that he is going to decorate and promote a marine for bravery. Do you know details about that?”

“Unfortunately, no! When I asked the general about that, he told me that he didn’t want to shine a public spotlight in advance on that marine, as it could put this marine in extra danger from Taliban or Al-Qaeda attacks.”

“A sensical enough reason to me. Well, I hope that the Air Force serves edible meals aboard its transport aircraft: I am getting quite famished by now.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too much, Nancy.” replied Amanpour, smiling.

21:20 (Afghanistan Time)

Thursday, August 16, 2001 ‘C’

Passenger cabin of U.S. Air Force C-152G transport aircraft

On landing approach to Jalalabad Nangarhar Airport, Afghanistan



“General, ladies and gentlemen, we are now on approach to Jalalabad Airport and should land there in a few minutes. Please return to your seats and buckle your seat belts.”

The pilot’s announcement made Erika Lang sigh with relief as she reached for her seat belt.

“Thank The One! This was a really long flight and I can’t feel my bum anymore.” Christiane Amanpour, sitting two seats from Erika, looked at her with some confusion.

“Thank The One? Why didn’t you say ‘thank God’, Erika?” In response, the drummer gave Christiane a sober look.

“Because I believe in ‘The One’, while I believe that the ‘God’ whom all our Christian preachers in the States keep promoting and praising ad nauseam is only a fiction. The proof of what I just said is sitting between us, Christiane.”

Amanpour glanced at Nancy, who was calmly listening on to this exchange. While Erika’s declaration would have triggered a tempest of protestations and insults in the United States, it was hard to dispute its logic or supporting facts. After performing multiple public healing miracles in the United States and demonstrating her supernatural powers a number of times, only the most entrenched religious fundamentalists, be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or of any other faith, still denied that Nancy represented something very special in terms of spiritual essence, while the support base of those fundamentalists was shrinking constantly. However, to her credit, Nancy had not exploited to her personal profit her growing popularity and devotion towards her by the American public and had stayed modest about her reputation, something that had only attracted more public support for her. More importantly, Nancy had steadfastly

refused to preach in favor of 'The One', insisting that her spiritual mentor didn't want or expect people to pray or venerate him, and that The One's only desire was to promote compassion, love and tolerance among Humanity. Faced with such a compelling and encompassing message, the leaders of the established churches were having a hard time to keep their faithful. Some of those more hardline religious leaders were still trying to paint Nancy as being some kind of envoy of the Devil sent to trick people into giving their souls to evil. However, the claims from those hardliners were increasingly falling into deaf ears. As for herself, Christiane was increasingly favoring the simple humanist message demonstrated by Nancy's repeated acts of kindness and tolerance.

The noise from the jet engines of the C-152G, which had diminished while the aircraft started descending, suddenly roared back to full power, while the cargo aircraft banked into a sharp climbing turn to the right, alarming and surprising its passengers.

"What the Hell is going on now?" wondered General Shumann, sitting in the first row of seats of the forward cabin. "Lieutenant Kyle, go to the cockpit and find out what is happening."

"Right away, sir!"

Sarah Weissman, who was sitting next to a window and was looking out and downward at the Afghan landscape, suddenly spoke out in alarm.

"I see explosions on the ground! There must be some kind of firefight or shelling going on in Jalalabad. I can also see some lines of tracer bullets."

"Damn!" exclaimed Erika in frustration. "I hope that we won't have to reroute to another airport somewhere else. I really want to get out of this airplane."

They soon learned what was going on when Lieutenant Kyle came back from the cockpit and spoke to General Shumann.

"A salvo of rockets from a short-range multiple rocket launcher was fired at the Jalalabad Airport, General. Thankfully, none of them hit the runway or the main installations and only created a few craters on the ground. The airport was temporarily closed as a result but should reopen as soon as those who fired the rockets will have been hunted down. In the meantime, our pilot was directed by the control tower to circle at medium altitude while waiting for the green light to land."

"So, those damn Taliban and Al-Qaeda extremists can still make a pest of themselves here, hey? Hopefully, we will be able to hunt the remnants of their forces

down and chase them from Afghanistan soon. Alright, return to your seat, Lieutenant. We will wait until our pilot gets the authorization to land.”

“Understood, sir!”

To everyone’s relief, the authorization to land was received after some twenty minutes of tense waiting and speculations among the passengers. Erika Lang blew air out in relief when the wheels of the cargo aircraft touched down on the asphalt runway of the airport.

“At last! I can’t wait to be able to walk out and be on the ground.”

Hearing her, Lieutenant Kyle smiled to her from his seat.

“Don’t worry, Miss Lange: there are accommodations waiting for your band, where you will be able to wash and sleep.”

“Are those accommodations segregated by sex, Lieutenant?”

“Of course! We do have female marines here, after all, and we respect the intimacy of our people.”

“Thanks! You do reassure me. What about those reporters and cameramen?”

“The female media personnel will share accommodations with your band, miss.”

That seemed to satisfy Erika, who then waited patiently as their aircraft was turning into a taxiway leading to the main tarmac of the airport. When they rolled off the cargo aircraft aboard their pickup trucks, following behind General Shumann’s vehicles, they were met on the tarmac by Colonel Wilkinson and a full platoon of armed marines acting as his security on-call force. As per standard Marine Corps procedures when in a combat zone, both senior officers avoided saluting each other in public, in case of enemy snipers, and shook hands instead.

“Welcome to Jalalabad, General.”

“Thanks, Colonel! The local welcome was indeed a warm one. What happened exactly?”

“Whoever fired at the airfield used a trick that is proving to be quite common with our enemies, General. Basically, they installed a rudimentary mount for a 104mm multiple rocket launcher in the back of a pickup truck, then camouflage it with a tarp. Once near an objective they want to hit, they then roughly point that MRL mount and fire its rockets, then get the hell out of the area. They are thus very difficult to catch but, thankfully, the accuracy from such improvised mounts is quite poor. One of our

checkpoints in town thankfully intercepted the said pickup truck-mounted launcher and killed its four occupants, who turned out to be Taliban fighters.”

“Good! Does this kind of attack happen often?”

“Yes, General! Such MRL attacks happen at least twice a week in my regimental area of operation and usually target our airports and advanced camps. Light and medium mortars are also frequently used by both the Taliban and Al-Qaida.”

Shumann was about to ask another question when he sniffed a couple of time while turning his head around.

“What is that awful smell being brought by the wind, Colonel?”

His question brought a frustrated expression on the face of Wilkinson.

“That is the smoke from our burn pits, General. When we arrived here, the local infrastructure proved incapable of supporting the needs of my regimental headquarters and of the airport’s new transient camp. This by the way was a common problem we encountered all over Afghanistan, General. Lieutenant General Brubaker, our overall commander in Afghanistan, then decided that we would get rid of our waste by using what we call ‘burn pits’. Basically, the human waste from our camps and the waste from our field kitchens are collected in large barrels which are then brought to a field where multiple holes have been dug in the ground. The waste and garbage is then poured into those holes, sprinkled with gasoline and then lit up. While they burn, men have to periodically stir the burning waste with long sticks, to ensure that they fully burn. It is both smelly and disgusting as a process and I protested the use of such a crude and unsanitary procedure but was told by General Brubaker’s staff to putt up and shut up.”

“Indeed!” said Shumann, his expression hardening. “Why didn’t he had our engineers build decent waste treatment plants instead?”

“The answer was that our engineers in place in Afghanistan didn’t have the necessary equipment, General.”

Shumann repressed a swear that came to his mind then. Looking in the direction the wind came from, he was able to see in the distance the dots of lights from multiple small fires lit inside the airport’s limits. He then took a decision and turned towards the officer in charge of his small visit party.

“Captain Smith, have Lieutenant Kyle escort our musical band and the media pool to their transient accommodations. However, ask at the same time Miss Amanpour and her cameraman to come here at once.”

“Understood, General!”

As the junior officer walked away towards the rest of the group that had left the C-152G, Shumann faced back Wilkinson.

“Colonel, know that, before coming here, I consulted our old Athena archives held at the Pentagon and read its files concerning what happened in this war in Nancy Laplante’s world. I did read a couple of articles and reports concerning those burn pits and they stated that their toxic fumes and smoke spreading over our camps caused many of our soldiers to eventually develop pulmonary diseases and cancers. Now that I can see that we are basically repeating the same mistake now, I am firmly decided to put a stop to such negligence on the part of our high command.”

“And what are you planning to do about it, General? Lieutenant General Brubaker is our overall commander in Afghanistan, after all, and his staff has refused to budge on this matter.”

“What I am planning to do is to light a fire under the ass of General Brubaker, and this with the assistance of our media people. In turn, I fully intend to protest this stupid policy directly with General of the Army Sherman. I will need you to escort me to those burn pits once Miss Amanpour will have joined us.”

“With pleasure, General!” replied Wilkinson, happy to see his commandant support him on this.

A four-door pickup truck soon rolled to a stop next to the vehicles used by Shumann and Wilkinson, with Captain Smith shouting to Shumann from inside the pickup truck.

“I HAVE MISS AMANPOUR, HER CAMERAMAN AND MISS DOWS WITH ME, GENERAL.”

“MISS DOWS? WHY HER, CAPTAIN?”

“SHE HEARD ME TALKING WITH MISS AMANPOUR AND SHE THEN INSISTED ON COMING ALONG, GENERAL.”

Shumann only needed to think for a second before nodding his head.

“VERY WELL: SHE MAY COME ALONG. FOLLOW US, CAPTAIN.”

Led by Wilkinson’s command car, Shumann’s own pickup truck started rolling on the tarmac, followed by the media truck and three trucks full of marines. Using a taxiway, then a secondary dirt road, the small convoy finally came to a halt next to a field where six holes in the ground let out short flames, along with columns of smoke rising in the air, which were then being blown downwind. Shumann nearly gagged when he was able to

fully sniff one of the columns of smoke, watched by a marine private who had been stirring the contents of the holes with a long stick while wearing a surgical mask.

"God! This is positively awful! And our marines have to breathe that stuff every day? That's downright criminal!"

"It certainly is, General." said Christiane Amanpour, who had dismounted from her truck and had joined him next to a burning hole. "With your permission, I will now make a short report to my audience while my cameraman films me and those pits."

"Please do, miss."

Shumann and Wilkinson then stepped aside, to let Amanpour and her cameraman do their report. That was when Nancy Dows joined them to ask something.

"General, I would like your permission to heal this poor private who had been stirring this shit."

"Heal him? But he doesn't appear to be sick to me, miss."

"He is, General, even though he doesn't know it himself. I can detect traces of toxic chemicals in his lungs, chemicals which will eventually bring on a cancer. I can do this discretely, if you prefer so."

Both Shumann and Wilkinson stared at Nancy for a moment before Shumann nodded his head once and spoke softly.

"You may proceed, miss. Just do it out of the field of view of that camera."

"Thank you, General. I will go with that private behind one of your trucks."

The two senior marine commanders followed Nancy with their eyes as she went to the marine private, who was filmed for a few seconds by Amanpour's cameraman, then led him to a position behind Shumann's truck. A short but bright glow of light then illuminated the back of that truck before Nancy and the young marine returned near the marine general. Shumann looked at the marine private, who appeared understandably overwhelmed by his experience, then at Nancy, whose expression was most sober.

"Thank you, Miss Dows, for helping my marine. You are indeed a most compassionate and caring person."

"Unfortunately, he was not the only one exposed to these toxic fumes and smoke, General. Every occupant of this airport and its marine camp has basically been breathing this shit for about a month now. I thus see only one way to take care of this problem. If you will excuse me for a moment."

Before Shumann could ask her where she was going, Nancy disappeared from where she stood, leaving the marines who had been looking at her bewildered, including Shumann.

“Where did she go? How could she disappear like that?”

He got a partial answer to his questions when a bright white light lit up above the airport area, with a silent wave of white light speeding away from it in all directions, eventually illuminating the whole area in a radius of three kilometers. The white light persisted for half a minute before fading out completely. That was when Nancy reappeared in front of Shumann.

“Your marines have been taken care of, General. Now, I will deal with these toxic pits.”

She then looked in succession at each burn pit, with those pits then evaporating in flashes of blue light, leaving a series of large blackened holes in the ground. Shumann and Wilkinson were still staring with bewilderment at the holes as Nancy addressed the Marine Corps Commandant.

“May I make a suggestion to you about how to deal with the source of this stupid burn pit policy, General?”

“Uh, go on, Miss Dows.” replied Shumann, now nearly ready to kneel in front of her. He and Wilkinso grinned on hearing what she had in mind.

“Miss Dows, I buy your suggestion one hundred percent! Thank you again for your intervention.”

10:03 (Afghanistan Time)

Friday, August 17, 2001 ‘C’

Afghan border post west of the Khyber Pass

Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan

“SARGE, A PELICAN IS ON APPROACH FROM JALALABAD!”

Alerted by the shout from one of her marines, Greta ran away from the border chicane, where she had been supervising the search of vehicles crossing the border, and posted herself on one side of a dirt and rock field her platoon had been using for weeks to accommodate the aircraft and helicopters which regularly resupplied her small unit. That field had been swept clean of all rocks except for gravel-sized ones, in order to make it

safe to use by visiting aircraft. Greta then positioned her arms to guide the pilot of the incoming PELICAN as he descended toward the field for a landing.

"I wonder what this is about." She asked herself. "Normally, they advise us in advance before sending a resupply aircraft here."

The answer came quickly enough after the aircraft landed at the vertical, once a group of persons, some in uniforms and others in civilian clothes, walked down the aft cargo ramp of the PELICAN.

"General Shumann and Colonel Wilkinson? Shit! Talk about a surprise V.I.P. inspection! I hope that Ramsay shaved his beard properly this morning."

It took her a conscious thought to remind herself not to salute Shumann and Wilkinson in full view of the Afghan and Pakistani civilians being processed across the border at this time. Instead, she came to attention and presented herself to Shumann.

"Staff Sergeant Greta Visby, temporarily in command of Third Rifle Platoon, Bravo Company of First Marine Battalion, sir! Welcome to the Khyber Pass border point, sir!"

"Thank you, Sergeant. Could you have your available marines not involved at this time in watching the border point assemble here for a moment?"

"Of course, sir!" replied Greta before turning around and shouting at her marines.

"ALL MARINES EXCEPT THOSE MANNING THE CHICANE ARE TO ASSEMBLE HERE AT THE DOUBLE!"

With ten of the marines staying to man the chicane, the sixteen other marines who were not sleeping came it at a run, to then hurriedly line up behind Greta. With that done, Greta faced back Shumann and Wilkinson, seeing then that half a dozen reporters and five media cameramen had positioned themselves behind and some ten meters to one side of General Shumann. There were also five young civilian women present in the reporters' group. General Shumann didn't give her much time to wonder about the goal of this surprise visit before speaking to her.

"I know that you are kept quite busy controlling this border point, Sergeant, and I also don't want to attract any extra undue enemy attention on you by my visit here, so we will do things short and sweet."

Shumann then nodded to Colonel Wilkinson, who shouted out loud at the marines standing some distance behind Greta.

"MARINES, ATTEN...HUT!"

The marines present immediately stiffened at attention, after which Shumann started speaking in a strong voice, in order to be heard by all nearby, including the reporters and their cameramen watching and filming him.

“STAFF SERGEANT GRETA VISBY HAS BEEN FIGHTING AND DIRECTING HER PLATOON HERE IN AFGHANISTAN FOR FIVE WEEKS NOW. DURING THOSE FIVE WEEKS, AFTER REPLACING QUICKLY HER PLATOON LEADER WHEN THE LATTER WAS KILLED ON THE VERY FIRST DAY, STAFF SERGEANT VISBY DEMONSTRATED A RARE LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP, ALONG WITH IMPRESSIVE BRAVERY, COMPETENCE IN COMMAND AND COURAGE. ON TWO OCCASIONS, HER ACTIONS BROUGHT SIGNIFICANT SUCCESSES TO OUR MISSION AGAINST TERRORISM, ACTIONS IN WHICH SHE BOTH DISPLAYED OUTSTANDING VALOR AND LEADERSHIP. SUCH OUTSTANDING VALOR AND LEADERSHIP COULD NOT IN MY MIND GO WITHOUT PROPERLY REWARDING THEM. AS A RECOGNITION OF HER OUTSTANDING BRAVERY IN COMBAT DISPLAYED BY STAFF SERGEANT GRETA VISBY, I AM THUS HAPPY TO AWARD HER THE BRONZE STAR.”

Blood rushed to Greta's brain at that announcement: the Bronze Star was the fourth highest award for bravery a U.S. marine could aspire to receive and was thus a most significant award for her. She stayed at attention as Shumann took a small medal handed to him by Wilkinson and then pinned it to the left chest area of her camouflaged shirt. Shumann then shook hands with her while handing her at the same time a small box containing the dress ribbon for the Bronze Star.

“Congratulation, Staff Sergeant Visby. You are an inspiration to your men and to the whole Marine Corps.”



“Thank you, sir!” replied Greta, her voice nearly choking up. She then expected to be dismissed but her Commandant surprised her by speaking further.

“Please stay on your present spot, Staff Sergeant: I am not finished yet with you.”

Shumann then raised his voice again after taking one step back from Greta.

“DURING THE LAST FIVE WEEKS, STAFF SERGEANT GRETA VISBY DISPLAYED A LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP AND COMPETENCE IN COMMAND INCOMMENSURATE TO HER PRESENT RANK LEVEL WHILE LEADING HER RIFLE PLATOON THROUGH COMBAT ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS. THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS NEEDS SUCH LEADERS AS HER, THUS I, AS COMMANDANT OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS, DEEMED THAT A PROMOTION WAS IN ORDER.”

'Hell, here I go for becoming a Gunnery Sergeant after only six years in the Corps. I will create quite a few jealous marines with this.' hought Greta.

Shumann then unpinned her present rank insignias of staff sergeant () from the collar of her combat shirt, something normal prior to pinning new rank insignias in place. Taking another small box offered by Wilkinson, Shumann then took out of it an insignia consisting of a single golden bar () and pinned it to the right corner of Greta's collar. Greta felt another rush of blood to her brain on understanding that she was being commissioned in the field to the rank of Second Lieutenant. Commissioning in the field from NCO to officer rank was extremely rare among the American armed forces and only rewarded the most conspicuous examples of leadership in combat. She was nearly wobbling while at attention when Shumann spoke out loud again.

"BY HER OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP DEMONSTRATED IN ACTIVE COMBAT, STAFF SERGEANT PROVED TO ALL THAT SHE IS TRULY MADE OF OFFICER QUALITY MATERIEL. I THUS PROMOTE HER IN THE FIELD TO THE RANK OF SECOND LIEUTENANT. SHE WILL NOW CONTINUE TO COMMAND HER RIFLE PLATOON AT HER NEW RANK LEVEL."

Shumann, imitated by Wilkinson and by the marines watching the ceremony, then applauded briefly before shaking hands with Greta.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant Visby. You amply deserved this."

"But, don't you need to hold a bachelor's degree in order to become an officer, sir?"

"Yes, you do, Lieutenant. However, in the case of commissioning in the field, you will be allowed to keep your new rank despite your lack of a college degree. Once your operational tour in this war zone will be finished and once you will return to Camp Lejeune, you will then have two years to enroll into a college studies program in order to eventually get a bachelor's degree."

"Will I have to get my degree at the Navy Academy or will I be allowed to study at a civilian college or university of my choice, sir? Excuse my language but I am not hot about studying with a bunch of young turks with zero experience and who already think of themselves as kings of the hill."

Both Shumann and Wilkinson had a chuckle at that, with Shumann answering her with a wide smile.

“Spoken like a true seasoned NCO! Yes, you will be able to choose where you will study and in which field, as long as your regimental education counselor judges that the college program you want to follow is an appropriate one for a marine officer.”

“And what if that counselor nixes my choice of studies or college, sir?”

“Then, you will have the right to appeal directly up to your divisional commander, Lieutenant. However, be assured that I will mention your case to Major General Lambert once I will have returned to the States. Thus, don’t be afraid to ask for what you really want to do.”

“Thank you, sir: you are most kind.”

“I am the one who needs to thank you, Lieutenant, for the shining example you present to our marines and to our nation. I will now leave you free to return to your duties, before my presence here could attract mortar fire on this place. You may now salute me this time: I think that everybody can now understand that I am a big cheese around here. Have a fine day, Lieutenant.”

As told by him, Greta saluted Shumann, who saluted her back before pivoting around and returning to the waiting Hiller PELICAN, followed by Wilkinson and the group of reporters, cameramen and civilian girls. Greta watched the big aircraft lift up in a cloud of blown dust and sand, then turned around and joined her marines, who mobbed her at once, patting her shoulders and congratulating her. Greta actually felt even more pride at being complimented by her men than at being complimented by her Corps Commandant: after all, they all depended on each other to fight and to survive this combat tour.

15:11 (Afghanistan Time)

Monday, August 20, 2001 ‘C’

Office of the Theater Commander, American Forces in Afghanistan

Kabul International Airport

The young army captain serving as aide to Lieutenant General Harold Brubaker shot up at attention from behind his desk when General Shumann stormed into his anteroom, closely followed by two marines carrying an apparently heavy and large covered bucket.

“General? We were not expecting your visit today.”

"Is General Brubaker in his office, Captain?" replied tersely Shumann, making the junior officer nod his head.

"Yes, General! Do you want me to..."

"Forget it, Captain!" said the Marine Corps Commandant before nearly crashing open the door to Brubaker's office and then charging inside, still followed by the two marines and their bucket. Lieutenant General Brubaker, understandably shocked by such an entrance, nonetheless got up from his chair and saluted Shumann.

"General Shumann? Why such a brutal entrance in my office?"

Shumann quickly looked around the rather posh office, which had belonged to the director of the airport, then looked at his two marines.

"Alright, men: proceed as discussed!"

The two marines, grinning with anticipation, removed the cover of the bucket they had been carrying, then lifted it over Brubaker's desk and flipped it upside down. A nauseating, semi-liquid brown mass splattered on top of the work desk while also splashing drops on the front of Brubaker's uniform, making him scream in protest.

"ARE YOU CRAZY? WHY..."

Shumann didn't give him time to finish his sentence, cutting him off while pointing an index at Brubaker.

"Why? Because you were exposing our fighting men and women to the smoke produced by burning this toxic brew, Brubaker, all this while you worked in comfort from your nice airport office. Be assured that I will report your stupid and uncaring decisions to General Sherman. Have a nice fucking day, asshole!"

Shumann then walked out of the office with his two marines, who left behind the now empty bucket.

CHAPTER 17 – A BLAST OF A CONCERT TOUR



09:45 (Afghanistan Time)

Saturday, August 25, 2001 'C'

**Kandahar International Airport, 17 kilometers southeast of Kandahar
Kandahar Province, Afghanistan**

"Thanks for the lift, Mother. You were really helpful to us."

"Bof!" replied Ingrid, waving her hand in dismissal. "What is a mother for, if not to be helpful to her daughters and their friends?"

Nancy kissed Ingrid on her cheek before getting in one of the two pickup trucks used to transport her band around. She however asked one question through her opened window before the truck could start rolling out of the hold of the Hiller SKYTRUCK.

"Are you going to haul vehicles and supplies for the marines for long still, Mother?"

"No! In fact, this is my last trip to the NEPTUNE. After getting on it, me and my crew will rest overnight and do a thorough maintenance check of our aircraft, then will fly back to the States. With all the vehicles and field equipment which were on our ships now in Afghanistan, my contract with DoD is coming to an end. Besides, I have important things to take care of at the Hiller plant in Port Angeles. Please be careful during the rest of your tour, you and your band members."

"We will, Mother! The real question is: will the Taliban and Al-Qaeda cooperate?"

"True! Still, be careful and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Hell, then I will get in trouble: there isn't much that you actually don't do."

On that last quip, Nancy's truck then rolled off the aft cargo ramp of the SKYTRUCK, followed by the second truck of the band. Ingrid watched the two pickup trucks drive away on the tarmac of the Kandahar International Airport, which served as the main base for the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan. She felt a pinch in her heart at thinking about all the dangers her two daughters, Nancy and Lucy, were still going to face during their concert tour made in benefit to the American troops. She then signaled to her loadmaster, Janet Morton, that she could raise and close the cargo ramp, so that they could fly out and return one last time to the battlecarrier NEPTUNE.

After rolling off the SKYTRUCK, Lieutenant Jeffrey Kyle directed his driver to go to the main passenger terminal, where he stepped out of the pickup truck and went inside, promising to Nancy that he wouldn't be long in finding out where their lodging for the night would be and where and when the band would give its concert. As Nancy, Christiane Amanpour and her cameraman were waiting for Kyle to return, the cameraman, a thin but tall man named Paul Swenson, wiped with one hand the sweat on his forehead.

"Damn, it is really hot!"

"It is effectively hot, Paul: it is over 95 degrees Fahrenheit today. This place is after all in a hot desertic climate zone." replied Christiane Amanpour, a seasoned traveler. "It however doesn't help that our vehicle is not equipped with air conditioning. Don't hesitate to drink plenty of water, Paul: you must avoid dehydration. Here, use my bottle."

Swenson took the bottle of water offered by Christiane and took a good swig of it before giving it back. Christiane then took a swig herself before offering her bottle to Nancy, who also drank a bit of water. Looking out through her window, Nancy eyed the vast camp of tents standing next to the airport proper and surrounded by a low wall of large canvas bags filled with dirt and topped off by rolls of barbed wire.

"Our soldiers are truly living it rough here in Afghanistan, on top of fighting a fanatical enemy. I am happy that my band can help their morale a bit."

"Your band is doing a lot than just helping a bit, Nancy." replied Christiane. "From interviewing I took with soldiers from all ages and rank levels who watched your concerts, I can say that you are considered to be a real benediction for them, you and your band. I also got word from CNN headquarters that your band's reputation and popularity has been significantly boosted by the reports about your tour in Afghanistan. Someone in Atlanta even told me that you are shaming many famous artists who still are not ready to risk a visit to Afghanistan."

"Yeah, I can imagine why: too many risks for too little money." said Nancy in a bitter tone. "They would rather go give shows to some millionaire Arab sheiks than sweat it out for our fighting troops. So much for superstars! I compare that to the time in 1953 when Marilyn Monroe went to visit our troops in Vietnam and, in the process, ended up as backseater for my mother when Ingrid was called to go help one of our destroyers which had been torpedoed by a Soviet submarine in the Gulf of Tonkin. Marilyn had started that flight as a simple passenger during an open day given in Da Nang by my mother but, when the call for help came and Ingrid was about to refuse the call because of the presence of Marilyn in her fighter aircraft, Marilyn insisted that Ingrid go help our sailors in danger and said she was waiving the risk liability about her. She ended up actually flying into combat with Ingrid against Chinese fighter aircraft and torpedo boats. Now, that's what I call dedication to our troops. By the way, did you know that Marilyn Monroe actually fought in World War Two as part of the Fifinellas, the combat air wing my mother formed in 1942? The great Katharine Hepburn also fought with the Fifinellas in that war."

"Uh, no: I was still quite young at the time. And how old exactly is your mother now, Nancy? She presently looks like a college girl."

"She certainly does, Christiane, but she is in reality 76-years-old and about to turn 77."

"Wow! Eternal youth certainly looks nice."

Those words actually made the smile on Nancy's face partly fade.

"It may look nice, but it is not for everybody, Christiane. Right now, Ingrid herself doesn't know when she will start to age again at a normal rate and that really worries her. She adopted her first child, Hien, in 1953, when Hien was six-years-old. Now, Hien is 54, married, and has two children of her own. Yet, Hien could now easily pass as Ingrid's mother or even as her grandmother. Ingrid's fear is that her children, except for

me, will all die of old age before her. By the way, I say this to you in confidence. Please do not repeat this to anyone. The same goes for you, Paul.”

“I will be mum, Nancy.” promised the cameraman.

Lieutenant Kyle ended up returning to their truck some 26 minutes ago and gave an apologetic look to Nancy and Christiane.

“Sorry about the wait, ladies: I hit some paper-bound idiot of an administrative officer who insisted on following every rules in his book before he would assign us a place to sleep. However, the entertainment officer proved a lot more helpful. You will be able to start your concert outside of the main cafeteria of the divisional camp at eight tonight.”

“Good! Let’s see now what kind of palace they are providing us for the night.”

Her sarcastic remark made Kyle roll his eyes: up to now, they mostly had to be content with hot and dusty tents and with minimal hygiene facilities. Their driver, a young marine corporal, chuckled at Nancy’s remark and at the reaction of his lieutenant to her words.

22:19 (Afghanistan Time)

Parade grounds next to the main cafeteria’s tent complex

82nd Airborne Division’s Kandahar Camp

Kandahar Airport

“BRAVO! BRAVO! YOU’RE THE BEST, GIRLS!”

Thunderous applauses and cheers from the nearly 2,900 paratroopers and aviation personnel occupying the parade grounds next to the main cafeteria’s tent complex greeted Nancy and her band as they bowed to their spectators after playing an encore of their interpretation of ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door’. Happy with the success of her concert tonight, Nancy used her microphone to speak to the crowd of American soldiers and aviators.

“Thank you, thank you my friends! It is a true pleasure for me and my band to be able to entertain brave men and women like you right here in Afghanistan. You are fighting to defend freedom and our country from terrorism and the nation owes you big for that. This tour of ours is our way to start repaying the debt of gratitude owed to you by our country. You can tell your friends and comrades who couldn’t make it here tonight that we will be giving another concert here tomorrow evening, at the same time

as today. Then, my band will visit your comrades manning the more isolated posts in this region, so that no one will feel forgotten. Thank you for your service, all of you!”

Loud cheers rose as Nancy bowed again at the end of her speech and then walked off the improvised stage with her band members. They were met at the foot of the stage by the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, Major General Mark Meany, who enthusiastically shook their hands.

“That was a truly great show, ladies. I can’t thank you enough for having come here to help entertain my troops and to support their morale.”

Meany then looked directly at Nancy, with his expression changing from enthusiastic to grateful.

“I must especially thank you for having healed my wounded soldiers in our infirmary this morning, Miss Dows. If anyone in the camp doubted that you were not an angel, you have now proven to be a true godsend and a most compassionate young woman.”

“It was the least I could do, General Meany. I don’t make a secret of who I am and to help suffering souls is part of my purpose in life. May I ask a favor from you in order to help further the morale of your troops?”

“Anything you ask, Miss Dows.”

“I would like your permission and support for me and my band to travel to your outpost in Spin Boldak tomorrow morning, so that we could go entertain your sub-unit holding that border post.”

That request made Meany’s smile fade, to be replaced by a concerned look.

“Uh, you should know that our Spin Boldak outpost is situated in a Taliban high-activity area and is next to the Pakistani border, where more Taliban fighters are hiding. Also, the road between here and Spin Boldak is the scene of frequent ambushes and attacks against our resupply convoys. Such a trip would represent a big risk to your band. As well, as a group of female musicians performing in public, you represent evil personified for the Taliban and may be specifically targeted by them. I would strongly counsel you not to go there, for your own safety.”

Nancy’s answer to that was then made in a calm but firm tone.

“General, we came here to support your troops and are ready to run the same risks as them while in Afghanistan. If your truck drivers are ready to run risks to bring supplies to your troopers, then we are ready to run the same risks as them in order to go help the morale of your soldiers.”

"But, you are not soldiers and you are not even armed, miss."

"Wrong on both counts, General! We may not be soldiers in this lifetime but me and my band members all were soldiers and warriors at least once during previous incarnations of ours. As for weapons, we each brought a personal handgun for self-defense and the Space Corps, thanks to my mother's influence, loaned us assault rifles for the duration of our tour in Afghanistan. As for if we are trained on those weapons, the answer is 'yes'. My mother, retired General of the Army Ingrid Dows, has been training us in pistol and rifle shooting for the last four years, both at an indoor pistol range which is part of our Washington D.C. mansion and at a Virginia shooting club. We are at least as proficient with firearms as your logistician truck drivers are, General. And if these weapons are not enough to get us out of possible trouble, I still have this."

Major General Meany, along with the members of his staff who were close by, instinctively took a step back while staring with disbelieving eyes at the crackling blue energy ball that had just appeared in Nancy's raised right palm.

06:32 (Afghanistan Time)

Sunday, August 26, 2001 'C'

When the two pickup trucks carrying the band, Christiane Amanpour and her cameraman stopped at the tail end of the small convoy of military trucks due to transport supplies to the American outpost at the Spin Boldak border post, a sergeant first class from the 82nd Airborne Division came to speak with Lieutenant Kyle and Nancy.

"Good morning Lieutenant, ladies! I am Sergeant First Class John Pierce, in charge of the escort for this convoy. I just wanted to advise you to stay alert during this trip to Spin Boldak: a number of our resupply convoys were attacked during the last month by the Taliban and we lost a few trucks and people in the process. If we get fired at, we will then speed up and try to leave the ambush zone as quickly as possible. Keep a safe distance between vehicles but be ready to react quickly to anything. Lieutenant, the radio frequency for our convoy is 76.4 megahertz and my callsign is Zebra Two. Your callsign is Zebra Two Five. Our Higher is Zebra Control. Any question, sir?"

"No, Sergeant!"

"Then we will leave now. I'll see you again at our forward operating base in Spin Boldak, FOB BLACKHAWK."

Pierce then walked back to the head of the convoy and climbed aboard a four-wheeled armored troop carrier called a MAW-PV, for Medium Armored Wheeled Patrol Vehicle. Once in, he made a sign with his right arm sticking out of his still opened door, then closed his door as his vehicle started rolling. The band's two pickup trucks followed behind the four six-by-six five-ton trucks of the convoy, which were carrying various supplies, as they also started rolling. The small convoy first rolled through the vast tent camp of the division next to the airport terminal, then started driving down through Kandahar City, to eventually get on the main Kandahar – Spin Boldak road. As a main border crossing point with Pakistan, Spin Boldak had to be closely watched, in order to prevent the Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements from entering Afghanistan and also to stop any attempts at resupplying or reinforcing such elements still in Afghanistan. As the small convoy rolled through Kandahar, one Afghan 'civilian' discretely made a call from inside a small local shop.

"Hello, Ahmed? This is Abdul! A small American convoy just left the airport, heading towards Spin Boldak. One armored car is in the lead, followed by four loaded heavy trucks and two pickup trucks... No, the escort is apparently limited to the leading armored car. I saw civilian women in the two pickup trucks... very well: I will keep watch for any other possible escort elements. May Allah be with you and your men."

Abdul then put down his telephone receiver, satisfied that this American convoy was going to get the kind of reception it deserved.

As the convoy started rolling on the main road to Spin Boldak and across mostly flat and arid terrain, Nancy and her band members, wearing the Marine Corps armored vests and helmets loaned to them before they had left the United States, along with a similarly clad Christiane Amanpour and her cameraman, who wore CNN black vests marked 'PRESS', started looking around their trucks, watching for possible trouble. The first sign that their trip was not exactly a safe one came up half a hour later, when the convoy passed by the twisted and blackened remains of an American military vehicle lying on one side of the road. Nancy and her band members looked at it with closed expressions but didn't say a word then, while Paul Swenson filmed the wreck for a few seconds before lowering his video camera. Another three miles away, they passed by the carcasses of three American trucks, making Sarah and



Carmen exchange looks. The silence in their vehicle became nearly oppressive afterwards, with the female musicians instinctively tightening their grip on the barrels of their rifles, held at the vertical between their legs.

The small convoy was less than twenty kilometers from the Pakistani border when, to the shock of all, a powerful explosion sent the head vehicle of the convoy, the armored vehicle carrying Sergeant Pierce and his squad of soldiers, flying in the air and flip over before crashing back down on the right side of the road. Lieutenant Kyle paled on seeing the MAW-PV fly up in the air and crash down, to then burst in flames: nobody could possibly survive this.

“SHIT! OUR ESCORT IS GONE! WE ARE BEING AMBUSHED! STEP ON IT, CORPORAL!”

His driver did try to accelerate then, in order to flee the ambush zone, but dense automatic fire then started hitting the trucks of the convoy. The first of the four loaded five-ton trucks was quickly hit hard by machine gun fire and veered off the road before crashing into the roadside ditch and tipping on its right side. The other three heavy trucks had to zigzag to avoid it and continued at full speed while pursued by automatic fire. Nancy’s driver was about to also speed past the upset truck when Nancy shouted to him.

“STOP! STOP, CORPORAL! THE DRIVER OF THIS TRUCK IS STILL MOVING. WE CAN’T LEAVE HIM IN THE HANDS OF THE TALIBAN. I SAID STOP!”

“DO IT, CORPORAL!” ordered Kyle, obeying one of the key mottos of the Marine Corps: to leave no man behind. Despite wanting desperately to get out of here in a hurry, the driver obeyed and stepped on his brake pedal, making his pickup truck stop in a noise of screeching tires and also forcing the pickup truck carrying Erika, Sarah, Carmen and Lucy to also brake to avoid rear-ending it. Her truck was still not completely stopped when Nancy threw her door open and jumped out, her rifle in hand, and performed a roll as she hit the roadside ditch. As soon as she was back up, she sprinted towards the truck lying on its side while at the same time shouting to her band members.

“GET OUT AND GIVE ME COVERING FIRE WHILE I GET THAT DRIVER!”

To Lieutenant Kyle’s shock and that of Christiane Amanpour, the four other musician girls jumped out at once from their truck, their rifles at the ready, and ran into the ditch before throwing themselves on their bellies and starting to shoot in the direction from which the enemy fire came. Christiane Amanpour and Peter Swenson then jumped out

as well, with the reporter pointing at the band members as she got out of the pickup truck.

"PAUL, LET'S GET INTO THIS DITCH, THEN START FILMING THE ACTION!" Seeing that gave no option to Kyle but to also step out and do his part, joining the four young women in the ditch and also starting to fire his rifle. After a machine gun burst of fire forced him to temporarily lower his head, he looked towards the tipped over truck and saw that Nancy was already on top of the cab's left side and opening the driver's door.

"Gee! The courage of this girl is incredible."

He then concentrated back his attention on his rifle firing. His firing and that of the four girls apparently was enough to make the enemy machine gun fire slacken noticeably, proving that their fire was at least partly effective. They were helped in this by the fact that the American assault rifles had more accuracy and range than the Kalashnikov rifles commonly used by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, the situation worsened when a light whistle was heard by him, coming from above.

"INCOMING MORTAR FIRE!"

Less than a second after he shouted his warning, a mortar bomb of small caliber exploded some thirty meters from Kyle, in the dirt of the field boarding the road. A second mortar bomb then exploded, this time close enough to make dust and debris rain on the Americans. Christiane was thinking that this was definitely going to end badly when luck smiled to them. A pair of American attack helicopters on patrol near Spin Boldak saw the initial explosion which had destroyed Sergeant Pierce's vehicle and had then changed heading at once while going to full power. Shortly after the explosion of the second mortar bomb, the distant low ridge from which the Taliban fire was coming from suddenly disappeared in a shower of explosions from salvos of unguided rockets. That rocket fire was then followed by gatling gun fire as the two attack helicopters overflew the Americans lying in the roadside ditch, making the latter scream with joy.

"YEAH! THE CAVALRY IS HERE, GIRLS!" shouted Erika before looking around to see where Nancy was. She saw that Nancy was now down in the ditch and helping the truck driver whom she had rescued, who seemed seriously hurt, to get to their two pickup trucks. As for the surviving heavy trucks of the convoy, they were already far in the distance, speeding towards Spin Boldak. In that, Erika could understand their drivers: those trucks were little more than big targets in such an ambush situation. Getting up and running towards Nancy, Erika then helped her support and carry the

wounded truck driver, a young woman who was bleeding from her forehead. Together, then soon got the unfortunate woman inside the second pickup truck just as Lieutenant Kyle shouted an order to everyone in their group.

“TIME TO GET BACK IN THE TRUCKS AND GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE WHILE THOSE HELICOPTERS ARE KEEPING THOSE TALIBAN BUSY, GIRLS!”

“I won’t say no to that.” quipped Sarah Weissman on hearing that. Soon, everybody was back in the two pickup trucks, which were now more cramped due to the additional presence of the wounded truck driver. The two marine drivers of their group lost no time in accelerating away from the ambush site, with Nancy looking sadly at the overturned and now burning wreck of Sergeant Pierce’s armored car as her pickup truck sped by it.

“Eight good men, dead in the middle of this shit hole and at the hands of a bunch of ignorant religious fanatics. We will remember them. Our country will remember them.”

The two pickup trucks ended up catching up with the three surviving supply trucks before arriving at the American fortified border post called FOB BLACKHAWK, where a concerned major was waiting for them. Nancy’s first move there was to hand over the wounded truck driver to two military medics who ran to their pickup trucks as soon as they entered the post’s perimeter. Once the poor woman was in good hands, Nancy exchange knowing looks with the members of her band.

“Well, that was one close call, girls. Thankfully, we are all in one piece, although others didn’t make it. I believe that we should go check our musical instruments in the back of our pickup trucks and trailers, to make sure that they didn’t get shot up.”

“Oooh, these Taliban assholes better not have shot holes through my drum kit.” replied Erika before hurrying towards the trailer containing her battery. As Nancy was also going to their two pickup trucks, she saw that Lieutenant Kyle was now talking with the airborne major commanding the outpost: he was probably reporting to him what had happened to the convoy. Christiane Amanpour then came to her, a sober expression on her face.

“Nancy, what you and your girls did was incredibly brave, especially when considering that you were not trained soldiers.”

“But we ARE trained soldiers, Christiane. We just weren’t trained in this century.”

Christiane could only roll her eyes at so much bad faith.

“Well, still, the video report of this incident that I’m going to send to CNN later today should be prime news back in the United States.”

“Do you really need to send your video of that ambush to CNN, Christiane? I would hate to see the spotlight being moved off our brave soldiers and onto my band.”

“Me, not sending out my video of this? Do you think that I am crazy, Nancy?” protested the veteran journalist.

19:00 (East Coast Time)

Monday, August 27, 2001 ‘C’

Evening news set, CNN studios, Atlanta

Georgia, U.S.A.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! This is the evening news with your host, Aaron Brown, and my cohost tonight, Judy Woodruff. It has been another eventful day in Afghanistan, with both good news and sad news. We will start first with a Taliban attack against an American convoy yesterday morning at around seven, Afghanistan Time. A small resupply convoy formed of one armored car, four cargo trucks and two pickup trucks, which was driving down the road between Kandahar and the Pakistani border, was ambushed by Taliban fighters as the convoy was approaching the border. The Taliban, using a roadside bomb, blew up the armored car escorting the trucks, then started firing on the trucks themselves. One of the trucks, hit hard, then veered off the road and tipped on its side, with its driver ending being wounded. Now, it happened that the pickup trucks which were part of the convoy were carrying our senior international correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, and her cameraman. Those pickup trucks were also carrying the female band ‘The D.C. Five’, which intended to give a concert for the benefit of the American Army unit posted at the border crossing point in Spin Boldak, which is indicated on the map now visible on your television screens. That wounded American Army truck driver would probably have died if not for the incredible courage demonstrated by those five female musicians. Christiane Amanpour and her cameraman were able to witness what happened then. Here is the video taken by our CNN cameraman after he jumped out of his pickup truck and followed Christiane Amanpour and the musician girls into the roadside ditch, in order to escape Taliban machine gun and rifle fire. Already, you can see by the numerous impacts of bullets in

the dirt around them that the enemy fire was quite intense indeed. The lead singer of The D.C. Five, Nancy Dows, is seen here as she is running towards the tipped-over truck, with the obvious intent of trying to save its driver. You can also see to the right of the video image the two pickup trucks which had been carrying our correspondent and the musician girls backing up on the road, in order to find protection behind the mass of the wrecked truck and also to be nearer to Miss Dows as she climbed on the upset truck in the ditch. We can now see the four other members of the band and the public affairs Marine Corps officer escorting them firing their rifles at the Taliban in order to cover Miss Dows while she is attempting to rescue the wounded driver. Miss Dows is now seen atop the side of the truck, with bullets striking the truck, and is attempting to open the driver's door, which seems to be stuck, probably from the impact when it fell into the ditch. She..."

Aaron Brown, who had not previewed the video because of its late arrival at the CNN studios, then paused, stunned by what he saw next. As for his cohost, Judy Woodruff, she nearly exclaimed herself in shock.

"Did she just rip that truck door clean off?"

"She certainly did, Judy. Miss Dows is now pulling out of the cab the truck driver, who seems either semi-conscious or dazed. Another member of the band, Miss Erika Lang, is now sprinting towards the truck in order to help Miss Dows rescue the driver. The other three members of the band are continuing in the meantime to fire at the Taliban in order to suppress their fire. Miss Dows is now on the ground with the wounded truck driver, a young female soldier, and is joined there by Miss Lang. Both of them then carry the truck driver to the nearest pickup truck. Thankfully for them, a pair of American attack helicopters had seen from a distance the fireball from the destruction of the armored car and arrived in time to chase away the Taliban fighters with rockets and machine gun fire, killing many of them in the process. The band members and our CNN team then used that providential help to get back in their pickup trucks and speed away, continuing to Spin Boldak, where they arrived safely at the American Army outpost."

Judy Woodruff blew air out in relief as the video, now filmed from the inside of a vehicle, showed the two pickup trucks speeding away from the ambush site.

"Talk about a dramatic event, Aaron. The courage shown by those five young musicians was incredible."

“Indeed, Judy! Just by volunteering to go to Afghanistan in order to help the morale of our troops by playing concerts for them, and this for nearly two weeks already, those ladies have already amply proved both their courage and their sense of patriotism. Let us show on your screen photos of those five young women: Nancy Dows; Erika Lang; Carmen Estrada; Lucy Dows, who by the way is the sister by adoption of Nancy Dows; and Sarah Weissman. Of special note, I wish to remind our viewers that Miss Nancy Dows, the band leader, is also known as the ‘White Angel’ around New York, where she performed repeated miracles of mass healings there while studying music in Manhattan. Miss Nancy Dows is indeed a very special person: she was born in deep Space, halfway between Jupiter and Saturn, on the United States Space Corps spaceship PROMETHEUS, which was commanded by her famous mother, General Ingrid Dows. Nancy Dows also happens to be what she calls herself a ‘half Celestial’, half Human and half Angel. Her father is said to be no other than Archangel Michael in person. Many still do not believe that and pretend instead that she is in reality a sort of witch, or an envoy of the Devil. However, what we just saw on video was in my opinion an act of pure care and compassion. The D.C. Five are now continuing their tour around our units fighting in Afghanistan but, in order not to attract attacks against the band, its present location and movements will be kept confidential.”

In the lounge of her house in Port Angeles, where she had just returned to after completing her air cargo ferrying contract with the Pentagon, Ingrid had nearly jumped out of her sofa on seeing that Nancy’s band had been stuck in an ambush by the Taliban. Her dread however quickly changed to relief, then jubilation and pride, as she listened to the CNN news on her television set.

“Nancy, you would make any mother proud. You also did good, Lucy, along with your three friends.”

CHAPTER 18 – THE WAR IS WIDENING



Pakistani Army convoy on the move.

13:58 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, August 28, 2001 'C'

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Clearly angered by what he had just read, President George W. Bush threw down on his presidential desk the highly classified intelligence report that was the cause of his ire, then looked up at his CIA director, George Tenet, who was standing in front of his desk.

“How certain are we about this, George?”

“Quite certain, Mister President. We intercepted multiple cell phone conversations from inside Pakistan and also intercepted and decoded a number of encrypted Pakistani military messages, many of them sent by their military intelligence agency, the ISI. There is no doubt in my mind that the Pakistani, on top of secretly providing weapons and ammunition to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, are also sheltering and hiding Al-Qaeda surviving leaders from us. The ISI in particular has a heavy hand in this.”

“And why would the Pakistanis play such a game?”

“Basically, to ensure that Pakistan’s influence prevails in Afghanistan and also to shut India out of that country. There is also the fact that a large part of the Pakistani border with Afghanistan is inhabited by Pashto tribes sympathetic to the Taliban.”

“The double-faced bastards!” raged Bush, who took some time to calm down before looking back at Tenet.

“Assemble a dossier able to convince my cabinet and, eventually, Congress, that the Pakistanis are betraying our trust about this. I will present your dossier first at a meeting of the NSC, where I will decide what to do about this.”

“Understood, Mister President. I will get my analysts on this right away.”

Bush sat back in his chair, his mind in turmoil, as Tenet walked out of the Oval Office. He just could not let this treachery from the Pakistanis fly. On the other hand, Pakistan owned a nuclear arsenal estimated to number at the least fifty warheads, delivered by both aircraft bombs and ballistic missiles. The potential here for a disastrous geopolitical and military crisis was very real. However, he would be damned if that would prevent him from punishing the terrorists who had murdered over 3,500 American citizens. If the Pakistanis chose to be against the United States in this, then they were going to quickly regret it.

11:06 (Afghanistan Time)

Monday, September 03, 2001 ‘C’

Afghan-side border point at the western entrance of the Khyber Pass

Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan

“LIEUTENANT, WE HAVE A LARGE PAKISTANI ARMY COLUMN APPROACHING THE PAKISTANI BORDER POST.”

Greta, who was about to heat up a field ration for her lunch in the tent used by her platoon as a field kitchen, put back down her ration and, grabbing her rifle, ran out of the tent and towards the border chicane, some sixty meters away. Looking towards the Pakistani border post, she saw a convoy of at least twelve vehicles, a mix of armed pickup trucks and of heavier trucks, all carrying Pakistani Army soldiers. A Pakistani flag flying from one of the leading trucks confirmed to her the identity of those soldiers approaching: the Taliban always used their own flags covered with Islamic writings,

never the Pakistani flag. She estimated that this Pakistani column carried at least 180 soldiers.

“STAND TO, MARINES! TAKE YOUR DEFENSIVE POSITIONS AND BE READY FOR COMBAT BUT DON’T FIRE UNLESS I SAY SO! ALL CIVILIAN TRAFFIC THROUGH OUR CHECKPOINT IS TO STOP AT ONCE!”

Next, while still running, she activated the microphone of her small radio tuned to her company’s frequency and spoke in an urgent tone.

“Bravo Six, this is Blue Bravo Six: urgent message, over!”

She was crouching down at her prepared defensive position, made of sandbags piled against one extremity of the chicane of steel drums full of dirt and stones, when she got a reply from her company commander, Captain Kenneth Gomer.

“This is Bravo Six: send, over!”

“Bravo Six, a Pakistani convoy is arriving at the Pakistani border post facing my position. I count a mix of twelve, no, thirteen trucks and pickup trucks, some armed with machine guns, carrying at least 180 soldiers in that column. That convoy is now decelerating and seems intent to drop off its troops at the Pakistani border post, over.”

“Blue Bravo Six, are there any armored vehicles in that convoy, over?”

“Negative, Bravo Six! However, a number of pickup trucks are mounting heavy machine guns and...wait! I see more vehicles turning the bend of the road, coming from the Khyber Pass. I’m going to look at them now, over.”

Using the 4X scope mounted on her rifle, Greta looked at the new vehicles approaching from the pass. It took her only a few seconds to identify the four large dark masses, prompting her to speak again on her radio.

“Bravo Six, from Blue Bravo Six: I have four medium tanks approaching the border. I identify the tank type as either Soviet-made T-54 or Chinese-produced Type 59, over.”

At the other end of the radio transmission, Captain Kenneth Gomer paused on receiving that information. While the T-54 tank and its Type-59 derivative were old and dated, they still mounted a 100mm main gun, plus two to three machine guns, depending on the variant. Also, sending main battle tanks to a border post was definitely not a common practice and could only demonstrate a hostile intent on the part of the Pakistanis.

"Blue Bravo Six, observe that Pakistani force and report any significant activity on its part. I am going to advise higher of this and request both air and artillery support for your position, over."

"Acknowledged, Bravo Six. The Pakistani infantry is now getting out of their trucks and taking positions along their own chicane and border line. The pickups mounting machine guns are presently forming an extended, dispersed line behind the Pakistani chicane and have their weapons pointed at me. The four tanks are still some 300 meters behind the Pakistani border post and approaching, over."

"Blue Bravo Six, hold your ground! If the Pakistani fire on you or cross the border and rush towards your position, then you are free to engage them at will. Over and out to you!"

Gomer silently swore to himself as he reached for his battalion net radio set: it looked like what was up to now a war against a guerrilla force may well turn into a clash with a mechanized army and against an opponent possessing nuclear weapons.

After talking with Captain Gomer on the radio, Greta quickly walked down at a crouch along the road chicane and the line of foxholes occupied by her marines, passing to her men the directives from Gomer. She also sent her two anti-tank launchers, which she had been keeping in reserve up to now, take protected positions behind separate large rocks, from where they had a direct view of the road and of the Pakistani border post. Last of all, she went to speak to the corporal leading her 60mm light mortar team, who were now preparing a number of mortar bombs for firing.

"Corporal Mattingly, I will want your mortar to target in priority those light trucks mounting machine guns and lined behind the Pakistani chicane. However, don't fire until I give you the order to do so. This could easily enough turn into an accidental shit pit."

"Understood, Lieutenant! We will set our HE-FRAG bombs on superquick fuze settings, so that we get the maximum spread of shrapnell on impact."

"Excellent! With luck, we will not have to fire on those Pakistanis today...or ever."

"You really believe that they won't attack us, Lieutenant? Bringing tanks up to the border sounds pretty aggressive to me."

"And you are right about that, Mattingly. However, we still have the right to dream."

On that sarcastic remark, Greta then walked back, still at a crouch, to her personal position at the chicane, and used her binoculars to observe what the Pakistanis were doing now. She saw the original Pakistani Border Corps guards assemble their kits and leave aboard their lone truck, something that alarmed Greta: the Pakistani border post could not be considered as such anymore but was now to be considered a Pakistani battle position. She reported that by radio to Captain Gomer, who replied with a piece of news that pleased her.

“Blue Bravo Six, from Bravo Six: know that you now have a howitzer battery ready to support you. Our gunners have the exact locations of both your border post and of the Pakistani border post. That battery’s callsign is Red Archer and it will monitor my present frequency. If the Pakistani attack, then you are authorized to contact Red Archer directly to ask for fire support, over.”

“That’s great news, Bravo Six. Be advise that I am going to cross to the Pakistani border post in order to ask for their intention. I will then inform you about their response, over.”

“Uh, understood, Blue Bravo Six, but please be careful, over.”

“I will be, Bravo Six, out!”

Straightening up, Greta then spoke to Sergeant Joshua Stern, who was in charge of the squad directly defending the chicane.

“Josh, I’m going forward to the Pakistani border post in order to see what are the intentions of these assholes. If I get shot or taken prisoner, then assume command of the platoon and defend our position.”

Joshua, who had more than a passing crush on Greta, eyed her with clear misgivings.

“Are you sure that you really want to do that, Greta?”

“Hey, those guys are supposed to be disciplined soldiers and not terrorist thugs. I should be okay.”

On those words, Greta slung her rifle across her chest and walked around the chicane and towards the Pakistani border post. She kept her pace at a medium speed while looking as calm and confident as possible. Nearly all the Pakistani rifles and machine guns instantly pointed at her, causing her heart to jump for a second in her chest, but she kept a straight face and a steady pace. Thankfully, nobody fired at her...yet.”

Covering the 300 meters between the two border posts took her a couple of minutes, at the end of which she stopped on the road once she arrived at a distance of ten meters

from the Pakistani chicane. There, she spoke up in English while looking directly at the nearest Pakistani soldiers facing her.

“I NEED TO SPEAK TO YOUR OFFICER!”

A man in Pakistani Army combat uniform responded to her by walking out of the border hut, where he had been standing in its opened door frame. As he walked towards her, Greta could see that the man wore the rank insignias of a major. She thus came to attention and saluted the Pakistani when the latter stopped three paces from her. That seemingly pleased the Pakistani, who then saluted her back. Greta then spoke to the man.

“I am Lieutenant Greta Visby, commanding the unit holding the Afghan border post. I came to inquire about your intentions, Major.”

The Pakistani, clearly surprised and taken somewhat aback by the fact that a woman commanded the Afghan border post, took a moment before replying to her.

“I am Major Ismail Khoran, of the Pakistani Army. My unit was sent here with a simple goal: to force you away from this border crossing. The Taliban were the legitimate government of Afghanistan and is still considered as such by my government, while the United States has invaded Afghanistan, a state of affair that Pakistan cannot tolerate for much longer. You can either withdraw peacefully from this border or I will have to chase you away, Lieutenant. The choice is yours.”

Greta gave him an unimpressed look while shaking her head twice.

“I have no intentions to withdraw my unit from the Afghan-side border point, Major. My orders are to filter those passing the border and to stop or apprehend any Taliban fighter or Al-Qaeda terrorist we will encounter, on top of preventing the entry of arms and ammunition into Afghanistan. Our intervention was made following a horrific terrorist attack by Al-Qaeda which cost the lives of over 3,500 innocent American civilians. The Taliban refused to hand over to us the Al-Qaeda members operating in Afghanistan and even pledged to support and defend those terrorists, thus giving my country no choice but to come here and chase after those Al-Qaeda members. By siding with the Taliban, Pakistan is committing what the United States considers as a hostile move. If you attack my unit, then this will be considered by the United States as an act of war and will attract an appropriate and forceful response on our part. Think well before you decide to attack us, Major.”

Her reply clearly didn't please the Pakistani, who then hardened his tone of voice.

"I don't need to think about that, Lieutenant: I have my orders from Islamabad and I will execute them to the letter. I give you one hour to withdraw from this border and leave. After that, I will force you out."

Seeing that this was going nowhere, Greta stared hard at Khorkan.

"I am sorry to hear that, Major. If that is really your choice, then men will die today, including many of your own men."

Greta then saluted Khorkan again and pivoted on her heels to return to her own border post. While walking, she activated her company-level radio and informed Captain Gomer about the demands from the Pakistanis. Gomer's answer was a calm but emphatic one.

"I will pass this info to Higher, Blue Bravo Six. Keep controlling your present position and resist any attempt by the Pakistanis to force you to withdraw, over."

"Understood, Bravo Six. Blue Bravo Six out!"

Greta felt a bit bad as she returned to her border post, not because she didn't want to defend the post against the Pakistani but because this could turn into a completely avoidable war, all thanks to the Pakistani intransigence and double dealings.

When the timing of his ultimatum was over, with still no signs of the Americans withdrawing, Major Khorkan repressed the anger building up in him and decided to give those invaders a last chance to leave peacefully. He thus took one soldier with him and walked towards the American positions. To his utter shock and ire, he found the American marines manning the chicane in a variety of relaxed poses, looking unconcerned. As for Greta Visby, she met him at the chicane while holding a warm ration pack in one hand and eating from it.

"Good afternoon, Major! Are you hungry? We have some really nice sweet and sour pork field rations available."

Khorkan stiffened and reddened with rage at her offer: he was certain that she knew that pork was a strictly forbidden food staple for Muslims like him. Her offer was thus a clear and direct insult to him.

"You really want to die today, you and your men, Lieutenant?"

"No, but I will if need be, and this while killing as many of your men as I can, Major, including you. Think well before triggering a war between your country and mine: yours will not win it, I assure you."

Thoroughly angered by her reply, Khorkan then turned back and walked back with his soldier to the Pakistani border post, where he used a tactical radio to call the commander of the tank platoon supporting his rifle company.

"Lieutenant Harraf, start up your tanks and start advancing towards the American positions. Maybe that will convince them that we are serious about this."

"Moving out now, Major!"

The engines of the four Type 59 medium tanks soon coughed up to life, throwing up at the same time four plumes of thick smoke from their exhausts. Those plumes were more than enough to tell Greta what was about to happen. She thus gave urgent orders to her marines while crouching behind the chicane.

"GET READY, MARINES! THIS IS IT! KEEP YOUR GRENADE LAUNCHERS FOR ANY PAKISTANI TRUCKS WHICH WILL CROSS THE BORDER AND LEAVE OUR HGL-105 TO DEAL WITH THOSE TANKS."

Next, she advised Captain Gomer that the Pakistani tanks were now moving and about to go through their line of the border and requested the howitzer battery supporting her platoon to be ready to fire, giving as target point the border zone just forward of the Pakistani border post's chicane. Still hoping for good sense to prevail, Greta watched as the four Type 59 tanks rumbled forward and started going around the double line of dirt-filled barrels of the Pakistani chicane. The moment the first tank had passed the chicane and was rolling on the road towards her own positions, she spoke up in her platoon-level radio.

"Anti-tank team: start engaging incoming tanks!"

Switching radios quickly, she then talked to the howitzer battery.

"Red Archer, this is Blue Bravo Six. We have enemy tanks on the move and coming towards my positions. Fire for effect in the zone immediately west of the Pakistani border post, over."

"Copy that, Blue Bravo Six. First rounds on the way in five seconds."

Greta, fully ready for combat, then grabbed her rifle and started scanning with its scope the line of positions at the Pakistani border, searching for Major Khorkan. She quickly located him, crouched behind one barrel of his chicane and observing with his binoculars. When two of the Pakistani tanks started rolling past the chicane and towards her platoon positions, Greta calmly aimed her rifle and fired one shot, just before two detonations announced the firing of projectiles by her two HGL-105 gunners. She then

had the satisfaction of seeing Major Khorkan tumble backward and disappear behind his protective barrel.

“Promise made, promise kept! Adios, Major Khorkan!”

Only two seconds after pronouncing those words, the lead Pakistani tank suddenly shuddered and stopped under the impact of a powerful explosion directly against the front of its turret. That turret then flew high up in the air as the whole tank erupted into a huge ball of fire, and this only a second before the second tank also blew up. The stunned Pakistani soldiers manning the chicane took a couple of seconds to react, then started firing at Greta’s positions. However, they were able to fire only for a few seconds before the scream of incoming artillery shells made them duck down behind their steel barrels and sandbags. Six 105mm shells then impacted in quick succession just in front of their chicane, bracketing the two surviving Pakistani tanks, which were now rushing out past the chicane. One of the shells found its target, impacting the top of the engine compartment of one of the two remaining Type 59 medium tanks. Its kinetic energy was sufficient to penetrate inside the engine compartment before the shell exploded. That tank was engulfed at once in a big fireball, which was quickly followed by secondary explosions as the 100mm shells stored inside the tank also exploded. The last remaining tank, having only a rather primitive fire control system for its main gun, then made the mistake of stopping on the road in order to aim and fire its gun. That gun had time to erupt once before a HGL-105 missile hit the tank, making its internal ammunition explode and sending its turret high in the air. Unfortunately, that lone 100mm tank gun shell directly hit part of the American-held chicane, throwing around four of the steel barrels full of dirt and killing or wounding a number of marines from Sergeant’s Stern squad. Before a second salvo of six 105mm howitzer shells could hit the ground, Greta’s mortar team sent its first 60mm mortar bombs towards the Pakistani chicane itself and the soldiers and vehicles lined behind it.

“RED ARCHER, THIS IS BLUE BRAVO SIX! ALL FOUR ENEMY TANKS NOW DESTROYED. ADD FIFTY AND SWITCH YOUR FIRE TO THE BORDER POST PROPER, OVER.”

“Acknowledged, Blue Bravo Six! Switching targets now.”

Looking around her, Greta felt a pang of her heart on seeing a number of her marines down on the ground, some of them moving and screaming in pain and others unmoving.

“BIG MAMA, I NEED YOU AT THE CHICANE!”

"ON MY WAY, LIEUTENANT!" replied the big Navy corpsman, who then jumped onto her ATV with Corporal Kim Lee and a folded stretcher before speeding towards the chicane, ignoring the Pakistani bullets still flying around with the message 'to whom it may concern'. However, that rain of bullets abruptly stopped when six 105mm shells landed just behind the Pakistani chicane, butchering the Pakistani infantrymen lining it, destroying outright three of the armed pickup truck and peppering with shrapnel four more vehicles and their occupants. To that was now added the fire from Greta's light mortar, firing one round every three seconds. Greta then decided to add to that volume of fire.

"MARINES, AT THE PAKISTANI TRUCKS PARKED BEHIND THE ENEMY BORDER POST, FIRE ONE 60MM GRENADE EACH WHEN READY."

Being immobile and also conspicuous by their size, the row of parked Pakistani Army trucks soon saw a rain of 28 60mm High-Explosive - Fragmentation grenades dive down on them. While only a few grenades managed direct hits against the trucks, many other exploded near them, puncturing tyres and chassis and damaging their engines. Some of the trucks also burst out in flames, their fuel tanks hit by hot pieces of shrapnel. The surviving Pakistani infantrymen, seeing their trucks go up in flames and smoke and with their commanding officer killed right at the start of the battle, panicked and started running towards their rear. That was a very bad decision on their part, as the next salvo of 105mm shells struck while they were running in the open, with nothing to shield or protect them from the blasts and shrapnel. Greta was soon able to see that no more than three Pakistani soldiers were still up and running after that salvo, so she called up again the artillery battery.

"Red Archer, from Blue Bravo Six: cease fire, cease fire! The enemy is now withdrawing."

"We acknowledge cease fire request, Blue Bravo Six. Glad to have been of help."

"I will owe you guys a beer, Red Archer. Blue Bravo Six, out!"

With her enemy defeated, Greta then turned to checking on her men and went to PO2 Reno and Corporal Kim Lee, who were frantically giving first aid to a badly wounded marine. Greta's heart sank when she saw that the wounded marine was Joshua Stern. She tried her best not to show favoritism towards him but still had tears flow to her eyes.

"Joshua, not you, please!"

However, Janet Reno had to give up after a few more seconds, when Joshua breathed one last time and fell still. The female Navy corpsman looked up at Greta, sadness in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant: he had massive wounds to his belly and groin areas and ran out of blood."

Overwhelmed by grief, Greta knelt near the head of her dead squad leader, then bent down and kissed his forehead before straightening up and looking at Janet Reno.

"How many casualties did we suffer, P.O.?"

"With Sergeant Stern, we suffered a total of five dead, plus three more men wounded. I will need urgent air medevac for those three men if we want to save them."

"I will call for medevac right away." said Greta, her voice nearly choking, before getting back up and using her radio to call Captain Gomer and request that an helicopter come to pick up her wounded. Next, she went to see in succession those three wounded marines, both to make sure that they were taken care of and also to reassure and comfort them. With that done, she threw a dark look towards the Pakistani border post, where dead and wounded Pakistani soldiers lay around their destroyed vehicles. That battle could have been avoided if the Pakistanis had not decided to throw their lot with those Taliban and Al-Qaeda bastards. Unfortunately, more Pakistani troops could show up later, or the Taliban could try their luck at this, in which case she was going to be most happy to send them to Hell.

CHAPTER 19 – THE CRAZIES ARE IN CHARGE



14:50 (Afghanistan Time)

Wednesday, September 5, 2001 ‘C’

Command conference room, Platform Deck

Battlecarrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE, on station in the Sea of Oman

The senior officers sitting around the conference table noticed at once the frustration showing on Vice Admiral Benson’s face when he entered the room, closely followed by a junior officer carrying a pile of classified file folders. As Benson took his seat, the junior officer started distributing the file folders, putting one down in front of each participant to the meeting. Benson waited until all had a file folder before starting to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the situation in and around Afghanistan, from being difficult, has now become outright chaotic. For those ship commanders whose role was simply logistical support for our expedition and who had no direct link with our ground forces in Afghanistan, I will resume quickly what has happened in the last two days. Two days ago, the Pakistani Army tried to forcibly push our soldiers who were holding the two main border crossing points between Afghanistan and Pakistan, namely at the Khyber Pass and at Spin Boldak. It did not hesitate to use tanks to attack our troops

holding those border posts and, in the case of Spin Boldak, artillery. Thankfully, our troops were able to resist and keep control of those border points while inflicting heavy casualties on the Pakistani units who had attacked them. Following those unprovoked attacks on the part of Pakistan, we reinforced our presence at those border points, while the White House officially protested to the Pakistani government about these acts of aggression. Unfortunately, that was when the Pakistani Army effected a coup and deposed Pakistani Prime Minister Sharif and his whole cabinet, taking effective control of the whole country. It appears now that Prime Minister Sharif had not ordered the strikes against our troops at the border and that the Pakistani Army, nudged on by its intelligence service, the ISI, had acted without authorization from the central government. When Sharif tried to straighten things up, that was when the army did its coup and took power. As of the latest news, the new de facto leader of Pakistan is Lieutenant General Zaraqat, who was previously the head of the ISI. This is bad news for us, as Zaraqat was the main architect of Pakistan's support for the Taliban and was also the man who has been stirring shit in Afghanistan for the last few years. He is known to be a strong supporter of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, while his ISI has been providing material and financial support to both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The ISI has also given refuge to the Al-Qaeda leaders who survived our initial strikes in Afghanistan. When President Bush called Zaraqat yesterday to enjoin him to stop supporting the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, his response was to declare war on the United States. Since then, our surveillance satellites and our electronic intercepts network have detected the start of massive Pakistani troop movements within Pakistan, all involving the shifting of Pakistani mechanized units westward, towards the Afghanistan border. Also yesterday, our fighter patrols on station over Afghanistan had to react and intercept two separate groups of Pakistani fighter-bombers who were apparently intent on striking our units at the Khyber Pass and at Spin Boldak. Thankfully, our fighter aircraft were able to repulse those air attacks, shooting down six Pakistani aircraft in the process. One Pakistani aircraft did release bombs towards our unit holding the Khyber Pass but, being chased at the time by one of our fighters, its aim was poor and its bombs missed our troops, exploding on empty ground. After this, we doubled the number of our fighter aircraft rotating on-station over Afghanistan, in order to be able to respond adequately to further Pakistani air attacks. That however means a heavy workload for our embarked squadrons and also much increased consumption of jet fuel for our carriers. Finally, Pakistan's military coup and declaration of war against the United States seem to have fired up the worst

elements around the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular declaring their political support for the new Pakistani regime. The latest intelligence reports allude to the possibility that Saudi Arabia could soon declare an oil embargo against the United States, to force us to leave Afghanistan. As you can imagine, that last point did not go down well in Washington.”

“So, what is Washington planning to do in response to all that, Admiral?” asked Captain Joshua Moore, the commander of the carrier U.S.S. WILLIAM F. HALSEY. “What are we expected to do now?”

Benson’s expression hardened at that question as he thought back at his latest exchange with the Pentagon.

“I don’t know yet, Captain Moore. When I sent three hours ago a request for updated operational orders concerning our mission, the answer I got half a hour ago was that this was being discussed at the Pentagon.”

“Discussed at the Pentagon?” exclaimed in an indignant tone Captain Sylvia Robertson, the commander of the amphibious landing ship U.S.S. GUADALCANAL. “Wasn’t the rank of General of the Army and the post of Commander of U.S. Combined Forces established in 1993 exactly to avoid these kind of long discussions and delays in command reaction at the Pentagon? What is General Sherman doing? What are his intentions concerning this theatre of operations?”

“I don’t know, Captain Robertson, and I suspect that he himself doesn’t know yet what to do. My feeling is that the Pentagon is probably waiting for President Bush to give it new marching orders before starting new operational planning.”

“The plan we are presently following, Operation AFGHAN EXORCISM, wasn’t that written by our previous combined arms commander, General Dows?”

“It was indeed! Unfortunately, it seems that General Sherman is no General Dows.”

“And how is Lieutenant General Brubaker, our ground force commander in Afghanistan, reacting to all this, Admiral?” asked Rear Admiral Stuart Reynolds, the skipper of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. “Has he sent us additional requests for support, or requests for us to hit new targets with our surface-to-surface missiles or with our planes?”

“No! The only thing he has done up to now was to reinforce our units at the Pakistani border.”

What Benson thought but didn't say was that Lieutenant General Brubaker was proving to be as much of a dud as General Sherman. In fact, Brubaker was known to be a close friend of Sherman and many suspected that he had gotten his Afghanistan command thanks to that friendship, rather than because of any particular strategic or operational competence on his part. This reminded Benson of a similar case of bad choice of operational commander which happened in World War 2, when General George Marshall, the then powerful chief of staff of the U.S. Army, had supported the career of Major General Lloyd Fredendall and had designated him in 1942 as commander of the American component of the Allied force which had landed in North Africa for OPERATION TORCH. Fredendall had then proven to be a complete incompetent, on top of showing cowardice. Fredendall had finally been relieved of command after the disastrous Battle of Kasserine Pass and had then been replaced by Major General Patton. The least he could say about General Brubaker was that he was no Patton, the same as Sherman was no Ingrid Dows.

15:15 (Washington Time) / 24:45 (Afghanistan Time)

**The D.C. Five's mansion, Woodland Drive Northwest
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**

"Thanks for the lift from Andrews Air Force Base, guys!"

All five young women waved goodbye as the Air Force minivan and cargo van drove off the driveway of their mansion after dropping them and helping them to carry their musical instruments and baggages inside. The two young Air Force privates blew kisses back at them, still jubilant about the way the five girls had 'thanked' them inside the mansion by going topless and letting them kiss and fondle their breasts. Once the two vans were out of sight, Nancy led her band members back inside their house and went to the main lounge, where they sat down with relief on two sofas.

"Hell, that was a lot of time zones we just flew through." Said Carmen Estrada. "From Afghanistan to Germany, then to Washington, all on a standard military transport. So, now that we are home, what now?"

"I'm going to call my parents to tell them that we are safely back in Washington." replied Sarah Weissman before going for the telephone set in the lounge. The four other girls decided at once to follow her example and went to their respective bedrooms, where they had their own private telephone lines. On top of calling Ingrid and talking

with her for a good fifteen minutes, Nancy also called her band's musical agent, to let him know that they were again available for shows and recordings in the United States. With that done, Nancy went back down to the lounge and switched on the wide flat screen television set and tuning it to the CNN channel, wanting to see what the latest news on Afghanistan were like. What she saw was far from pleasing her.

"Those damn Pakistani hyppocrites! I hope that they will get their just rewards for this soon."

21:44 (West Coast Time)

1402 South McDonald Street, Port Angeles

Washington State

Since she was not expecting any visitor tonight and in view of the number of enemies she had made during the past few decades, Ingrid took the time to grab her GLOCK 19 pistol before going to answer the door. One discrete look through the front window of her lounge, which was next to the main entrance, showed her an official government car, with one armed and uniformed man standing next to it in her driveway. Hiding her pistol in her back, she then unlocked and opened her main door and found herself facing an Air Force major in uniform. The man saluted her at attention while handing her a sealed envelope.

"General Dows? I came to give you this letter from the President and to bring you back with me to Washington, where the President wants to speak with you. You are being recalled to active military service."

Saluting back the major, Ingrid took the offered envelope and then motionned for the man to step inside.

"Please come in, Major, and make yourself comfortable while I read this letter."

"Thank you, General!"

Once he was in and she had closed back the door behind him, Ingrid led him into her lounge and offered him a sofa.

"You must have travelled for a few hours already and it is late. Would you like a coffee, or a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, General, but no: I was ordered to return with you to Washington as quickly as possible."

Ingrid gave him an inquisitve look while starting to open the sealed envelope.

"What unit do you belong to, Major?"

"I am part of the military liaison staff at the White House, General. The President mostly uses me as his personal messenger when discretion is required."

"I see!" said Ingrid while extracting and unfolding a single sheet of paper. It was stamped as 'SECRET' and bore the signature and seal of the President of the United States. Her expression became most sober as she read the classified letter: she was being recalled to active military duty, in her old rank of General of the Army, and was told to report directly to the President and to be ready to deploy overseas. She could already guess what was awaiting her once in Washington and, in a way, was not very surprised by this.

"Major, I am presently employed by the Hiller Aircraft Corporation and am in charge of a very important part of its infrastructure here, in Port Angeles. I will need to inform Mister Hiller of the fact that I am going to be unable to work for his firm for at least a few weeks. I promise not to give him any details about this letter and will just tell him that I am being recalled to active military duty. Not doing at least that would be grossly abusive of his trust in me."

The major thought about that for a couple of seconds before nodding his head.

"Very well, General: call Mister Hiller now but tell him the strict minimum, please. Know that we are now at war with Pakistan...and possibly with other Islamic states around the Middle East."

"I already figured so, Major. To reassure you about my call, I will put it on speaker, so that you can listen on to the call."

"That is most appreciated, General."

Ingrid then didn't waste time to go to the telephone sitting on top of her low coffee table and to call Jeff Hiller in California. The one to first answer her was Hiller's wife.

"Hello?"

"Lynda, this is Ingrid Dows. I would need to speak urgently to Jeff, please."

"Uh, one moment, please."

Some fifteen seconds later, the voice of Jeff Hiller came on the line.

"Jeff here! What can I do for you at this hour, Ingrid?"

"Jeff, I am limited in what I can tell you right now but suffice it to say that this is to warn you that I am being recalled into active military service and that you will lose my services for an unknown length of time, possibly weeks and months. I am sorry that I can't tell you more at this time about this."

Jeff Hiller, who was no fool, probably understood at once the reasons for this to happen. Still, he stayed silent for a few seconds before speaking.

“Then, I can only wish you good luck in whatever task you will be doing, Ingrid. Be careful and come back in one piece, please.”

“Thank you, Jeff! I will be careful, as always.”

Those last words made Hiller chuckle in derision.

“You, careful? You keep jumping from the frying pan into the fire, Ingrid. Still, be careful: I will need you for our next main aircraft project.”

“I will be back for that, Jeff, I promise. I am now going to hang up. Goodbye!”

Ingrid then cut the line and looked at the major.

“The President’s letter tells me to be ready for a deployment overseas, Major. Do you mind to wait half a hour or so, time for me to pack my old uniforms and some personal effects, including personal weapons?”

“Go right ahead, General. I will wait right here while you pack.”

“Thank you!”

As promised, Ingrid was back in her lounge after some 35 minutes, wearing her old Space Corps uniform with the five-star rank insignias of General of the Army. She was also wearing an impressive pistol at her belt and carried one suitcase, one military kit bag and one long rifle case.

“I am ready to go, Major. How will we be traveling to Washington tonight?”

“I came into a military liaison jet which is now waiting on the tarmac at the local airport, General.”

“Then, let’s go!”

With the major helping her by carrying her suitcase, Ingrid closed all the lights in her house and secured all the windows and her rear patio door before leaving her house and locking the main door. As she walked to the waiting military staff car, she thought to herself that she was probably on her way to go fight in her eleventh war since 1939.

06:08 (Washington Time)

Thursday, September 6, 2001 ‘C’

Family Dining Room, first floor, The White House

Washington, D.C.

When Ingrid was led into the Family Dining Room, on the first floor of the White House, she found President George W. Bush and his wife Laura sitting at their dining table and eating breakfast. On seeing her, the president got up from his chair at once and went to her with his right hand extended.

“General Dows, I am happy to see you come so quickly.”

Ingrid saluted him at attention before shaking his hand.

“I simply did as ordered, Mister President. I suppose that you wouldn’t have recalled me into active military service unless you had important reasons to do so.

“I certainly didn’t do that lightly, General. Have you eaten yet this morning?”

“Uh, no, Mister President. I did however catch some sleep aboard the aircraft you sent to Port Angeles.”

“Then, have a seat and I will have a substantial breakfast served to you while we speak.”

“Thank you, Mister President.”

Ingrid walked with Bush to the dining table and took the chair offered to her by a steward after exchanging kisses on the cheek with the President’s wife.

“I am sorry that it takes a national emergency in order for me to be able to see you, madam.”

“Please! You don’t need to be sorry about that, Ingrid. And please call me simply Laura.”

Sitting down, Ingrid let the steward pour a cup of coffee for her before speaking to the President.

“So, Mister President, what are you expecting from me?”

“I am expecting you to help straighten up a mess developping in and around Afghanistan. What have you heard most recently on the news about Afghanistan?”

“The latest I heard was that the Pakistani military conducted a coup and deposed Prime Minister Sharif and his cabinet and took power, then declared war on us and vowed to expell us from Afghanistan. That was about it in yesterday’s evening news. Is there more I need to know, Mister President?”

“A lot more, unfortunately. First, the Pakistani Air Force tried to bomb our troops holding the border crossings at the Khyber Pass in the Northeast and in Spin Boldak, in the Southeast. Thankfully, our fighter patrols were able to react in time and shot down a total of seven planes, preventing the bombing of our troops. Our embassy in Islamabad was attacked by rioters, with the Pakistani police showing little effort to stop them but our

embassy marine guards succeeded in defending our embassy. I then ordered Ambassador Collins to evacuate the embassy and leave the country, which he thankfully was able to do successfully. I have also ordered all American citizens to leave Pakistan, due to the strong public anti-American sentiment in the country. That includes all media personnel and I hope that no overzealous journalist will try their luck at staying in order to report the news there. I have no wish to have to ask our special forces teams to risk a rescue operation inside Pakistan right now.”

“Unfortunately, I am certain that a few idiots will think that the word ‘Press’ on their vests will render them invulnerable, Mister President. Anything else I should know, Mister President?”

“Yes! Saudi Arabia is now calling our anti-terror operation in Afghanistan an ‘invasion’ and has just expelled our ambassador. In return, I have ordered all diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia to be cut, as their actions show it to be sympathetic to those Al-Qaida terrorists. I am now afraid that Saudi Arabia will call for an Arab oil boycott against us, something that could really hurt our economy.”

“You know what, Mister President? Let’s cut our economic ties with that damn OPEC organization and let our own oil industry work independently from OPEC quotas and fixed prices. We produce enough oil and gas by ourselves in the United States to sustain our economy, especially if we can rely on the help of both Canada and Mexico to supply oil to us at prices not dictated by the OPEC. I am sure that we could thus form a sort of North America oil producing association which would be able to ignore those OPEC hypocrites.”

Bush had an air of revelation on hearing Ingrid’s words.

“Damn! This could actually work, Ingrid. I will have to talk with Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham about this. Well, time to talk about you now. I recalled you to active military duty, with your old rank of General of the Army, because I am finding out that I have two duds in charge of our Afghanistan operation. The first one is Lieutenant General Brubaker, our present theatre commander in Afghanistan. I am no expert strategist but it is evident to me that the man can only react to the enemy, instead of acting and using his initiative. The only thing he has done to date in response to the Pakistani attacks against our troops was to reinforce our troops at the border. He hasn’t asked for any extra troops or aircraft from us and is still sitting tight in his safe office at Kabul Airport. The other dud is General Sherman, who is supposed to be our top strategic commander. He was the one who nominated Brubaker to the post of theater

commander and has not planned yet to send new reinforcements to Afghanistan, telling me just yesterday that what we have already in Afghanistan is more than enough to deal with Pakistan. What do you think about that, Ingrid?”

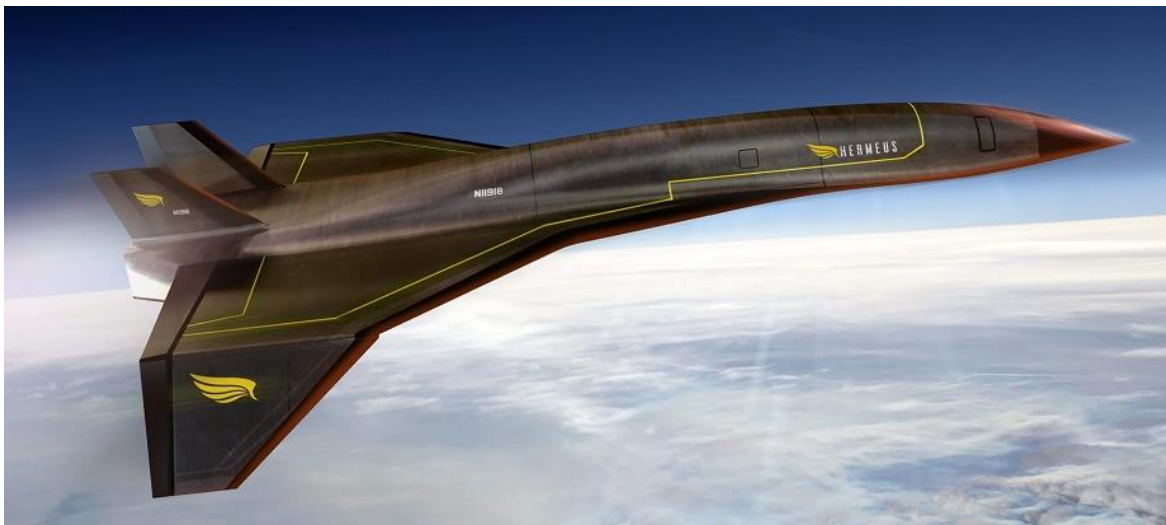
“Pardon my choice of words, Mister President, but I think that Sherman is full of shit on that. He may be a good military administrator but he is no master strategist. Worse, he tends to underestimate our present enemies because they are not so-called top tier military forces. I suspect that racial bias has a part to do in this, Mister President. So, you want me to replace General Sherman as our National Combined Combat Commander, Mister President?”

“Not exactly!” answered Bush, surprising Ingrid. “What I want you to do is to go to Afghanistan as quickly as you can, take Brubaker’s place as our theater commander there and then take care of our problems in and around Afghanistan. In return, I will tell Sherman that he is to support anything you will do and to fulfill without discussion any requests you send him. In effect, you will have the equivalent of his authority as NC3, with my full backing. You will have direct command of all our forces in that theatre and of those stationed in Europe, Turkey and at sea in support of Operation AFGHAN EXORCISM. I am also giving you full plenipotentiary powers to deal directly with the Pakistanis and with other relevant governments at the political and diplomatic levels. You thus have my benediction to short-circuit the State Department while in theater: we wasted enough time talking and it is now time for action. If you need more to do the job correctly, then call me and I will tell Sherman to oblige you. I know that this kind of goes against the normal chain of command but, while I have lost confidence in both Brubaker and Sherman, officially firing Sherman at this time could prove embarrassing, especially in the Congress, where Sherman has many political supporters. As for Brubaker, his reputation is already stained, so firing him should not create much backlash. So, when could you leave for Afghanistan, Ingrid?”

“I will certainly leave sometimes today, at the latest, Mister President. However, I would need a few things before I go.”

“Ask and you will get, General!” replied at once the President.

CHAPTER 20 – THEATER COMMANDER



15:39 (Washington Time)

Thursday, September 6, 2001 'C'

Main tarmac of Andrews Air Force Base

Maryland, U.S.A.

President Bush, along with his wife Laura, had insisted on accompanying Ingrid to Andrews Air Force Base, situated southeast of Washington, to wish her goodbye before she would fly off to Afghanistan. One of the President's Secret Service bodyguard helped carry her long gun case as she walked with the presidential couple towards the Conqair B-96 TYPHOON hypersonic bomber waiting for Ingrid on the main tarmac of the base. Parked next to the bomber were two C-152G cargo aircraft, loaded with spare parts, a ground maintenance crew and extra ordnance for the B-96. Once close to the belly retractable ladder giving access to the cockpit section of the bomber, Ingrid stopped and turned to face President Bush and salute him.

"Well, time for me to leave and raise Hell in the name of the United States in yet another corner of this planet, Mister President."

"I am sure that you will mark your brand again, this time in and around Afghanistan, Ingrid. Good luck on your mission. Hopefully for you, you will be able to return to your civilian life soon enough."

"I hope so, Mister President: I still have quite a few projects in my head that I really want to turn into reality in the not so distant future."

They exchanged a last handshake, with Laura hugging and kissing Ingrid, before the latter passed on in succession her three pieces of luggage to one of the crewmembers of the bomber waiting for her at the top of the access ladder. Ingrid then climbed the ladder and disappeared inside the bomber, with the ladder then retracting and its cover hatch closing. A ground technician then politely asked the presidential couple to take some distance from the bomber before it would start its four combination turbofan-ramjet engines. Sitting back in the safety of the armored presidential limousine, which then rolled to a further distance from the B-96, President Bush watched on with his wife the bomber light up its powerful engines one by one. Two minutes later, the big, sleek bomber started to roll along a taxiway, to finally turn and stop at one of the main runway of the base. It stayed there for another minute, performing its last preflight checks, before gunning down its engines to full power and raising its noise to painful levels. The B-96 then quickly accelerated down the runway, rotating up its nose and taking off after less than 1,500 meters. President Bush watched, fascinated, as the hypersonic bomber flew away towards the East and Europe.

“Here she goes again to war. The nation will never be able to fully repay her for all that she did for our country: she already has received about every possible honor and decoration the United States could confer on her, including two Medals of Honor.”

“I think that the best reward we could give her after this will be to allow her to return to her civilian life of designing new aircraft, George: planes and flying have always been her life and will continue to be so.”

“I think that you are right about that, Laura. Well, let’s wish her success in Afghanistan. The task over there will be far from easy.”

06:03 (Afghanistan Time) / 21:03 (Washington Time)

Friday, September 7 (Afghanistan) / Thursday, September 6 (Washington)

Cockpit of the Convair B-96 TYPHOON, overflying Northern Afghanistan

Ingrid, occupying the spare jump seat situated behind the pilot’s seat, was surprised to see the pilot, Major Roger Fenwick, undo his seat harness and get up from his seat, then step in the back area of the cockpit.

“What are you doing, Major? We are due to start our bombing run soon.”

The pilot replied to her with a benevolent smile on his face while pointing the empty pilot seat to her.

“General, you directed the design project for the B-96 and you have flown it more than once before retiring from the military. As our best and most experienced combat pilot in the history of the U.S. Air Force, it would be only just that you are at the commands for the first ever combat mission of the B-96. I know that more combat missions will follow in the days to come, so I will have plenty of chances to fly my plane into combat. Please, it would honor us all if you would take the commands now, General.”

Sincerely moved by the honor thus presented to her, Ingrid got up from her jump seat and shook hands with Fenwick while making a joke.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Major.”

“I know, General.” replied the pilot with an exaggerated sigh, making the copilot, navigator-bombardier and electronic warfare officers briefly laugh. She took and put on the special flying helmet offered by Fenwick before sitting in the pilot’s seat, then plugged in the data link and radio connections of her helmet, plus her oxygen mask’s tube. Fixing for a few seconds a dot marked in front of her on the top of her forward view heads-up-display, she aligned the external view sensors of the plane with her helmet’s positional sensors. With her helmet visor display system now synchronized with the bomber’s sensors displays, she strapped herself in the pilot’s seat and looked down at the wide multicolor display screen showing her position and heading over Afghanistan: she was now overflying the city of Mazar-i-Sharif at a speed of Mach0.95 and at an altitude of 20,000 meters, having already decelerated from its supersonic cruising speed of Mach 3.1 at which the bomber had flown most of its trip from the United States. In her opinion, no other bomber in the World could even approach the performances and capabilities of the Convair B-96, an aircraft capable of speeds of up to Mach 5.5, or close to 6,000 kilometers per hour. The Pakistanis were however going to be the first to taste its sting.

“Missiles programmed and targets set?”

“All twelve of our AGM-5 SKYMOLE air-to-ground missiles are programmed and ready to launch, General. Our three five-ton TORNADO gliding F.A.E. bombs are also programmed and will be within range of their objective in nine minutes.” answered the navigator-bombardier, Captain Angela Robinson.

“Excellent! Captain Masaki, what does the Pakistani radar coverage picture looks like?”

“There is a single search radar emitting from Peshawar Air Force Base, plus a smaller ranged air control radar used for air traffic control. None of the two have enough range to detect us yet. There is also a more powerful air search radar based in Islamabad but that one two doesn’t have the range to be able to detect us, unless we enter Pakistani airspace, General. These guys clearly don’t have the kind of long-range, phased array radars the Russians had.”

“That is fine with me, Captain Masaki. Captain Robinson, you may start launching our AGM-5CP SKYMOLE missiles in sequence when ready.”

“Aye, General! Launching our first SKYMOLE now!”

One of the belly weapons bays of the B-96, which carried all its ordnance internally in order to allow high speeds, opened up for half a second, long enough to let drop a SKYMOLE missile. The booster rocket motor of the air-to-surface missile then ignited after its folding wings and control surfaces had unfolded and deployed. The booster motor accelerated the three-ton missile, then flamed out, to be immediately followed by the ignition of its ramjet engine, which accelerated the missile to a speed of Mach 4, or 4,300 kilometers per hour. Guided by its GPS and inertial navigation package, the missile, with its 500-kilo concrete-piercing penetrator warhead filled with a powerful explosive mixture of HMX-RDX, headed towards the Pakistani air base in Peshawar, Northwest Pakistan, which was home to the two Pakistani attack squadrons tasked with carrying out strike missions with nuclear bombs. Eight more AGM-5CP missiles followed at intervals of three seconds and also headed towards the Peshawar Air Force Base at a speed that made them impossible to intercept by any of the air defense missiles used by the Pakistanis.

06:11 (Afghanistan Time) / 06:41 (Pakistan Time)

Radar room, control tower of Peshawar Air Force Base

Pakistan

One of the two radar operators on watch duty this morning in the radar room of the base’s control tower had barely started to sip his first cup of coffee



of the day when an impossibly fast dot appeared on his radar screen, coming from the

West. The time that he took to go over his surprise and shock and another dot, equally fast, was now visible on his screen.

"ALARM! FAST MISSILES ON APPROACH FROM THE WEST!"

His shift supervisor, an Air Force captain, hurried to him on hearing that and looked over the shoulder of his operator at the radar screen. His eyes widened with dread when he saw that there were now five dots visible on the screen, all impossibly fast and heading directly towards his base. Making a couple of quick steps, he opened a red panel on the control desk and pushed the large, red button under the cover, starting the sinister owl of the base's air raid alert siren. Next, he grabbed the red telephone situated next to the red panel and called the base's underground command bunker, in which his commander would be on watch duty.

"Colonel? This is Captain Musher, in the radar room. We have at least five missiles heading towards our base at Mach 4, coming from Afghanistan... Yes, I said Mach 4: they must be American air-to-ground missiles... I evaluate that the first of those missiles should strike our base at any moment now, in view of their speed... Understood, Colonel."

Musher then hung up and looked at his radar operator.

"Where is the nearest missile now, Ahmed?"

"IT IS ARRIVING NOW, SIR!" answered the operator, his voice panicky. Before he could say more, the ground shook under the control tower, followed by the noise of a powerful underground blast. Despite not having been the target of that missile, some of the concrete debris and earth projected upwards by the missile that had just destroyed the base's underground command bunker then hit the nearby control tower, ripping off its top and drilling holes in its sides. Captain Musher and his four men on duty in the radar room had to duck under their consoles and desks to avoid the chunks of concrete which flew through the radar room, followed by a thick cloud of dust that made them choke. They didn't have time to cough much, as the second missile to strike was destined for the control tower, which was obliterated along with the radar tower by the explosion of its penetrating warhead. The next missiles to strike each hit one of the aircraft bunkers protecting the ready alert Chinese-made Nanchang A-5 fighter-bombers of Number 26 Squadron, easily piercing their concrete tops before exploding inside the bunkers and destroying the aircraft inside. Two of the missiles hit the main runway of the base, creating huge craters at the intersections with two taxiways and basically making that runway unusable. The two last missiles then hit the two ordnance bunkers

containing the nuclear gravity bombs stored on the base, destroying the eleven fissile nuclear bombs inside. Panicked Pakistani Air Force personnel were now running in all directions, overwhelmed by the brutality and speed of that attack from the air. The base emergency services and fire trucks of the base were barely starting to react properly to the missile strikes when the second hammer blow from Ingrid's B-96 arrived. Two five-ton gliding fuel-air-explosives bombs filled with ethylene oxide, one aimed at the main tarmac aircraft parking area and its line of large maintenance hangars and the other at the base's fuel depot, with its large cisterns full of kerozene, arrived at their respective targets, guided by their GPS-inertial navigation package. Any person unfortunate enough to have been able to witness their arrival would have seen a sort of large winged bomb diving at a steep angle on its objective. Then, at an altitude of 500 meters, cruciform airbrakes opened up like the petals of a flower, drastically braking the bomb as it kept diving down. At an altitude of 150 meters, the bomb burst open like an overinflated balloon, spreading ethylene oxide droplets into a large aerosol cloud which then expanded while mixing with the oxygen in the air. When the bomb's body hit the ground, it did not explode but simply crushed on impact. However, attached to its tail was a long and thin wire at the end of which was an incandescent initiator reminiscent of a car lighter. When that initiator reached the now expanded cloud of fuel-air vapor, it ignited it in a titanic fireball which produced a crushing blast wave. The ignition of the 4,200 kilos of ethylene oxide, now mixed with the surrounding air, produced a blast equivalent to that of 14,000 kilos of TNT high-explosives detonating over a large area. The dozens of aircraft parked on the main tarmac or inside the maintenance hangars were blown away as if they were made of paper, while the hangars were blown open by the powerful blast wave. Everybody within 200 meters from the point where the bomb hit was instantly killed by the blast overpressure, which ripped lungs and burst open internal organs, while the soft fleshy parts were ripped away and burned. Those beyond that radius were either left with burst lungs or were gravely wounded after being projected into the air like broken puppets. The TORNADO bomb that hit the fuel depot blew the big fuel cisterns away, freeing the thousands of tons of kerozene, diesel fuel and gasoline they contained. All that fuel then ignited, flashing into huge fireballs before continuing to burn fiercely for hours. The first alert about the base being hit went out by a simple telephone located in the officers' mess more than 26 minutes after the first missile had hit. However, the panicked junior officer trying to alert the Pakistani Air Force Headquarters, located to the east of Peshawar, in Islamabad, was unable to

obtain a connection, for the good reason that the large building housing the higher headquarters had just been blown away by a TORNADO bomb that had followed two SKYMOLE missiles aimed at the underground command bunker complex of the headquarters. Another location in Islamabad, the headquarters of the Pakistani ISI military intelligence services, was similarly destroyed by the ultimate salvo from the B-96.

Still at the commands of the B-96, Ingrid observed on her radar the arrival of her missiles and bombs on her objectives but didn't scream in triumph then, realizing too well the kind of death and destruction she had just caused. She had learned from long experience that war was truly Hell and was no glorious thing. However, when a bully attacked you, you had to hit back as hard as you could, in order to either deter more attacks or to stop that bully cold. Pakistan had made the grave mistake of trying to play the bully against American units operating in Afghanistan and was now paying the price for it. She however felt satisfaction at the thought that the Pakistani ISI, which had instigated so much trouble and intrigue in Afghanistan and had supported both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, had been made to pay a first price for its dirty deeds.

"Alright, folks: time to go land in Kabul. Major Fenwick, once I will have disembarked, you will refuel and rearm your aircraft for our second strike mission against Pakistan and will fly out as soon as you are ready to go. Our heavy bomber squadron forward-based in Germany should now be about to hit their own designated targets across Pakistan. By the time this day is over, the Pakistani armed forces will have been thrown back to the Stone Age and we will then be able to concentrate again on finding and hitting those Al-Qaeda and Taliban bastards."

"I am sure that you will give those bastards Hell, General."

"And I will be most happy to give them their just rewards, Major."

07:02 (Afghanistan Time)

Kabul International Airport

Afghanistan

After having landed her B-96 in Kabul and having rolled it to the main tarmac area, Ingrid shut down its engines and regretfully left the pilot seat before shaking hands with the crewmembers of the heavy bomber.

"Good job, people! Time for me to switch to my new job as theater commander. I wish you good luck for your following combat missions."

"You just proved that you are still a first-class combat pilot, General." replied Fenwick while shaking her hand. "It was an honor to fly a mission with you."

"Thanks, Major! Well, time for me to look like a ground-pounding grunt."

The aircrew chuckled at that as Ingrid went to her three pieces of luggage, stored in the tiny rest compartment situated behind the cockpit. There, she put on her armored vest and helmet and strapped her GLOCK 9mm pistol in its combat holster to her right hip, then slung her folding-stock assault rifle across her back before deploying the belly access ladder of the cockpit. She passed in turn her three pieces of luggage to the two ground technicians waiting under the nose of the aircraft before climbing down herself. She felt some emotion when she jumped down on the tarmac of the Kabul International Airport: she was now going to direct yet another war in her long military career. That meant having to cause more deaths among the enemies of the United States but also to save American lives at the same time. Returning the salutes from the two technicians, she then grabbed her luggage and walked to a waiting pickup truck, in which she put her kit before going to sit in the front cab and smiling to the young female Air Force airman driving the truck.

"To the section of the air terminal used by our theater headquarters, please."

"Right away, General!"

Once at the air terminal building, Ingrid enrolled the help of her driver in order to carry one of her three pieces of luggage, then walked into the terminal, being saluted in passing by two armed American paratroopers guarding the access door. Seeing a paratroop officer who had stopped to salute her at attention, she returned his salute before asking him a question.

"Could you please show me the direction for the offices of our theater command staff, Captain?"

"Sure, General! Please follow me!"

Ingrid thus followed the young officer along the halls and corridors of the building, using an elevator cabin to reach its upper floor. She then found herself inside the section housing the offices of her new command. The personnel she crossed path with all stopped at attention and saluted her but, with her two hands holding her kit bag and her rifle case, she could only nod her head politely to them while the captain led her towards

the operations center. When she entered the large room used as an operations center for her new command, Ingrid disliked it at once for a number of reasons. First, it had large windows facing the outer side of the airport: that made it vulnerable to sniper and rocket fire coming from outside the airport's perimeter. Second, those windows would also allow a spy equipped with electronic listening equipment to be able to intercept the signals and electronic impulses from the dozens of laptop computers used in the operations center, most of which worked with highly classified data. That was a clear breach of the strict protocols concerning the handling of classified data and documents. Ingrid smiled to the young woman carrying her suitcase while putting down her two pieces of luggage near the entrance door of the room.

"You may leave my suitcase here, Airman Forsythe, and may return to your duties. The same for you, Captain."

Both saluted her before leaving, making Ingrid free to walk to the large map table throning in the center of the room. There, she looked inquisitively at the highest ranking officer standing next to the table, an army lieutenant colonel, while returning his salute.

"Where is Lieutenant General Brubaker, Colonel?"

"I believe that he is packing up his things in his quarters, General."

"And where are his quarters, Colonel?"

"In the King's Hotel, next to the airport, General."

"You mean that he resides out of the airport, away from his own operations center? That made him vulnerable to ambushes while he went to and from here. What was he thinking? Have him called and tell him to come back here at once, without his precious luggage."

"Yes, General!" replied the embarrassed lieutenant colonel before walking quickly to a telephone sitting on a table next to one wall. Next, Ingrid looked at the second most senior officer present, a major from the 101st Airborne Division.

"Major, is a plane ready to carry General Brubaker out of Afghanistan, as requested by Washington?"

"Uh, yes, General! However, it was scheduled to depart only tomorrow morning, I believe."

"Tomorrow morning? No! Have it ready to depart as soon as General Brubaker shows up here, Major, with or without his bags."

"Yes, General!"

"Just out of curiosity, to what branch of service does General Brubaker belongs, Major?"

"He is an Armor Branch officer, General."

"Thanks! You may now pass my order to that waiting transport aircraft."

As the major walked away, Ingrid couldn't help shake her head in wonderment.

'Placing an Armor Branch officer in charge of what is basically a war fought with light infantry units. What the hell was General Sherman thinking when he named this Brubaker to this theater command?'

The answer came quickly enough to her mind: this was probably the latest example of the 'old boys network' at play, with Brubaker being more than likely an old friend of Sherman, himself an Armor Branch officer. She then studied the symbols marked in erasable ink on the plastic film covering the map of Afghanistan lying on top of the map table. Looking at an Intelligence Branch sergeant, she pointed Peshawar and Islamabad to him.

"Sergeant, mark the Peshawar air base and the Pakistani Air Force headquarters and ISI headquarters in Islamabad as destroyed half a hour ago. The B-96 heavy bomber which landed me here took care of those objectives. Also, the B-96 bombers from our 130th Bomber Squadron, which are forward-based in Germany for this operation, should be about to hit more targets inside Pakistan, with their top priority targets being the sites containing nuclear-tipped ground-to-ground missiles and their command bunkers."

"Understood, General!"

Her declaration made more than a few heads snap in her direction, reflecting a mix of surprise and awe as the officers and NCOs around the map table realized that she had either conducted herself or led that bombing mission on Peshawar and Islamabad. More analysis of the symbols on the map made Ingrid understand better what had been going on in Afghanistan for the last two months. Many elite infantry sub-units, like Navy S.E.A.L. commando teams, Army Green Berets and Rangers teams, had been utterly wasted by placing them in reserve positions, instead of using them for the deep stealthy reconnaissance and strike roles they had been trained for. Brubaker had basically been reacting to the enemy rather than acting and taking the initiative over the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. That in Ingrid's books was pure anathema and it was going to change...quickly! Ingrid then took a good hour to learn the local situation in Afghanistan in detail through the reading of operational message traffic and by asking for impromptu briefings from

the staff officers of the operations center. By the time she concluded her review of operational information, Lieutenant General Brubaker still hadn't shown up. Her patience about exhausted, she looked at the officer who had called Brubaker at her request.

"Colonel, call back General Brubaker's hotel and tell him that he has thirty minutes to show up here. If he isn't here in thirty minutes, I will charge him with insubordination. Make sure that he understands that I am not joking around about this."

"Uh, yes, General!"

As the lieutenant colonel called the King's Hotel again, Ingrid sat down at a desk and started writing a series of short but concise messages to the main units fighting as part of her theater of operations, issuing to them new directives and giving them new goals and objectives, frequently consulting the big tactical map of the operations center to choose target zones. She was still doing so when Lieutenant General Brubaker finally showed up at the operations center, looking in a bad mood. He still had to salute Ingrid at attention, though.

"Lieutenant General Brubaker, reporting as ordered, General."

"You took your sweet time to do so, General Brubaker." replied in a cold voice Ingrid while returning his salute. She then pointed at the door of her new office, which was adjacent to the operations room. "Get in there: we need to talk in private."

A number of officers and NCOs present discretely shook one hand as Ingrid slammed the door of the office behind herself and Brubaker.

"Somebody is going to get a bucket of shit on the head." predicted a young operations clerk to another, speaking in a near-whisper, with the other clerk nodding her head in response.

Once alone with Brubaker, Ingrid kept standing in the middle of the office, two steps in front of Brubaker, who was slightly taller than her but was fairly thin for a man. There was no politeness when she started to berate him in a voice strong enough to be heard as a muffle in the operations center.

"Lieutenant General Brubaker, I came very close to sending military policemen to go arrest you for insubordination at your hotel residence. When I ask someone to come right away, I don't mean one and a half hour later. What I saw here up to now amply showed to me why the President had good reasons to doubt your competence as

commander of this theater operations and why he deemed it necessary to recall me to active military duty in order for me to come relieve you of command and replace you. You have many of the best troops and units the United States has, yet have been basically standing still and letting a bunch of radical thugs make you react to them, rather than having them react to you.”

“But, I...”

“SHUT UP AND LISTEN, BRUBAKER! You have been utterly wasting some of the best trained commando soldiers in the World by putting them in ‘reserve’, instead of letting them do the job they have been trained to do: deep reconnaissance and lightning strikes. You have a floating navy arsenal armed with long-range precision missiles on station in the Sea of Oman but haven’t once called for fire support from our ships, except for asking for a few naval airstrikes from our carriers. The same ground sub-units manning the two main border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Spin Boldak and at the Khyber Pass, have been holding those positions now for two months without being relieved once to allow them to take a well-deserved break to their rear areas. I also learned that you didn’t visit our frontline troops once, NOT ONCE, while gluing yourself to this headquarters in Kabul. And you call that competent combat leadership, Brubaker?”

“But, General, my concern is about avoiding heavy casualties among my troops and I positioned my units accordingly.”

“Bullshit! By sticking your units to static positions and predictable patterns, you were allowing the enemy to plan their attacks and to strike your soldiers at the time and place of their choosing, instead of keeping the enemy on the run and off balance. Well, the times for pussyfooting around are over, Brubaker. You are relieved of command for incompetence, on orders from the President. You will leave Kabul no later than noon today and will fly back to the States via Germany. And don’t expect a ticker tape parade for you in Washington. Now, go get your precious luggage and get out of Kabul before noon.”

Now quite pale, Brubaker could only salute her before walking out of the office at a hurried pace. Looking around her new command office for a moment and seeing that it connected to a small but fully equipped bathroom, Ingrid stepped out briefly and signaled to a sergeant and two clerks to come in, which they did at a near run. Once they were inside, Ingrid pointed to them a large wooden bookshelf sitting against one of the walls of the office.

“Sergeant, I want that bookshelf moved so to create a private space in that corner to the left of the entrance door, then you will bring in a cot bed and a bed kit and will install them in that new corner, which will become my sleeping space. I will be living from this headquarters, when I will not be visiting our frontline troops and positions around the country. If you can also find and bring in a chest of drawers, that would be helpful. Finally, I want the windows of the operations center which are facing the outside of the airport to be boarded up with thick plywood. Right now, this operations center is too vulnerable to my taste to sniper fire and to spying. I may move it to a new, more secure location entirely inside this building once I will have a chance to choose a better-suited room for it. You have all that, Sergeant?”

“Yes, General!”

“Then you are dismissed!”

The sergeant and two clerks saluted her at rigid attention, then left the office to execute her orders. Ingrid, thinking about her next move, then saw a brass plaque on the work desk of the office, which bore the rank, name and list of decorations of Lieutenant General Brubaker. Walking to the desk, Ingrid grabbed the brass plaque, then threw it in the waste basket next to the desk.

10:12 (Afghanistan Time)

Barrack used by Black Squadron of S.E.A.L. Team Two

Forward Operating Base RHINO, 190 kilometers southwest of Kandahar

Registan Desert, Afghanistan

Navy Commander Neil Harmond’s was grinning widely by the time he finished reading the short but succinct decrypted message just received from the Theater High Command headquarters in Kabul. He then turned to his senior NCO, Master Chief Petty Officer Stan Krazinsky, who was marking some tactical information on their operational map.

“Hey, Master Chief, good news from Kabul: General Brubaker is out! He was relieved of duty this morning by none other than General of the Army Ingrid Dows, who has been reactivated into active service. General Dows is now in command in Kabul. And she just sent us new orders to my liking.”

“General Dows, God’s General? But that’s great news, sir! You can’t get better than her.”

“With near continuous experience of combat and wars since 1939? You bet she’s the best, Master Chief. Those Taliban and Al-Qaeda bastards are going to shit in their pants when they will learn that she is in charge here in Afghanistan.”

12:49 (Pakistan Time) / 12:19 (Afghanistan Time)

Secret Al-Qaeda safe house, Rawalpindi

Southwest of Islamabad, Pakistan

Osama Bin Laden felt a mix of discouragement, anger and hatred as he switched off the television set on which he had just listened to the latest news on Pakistani television. The Shaytan¹⁹ itself was now in command of the despised Americans who had forced him and many of his surviving followers to find refuge in Pakistan. Worse, it had come in female form and had the effrontery of being nicknamed by the Americans as ‘God’s General’. For Bin Laden, that was nothing short of utter blasphemy. Still, that didn’t change the fact that his main supporter, the Pakistani ISI military intelligence service, had just been dealt a near mortal blow, along with much of the rest of the Pakistani armed forces, which had just seen its most important bases crushed under a deluge of bombs and missiles. Anger and hatred finally got over his discouragement, with a firm wish forming in his mind: that this Ingrid Dows had to die, at all cost!

¹⁹ Shaytan : ‘Devil’ in Arab.

CHAPTER 21 – ULTIMATUM



11:01 (Pakistan Time)

Saturday, September 8, 2001 'C'

Main conference room

Pakistani Parliament building, Islamabad

Pakistan

To say that the atmosphere inside the large conference room was tense and agitated would have been a gross understatement. Most of the eleven men present wore military uniforms but a few were in civilian suits. The voice levels of the 'discussion' was quite high, with the military men in particular prone to nearly shout at the ones contradicting them. However, the room fell mostly silent when a junior army officer manning the telephones answered a call after a short hesitation: an earlier call to the Prime Minister's office had warned that an important call from an American military officer would come in at the Parliament's main conference room at this hour and had enjoined that Pakistani leaders be in attendance. However, with many of the top military leaders now dead, crushed inside their destroyed headquarters buildings or operations centers, most of the men present were mere deputies.

"Hello?"

The junior officer then heard the voice of one of the telephone operators of the Parliament building.

"Sir, I have an incoming call from Kabul, for the quote 'government of Pakistan', unquote. Shall I switch it to you, sir?"

"Please do, miss." replied the young captain, who then put the call on 'speaker' and raised the volume to the maximum as the noise of the line being transferred was heard. A female voice then came out of the telephone set, speaking in English.

"This is General of the Army Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Afghanistan Theater of Operations. I wish to speak to the present leader of the Pakistani government and to his cabinet."

"One moment, please!" replied the captain, who then looked at the ten men now staring at him and the telephone: in truth, the question of who was now truly in charge in Pakistan, with so many leaders of the military junta now dead, was a contentious one indeed. The deputy prime minister of the junta and deputy of the now dead Lieutenant General Nasir Zarfat, who had led the military coup against the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Sharif, then spoke into his own telephone set.

"This is Major General Hazeem Farhat, Deputy Prime Minister of Pakistan's Supreme Defense Council. I am presently with the surviving leaders of my government."

"You will do, General Farhat." said the female voice on the phone as if she was simply stating a simple fact. "I am calling now to give an ultimatum to Pakistan, in the name of the United States of America. Before you protest the goal of my call, hear me out and listen well, as I won't repeat myself. You don't want me to hang up right now, General Farhat."

Farhat swallowed the hard ball in his throat before replying to that: he was now speaking with a woman whose fearsome reputation as a military leader and strategist was legendary around the World and who had beaten to submission such foes as Russia and Communist China.

"We are listening, General Dows."

"Good! To resume things as they happened during the last two months, the armed forces of the United States entered Afghanistan after the then Taliban government of Afghanistan refused to hand over to us the Al-Qaeda terrorists who murdered over 3,500 innocent American civilians. The Taliban also declared their support and protection for those Al-Qaeda leaders sheltering inside Afghanistan with their followers. As you know already, that decision by the Taliban to shield Al-Qaeda leaders cost them dearly, with the Taliban surviving leaders either in hiding or in exile

inside Pakistan. Unfortunately for Pakistan, your military, which had been supporting both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, refused to cut that support and took over by force the government of Prime Minister Sharif when the latter tried to bring some sense to the Pakistani military leaders. Your Lieutenant General Zargat then compounded that stupidity by quote 'declaring war' on the United States forces in Afghanistan. Well, you now know what declaring war on the United States can bring to you, General Farhat. You have now lost your nuclear arsenal, your fleet of combat aircraft, your various primary military headquarters and your main ammunition depots across Pakistan, and I am far from finished, I assure you."

"And what exactly do you want from us, General Dows?"

"What the United States want are the Al-Qaeda leaders hiding and sheltering inside Pakistan, starting with Osama Bin Laden, plus the surviving Taliban government leaders. We also want all the training camps used by both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to train their fighters and terrorists to be forcibly closed and destroyed by the Pakistani Army. Your ISI, whatever is left of it, is to stop for good any support it was providing to the Taliban and to Al-Qaeda and to cease its destabilizing activities in Afghanistan. Better still, you could defang your ISI and abolish it, thus eliminating a major factor of instability in the region. Your fears of potential Indian influence in Afghanistan were nothing more than a smokescreen for the ISI's quest for political power, as its recent coup demonstrated. Finally, Pakistan will have to regain full control of its Pashto tribal territories along the border with Afghanistan, so that surviving Taliban forces could no longer attack us. Pakistan has been abdicating its authority in those border regions for far too long already and letting chaos and anarchy reign inside your tribal territories. If you don't do that, then the United States will do it for you via a long-term campaign of air and missile bombardment. As of now, you probably noticed that our bombardment has stopped at eight o'clock this morning. That is however only temporary and your response to my ultimatum will decide its termination or continuation. If by tomorrow at noon you have not started handing over to us the Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders sheltering inside your country, then our bombardment program will resume, with four fresh missile strikes every hour on Pakistan. Our strikes will be aimed only at military targets and at the infrastructures supporting your military. Civilian infrastructures and population centers will not be targetted by us, as our war is not against the Pakistani people but against religious extremists and fanatics supported by your military. The targets for our hourly strikes will not be announced in advance and may happen around

the whole of your country, and this until you start handing over to us those Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. The moment you start handing those bastards to us, I will suspend my bombardment program until I can see that you are being serious about addressing my ultimatum. If you refuse and persist in protecting the Taliban and Al-Qaeda assets located inside your country, then the United States will continue its bombardment campaign and will throw the whole of Pakistan back to the Stone Age. Know that I have already talked with the Government of India and have obtained a pledge that the India armed forces will not use our bombardment campaign to attack Pakistan. Instead, the Indian armed forces will simply hold their present border with Pakistan. Thus, your army units manning the border with India will be free to go clean up and restore order inside your tribal territories. That is the gist of my ultimatum, General Farhat. Think well before rejecting it.”

“But that’s pure tyranny on the part of the United States, General Dows! No country should have the right to impose such conditions on another country and...”

“YOU WANT TO SEE IF I AM SERIOUS ABOUT THIS ULTIMATUM, GENERAL FARHAT? DON’T PUSH YOUR LUCK! I WANT TO SEE AL-QAEDA AND TALIBAN LEADERS ARRIVE IN HANDCUFFS AT YOUR BORDER POINTS IN SPIN BOLDAK AND AT THE KHYBER PASS BY NO LATER THAN NOON TOMORROW. GOODBYE!”

The line was then cut, leaving a most flustered Farhat to stare at his telephone. He then looked around at the other men in the room, utterly unable to take such a weighty decision by himself.

“I am afraid that this young woman is not bluffing, my friends. We better decide on our response to her ultimatum, and quickly.”

10:34 (Afghanistan Time)

Sunday, September 9, 2001 ‘C’

Afghan border post, west of the Khyber Pass

Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan

“LIEUTENANT, A PAKISTANI MILITARY CONVOY IS APPROACHING!”

Alerted by one of her marines, Greta Visby ran out of the small sandbag bunker which had been built next to the ruins of the original border post hut, closely followed by Major Roger Snider, the intelligence officer for the Sixth Marine Regiment. Using her binoculars

once next to the road chicane of the border crossing, she examined quickly the small convoy of four Pakistani Army light vehicles approaching the border post.

"They are flying a white flag, sir. We may be about to get some good news, in view of the hour for their coming."

"You may be right, Lieutenant Visby. God, it would really be nice if the Pakistanis truly decided to obey our ultimatum."

"It would certainly save the lives of many of our soldiers if this could shorten our stay in Afghanistan, Major."

Snider gave her a cautious look on hearing that.

"Even if the Pakistanis comply with the terms of our ultimatum, we will still need to clean up Afghanistan of those Taliban barbarians: they were a true cancer for this country. We still need in particular to sanitize the Kandahar Province, which was their spiritual bastion and birthplace. That fight will need quite a few more weeks to get it to a favorable conclusion."

That poured a cold shower over Greta's spirits, as she fully realized how hard that fight could prove to be.

"And once the Taliban will have been eradicated, sir, what next? Who will govern Afghanistan? Us?"

"Hell no! Neither General Dows nor President Bush wants to stay longer than necessary in this shithole of a supposed country. It is too divided into ethnic groups which generally distrust and hate each other and still harbors a number of power-hungry warlords, each vying to control as much of the country as they could. I understand that General Dows is presently working on a possible solution to that problem."

"General Dows..." said Greta in a thoughtful tone. "Where would be our country if not for her past services?"

"If not for her, Lieutenant, the United States would be a radioactive wasteland. Only her insightful defensive plans saved our country from that Russian sneak nuclear attack using submarines launching missiles from inside our coastal waters in 1996. She truly deserves a place of honor in our historical pantheon."

Greta could only nod in agreement at that while watching the Pakistani vehicles roll slowly towards the road chicane of her border post. The lead vehicle, a Toyota jeep, stopped some ten paces short of the chicane, with a Pakistani officer and two soldiers then stepping out of their vehicle. A big grin appeared on Snider's face when the

Pakistanis pulled out of the jeep a tall and thin bearded man wearing shackles around his wrists and ankles.

“Osama Bin Laden! Now we’re talking!”

Snider then signaled to the strong party of marines he had brought with him from Jalalabad to come forward and be ready to take charge of the prisoner. Closely followed by Greta, Snider then walked to the Pakistani officer, a major, who was escorting Bin Laden. Both men and Greta exchanged salutes before the Pakistani officer spoke up in good English, his expression most sober.

“My government has decided to comply with the terms of your ultimatum. However, neither Al-Qaeda nor the Taliban surrendered to us without a fight. Our troops are in fact still battling it out with those still refusing to surrender. We also had to fight when we went to arrest Osama Bin Laden and lost a few of our own men.”

“I am truly sorry to hear that, Major, but I believe that your country will be better off without those murderers and terrorists. Who else did you catch, apart from Bin Laden?”

The Pakistani officer pointed at another prisoner being taken out of a second jeep and at five body bags being pulled out of the back of a pickup truck.

“Our second live prisoner is a man named Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was the chief of operations for Bin Laden. In the fight at their local hideout, we killed five other Al-Qaeda staff members. We will leave their bodies with you, along with Bin Laden and Sheikh Mohammed.”

“Excellent! Let me go formally identify them, then you will be able to go back to your side of the border.”

With eighteen marines following him, Snider then used a photo file he had with him to positively identify the two live prisoners and the five dead men. Each body bag was then picked up by two marines and carried to a waiting pickup truck, while four marines each escorted Bin Laden and Sheikh Mohammed to two separate vehicles. With the handover complete, Snider and Greta shook hands with the Pakistani major before the latter left with his small party. Snider was still smiling as he walked back to his own vehicle, in which Bin Laden sat between two big marines.

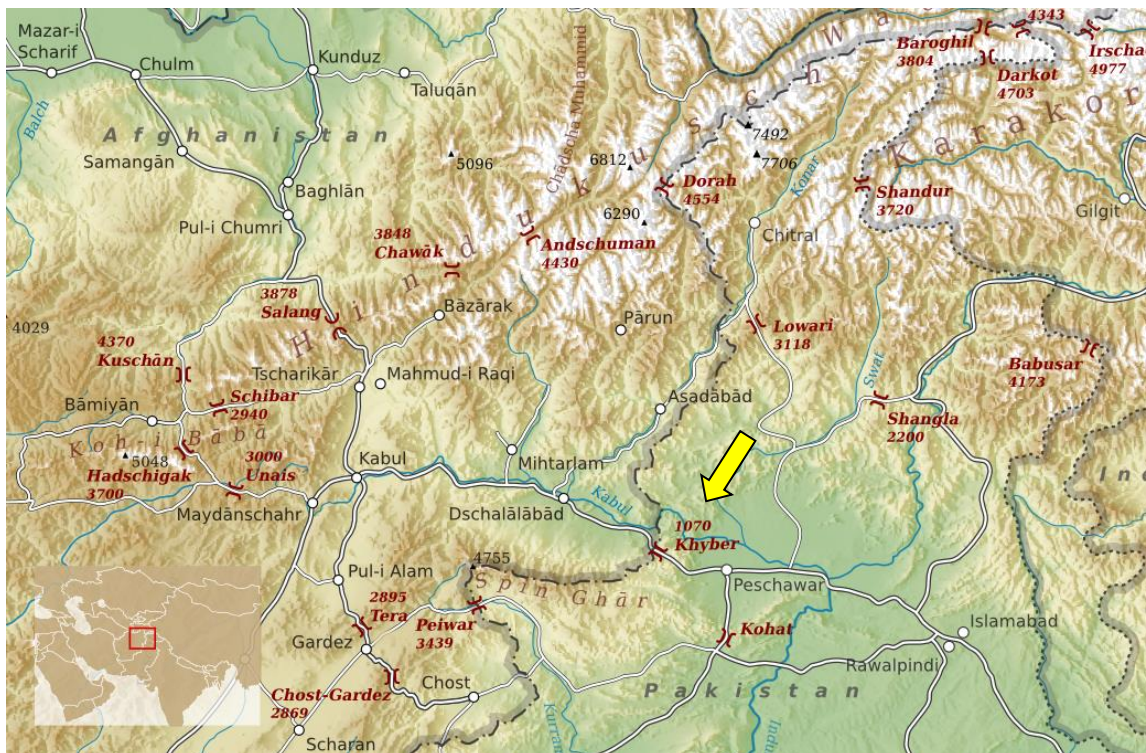
“This is decidedly a good day for our country, Lieutenant, as justice will be done for the deaths of our murdered citizens. Hopefully, our border post in Spin Boldak will also get prisoners today. On this, have a good day, Lieutenant.”

Feeling truly good now, Greta saluted Snider one last time, then watched his pickup truck and its escort vehicles leave towards Jalalabad.

“May this war be over soon: there has already been too many deaths here.”

She was going to learn later that a number of Taliban high-level leaders and of their supporters were brought just after noon to the American post in Spin Boldak. However, none of them arrived alive, with some arriving in pieces, having been blown to bits when they had resisted the assault of their command posts and hideouts by Pakistani mechanized units. Then, the true hard work, that of cleansing Kandahar Province from the presence and influence of the Taliban, started in earnest, spearheaded by a total of over 2,100 American special forces teams from the Navy S.E.A.L., Army Green Berets, Delta Force and Rangers, backed up by 6,000 American paratroopers.

CHAPTER 22 – GOING HOME



08:50 (Afghanistan Time)

Tuesday, October 30, 2001 'C'

Afghan border post, west of the Khyber Pass

Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan

Having been warned in advance by radio, Greta was standing at the border post road chicane when a small convoy led by two Marine Corps light trucks braked to a stop near it, having come from the direction of Jalalabad. About forty Afghan fighters then jumped out of their pickup trucks as her battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Walters, came to her, along with one armed Afghan. Greta's attention went at once to the Afghani, a fit and handsome man of medium height with long black hair and green eyes. The man walked with confidence and had a friendly smile on his face, while his eyes detailed Greta with obvious interest. As per combat habit, Greta did not salute when Walters stopped in front of her, instead coming to attention.

"Second Lieutenant Greta Visby, ready to report, sir!"

"At ease, Lieutenant!" replied Walters before pointing to Greta the armed Afghan who had accompanied him. "This is Commander Rustam Massoud, of the Northern Alliance forces. His unit will take over this border post from your platoon today."

Greta exchanged a handshake with Massoud, who was clearly surprised by how strong her grip was for a woman. He then spoke in an English which proved to be more than decent.

"So, I finally get to meet the famous Lioness of the Khyber Pass. You certainly look the part."

"Me, famous?" said Greta, not a little surprised. "And who is calling me this, Commander Massoud?"

"The men of the Northern Alliance, Lieutenant. You have built quite a reputation as a dangerous fighter while defending this border post."

"Uh, I owe my success to my marines, Commander Massoud. Without them, I would be nothing."

Massoud nodded his head approvingly at those words.

"I see that you are no glory seeker and care about your men, Lieutenant. I like that."

That was when Walters slipped into their conversation.

"To resume the present situation, Lieutenant Visby, now that the Taliban has been thoroughly defeated throughout Afghanistan and that the Al-Qaeda leaders are in our hands, the Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Massoud, which is allied with us, will be taking control of the northern half of Afghanistan, including the Nangarhar Province and this border point. This will in turn allow our own forces to withdraw from Afghanistan while leaving this country under the control of a coalition of non-Pashto leaders ready to prevent any return in force of the Taliban. A PELICAN will land here this afternoon to return your platoon to the NEPTUNE, after you will have briefed Commander Massoud about the situation and layout of your border post."

"And once we are on the NEPTUNE, sir? Will it sail back to the United States?"

"Our marines will be effectively returning home after having fought in Afghanistan for nearly four months, Lieutenant."

"They will certainly be happy about that, sir. Unfortunately, not all of us will be returning to our families and friends."

A sober expression came to Walters' face and he nodded slowly once.

“Too true, Lieutenant. Your platoon lost a total of ten men killed and five more wounded in combat, or about a third of its strength, if I remember correctly. However, your platoon and yourself performed your duties in a most exemplary manner. Be assured that their service in combat will be rightly acknowledged and rewarded. Well, with this said, I will now return to Jalalabad to prepare the withdrawal of our battalion. Make sure that you brief Commander Massoud thoroughly before you leave with your platoon this afternoon.”

Greta came back to attention as Walters turned around and returned to his vehicle, leaving her with Commander Massoud. She waited until the two marine vehicles had left before smiling to the Afghan fighter.

“Colonel Walters said that your Northern Alliance is led by Ahmad Shah Massoud. Are you related to him?”

“I am his nephew, Lieutenant.” answered the man with obvious pride. “My uncle is possibly the greatest Afghan fighter who ever lived and I always wanted to become a fighter like him, so I trained as a fighter since my youth. The fighting of the last few months and years against the Taliban and their terrorist allies was hard but I was able to prove myself as a fighter and to make my family proud.”

Greta nodded her head while discretely admiring the handsome face and sparkling green eyes of the young man.

“You certainly look the part, Commander. Well, if you could assemble your men, I will then show my positions to you and them, so that they can become familiar with the grounds around this post. You will excuse me if I can’t speak to them in your language: I was only able to pick up a few words here and there during the last months.”

“That you even tried to learn our languages is a credit to you, Lieutenant. In truth, we Afghans speak over half a dozen different languages and most of us can’t understand people who come from other parts of the country. In the territories controlled presently by the Northern Alliance, the main languages are Tajik, Uzbek and Dari, while Pashto and Baluch are mostly spoken in the South and East of Afghanistan.”

“And...will you be able to govern Afghanistan as a country?” asked Greta, having serious doubts about that. Massoud’s slow shake of the head confirmed her thoughts.

“I am afraid that there is too much ingrained, long-standing mistrust between our various tribes and ethnic groups in Afghanistan to realistically think that my country can truly unite at last, Lieutenant. From what I heard from my uncle before coming here, your General Dows is presently speaking with the various leaders and warlords who had

been opposing those murderous Taliban bastards, with the intended goal of turning Afghanistan into a loose confederation of tribal provinces where each ethnicity will finally be able to govern itself according to its respective laws and customs. While some will lament the passing of Afghanistan as a unified country, I believe that your General Dows has understood the basic pertinent facts concerning Afghanistan and its tumultuous history. King Zahir Shah will be officially reestablished as a monarch but he and his successor will have only a symbolic role and will mostly act as an arbiter of disputes between our various ethnic groups and tribes.”

Greta nodded her head at that but kept to herself the questions she had about the future role and actions of the United States concerning Afghanistan. Too often, American soldiers were called to fight and die in other countries in the name of American interests, only to see opportunistic or short-sighted American politicians spoil a hard-won victory on the ground by making stupid, ill-informed geo-political decisions.

“I understand. Well, time for me to show you my unit’s deployment on the ground.”

Massoud nodded once himself, then shouted out orders in Tajik to his men, making them congregate around him before following Greta around the border post positions.

When the time came for Greta and her marines to fly out on the PELICAN that had just landed at the vertical near the border post, she exchanged a last handshake with Rustam Massoud in front of the waiting VTOL transport.

“I wish that your country will know peace from now on, Commander.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant Visby. I also must thank your marines for the sacrifices they made to chase those Taliban and Al-Qaeda bastards out of Afghanistan. We will honor the memory of your dead.”

“Thank you, Commander: that will count for a lot to me. Well, I now have to go before my pilot loses patience and flies out without me.”

Massoud smiled at her attempted joke.

“You would be most welcomed here if you ended staying here, Lieutenant. You are one remarkable woman...and a pretty one at that.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Commander Massoud.” replied Greta, making Massoud laugh briefly. She then saluted Massoud at attention, with the Afghan fighter returning her salute, then turned around and walked to the rear cargo ramp of the waiting PELICAN. Massoud watched her climb inside the big aircraft, then followed the

PELICAN with his eyes as it lifted off and flew away. He sighed to himself as the aircraft disappeared in the distance.

“By Allah! I will never be able to find another woman like her. I wish that I could have met her sooner.”

CHAPTER 23 – WASHINGTON DEBRIEF

21:13 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, November 21, 2001 'C'

**The D.C. Five's mansion, Woodland Drive Northwest
Woodley Park District, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**



Nancy, sandwiched between Carmen Estrada and Erika Lang, was watching the evening televised news in the big lounge of their mansion when someone rang the entrance doorbell. Erika, a girl with typically fast reflexes and an impetuous character, immediately jumped out of their sofa and ran to the entrance lobby while speaking out.

“I’LL GET THAT!”

“You better check first if it is not another religious nutcase or someone coming to get a miracle healing before opening the door, Erika.” shouted back Nancy. In truth, those two categories of persons had become way too frequent around her as her notoriety as a half-celestial widened around the country and the rest of the World. While continuing to listen to the news program, which was presently talking about the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Nancy kept an ear up for who Erika was going to encounter at the entrance door. A joyful shout from her friend then made her heart jump in her chest.

“NANCY, YOUR MOTHER IS HERE!”

Both she and Carmen jumped on their feet, to then run to the entrance. There, Nancy found Ingrid just inside the door, with a military kit bag, a suitcase and a rifle case lying on the floor at her side. Ingrid was still wearing her military uniform bearing her rank insignias of General of the Army but fatigue was clearly visible on her still young-looking face. Nancy went to her at once and hugged and kissed her with passion, with Ingrid warmly returning her hug and kisses.

“Mom, it is so nice to see you again. Thank The One that you are still in one piece after those months in Afghanistan.”

“And it is nice to be able to hug you again, Nancy. I just arrived from Afghanistan on a military plane less than one hour ago at Andrews Air Force Base, after flying nearly

non-stop for thirteen hours. I am bushed, so I came here to see if I could spend the night here before reporting to the White House tomorrow morning.”

“Are you kidding, Mom? You don’t need to ask permission to come here, ever! Let us carry your luggage upstairs to the V.I.P. guest room.”

Erika and Carmen immediately grabbed Ingrid’s bags before she could protest, leaving her free to follow Nancy towards the grand staircase of the mansion.

“So, I suppose that you will again hang up your uniform and return to your civilian life on the West Coast, Mom?”

“Eventually, Nancy. However, there are a few things which I will need to take care of before I could return to Port Angeles.”

“Oh?! What kind of things? I thought that you managed to convince the Afghans to form a loose confederation of tribal provinces. According to the latest news, that confederation seems to be holding together well enough.”

“What I still need to fix is here in the States, not in Afghanistan, Nancy. Our intervention there has highlighted some deficiencies which still exist in our military chain of command and which needs to be addressed by me. Also, some at the State Department are apparently pissed about the fact that I negotiated a deal with Afghan leaders without getting their consent first.”

“Screw those idiots at the State Department! They think that they know everything about geopolitics but, compared to you, they are just blundering amateurs.”

“My thought exactly, my dear daughter.” replied Ingrid, a sarcastic smirk on her lips.

Going up the monumental Grand Staircase, the group soon arrived at the V.I.P. guest room of the mansion, a large suite with its own private bathroom and study. There, Erika and Carmen put down Ingrid’s luggage beside the king-sized bed of the bedroom, with Nancy eyeing her mother’s face.

“You really look tired, Mom. A good shower and lots of sleep should do you good.”

“That it would. A hot shower will also help my muscles relax: they are all knotted up after these long hours spent sitting in a military grade passenger seat.”

Erika’s left eyebrow rose on hearing that and she got closer to Ingrid, an inviting smile on her lips.

"Maybe we could massage you after your shower, Ingrid, so that you could fully relax before going to sleep."

Ingrid grinned back at Erika, understanding at once her real intentions behind her offer of a massage. Erika, like the other members of the band, had become a bisexual girl after having the souvenirs from her past incarnations return to her mind via Nancy's intervention. Before that, Erika had been a straight lesbian. Ingrid, herself a bisexual woman thanks to her past incarnations' memories, raised her left hand and caressed Erika's cheek with it, making the drummer girl shiver with desire.

"I will gladly accept a massage from you...and from Carmen as well. I however expect Nancy and Lucy to pass on that: as my official daughters, it would be inappropriate for me to ask for their attention."

In response, Nancy crossed her arms and threw a critical look at her mother.

"And what would be inappropriate about helping my own mother to recuperate from a long air trip? I follow The One, not that hypocritical book written thousands of years ago by a bunch of ignorant, misogynistic men."

"Well, if you put it that way..." replied Ingrid.

10:58 (Washington Time)

Thursday, November 22, 2001 'C'

The Situation Room, The White House

Washington, D.C.



There was a mix of anxiety, curiosity and expectation, along with a steady exchange of whispered conversations between the 21 men and one woman sitting around the long conference table, as they waited for President Bush to arrive for this unscheduled meeting of the National Security Council. The composition of those present actually differed from the usual NSC list of members, as all the military services chiefs of staff were present in addition to General of the Army Harold Sherman. The President's senior political advisor, Karl Rove, was also present, despite not being on the formal NSC list. Among the participants to the meeting, General Sherman was particularly nervous, as he had an inkling about the goal of this meeting. He knew that President Bush was displeased with him because of his perceived poor command performance before and during the Afghanistan crisis. He also knew that General Ingrid Dows was due to participate in this meeting as well as a main briefer. Those two facts didn't portend well for Sherman, as the unceremonious sacking of General Brubaker in Afghanistan at Dows' hands possibly announced concerning his own position. Sherman was not alone about being anxious concerning what was going to be said in this meeting, with a number of cabinet members and presidential advisors having recently seen their advice or opinions rejected by President Bush, apparently because of the counsels he had received from Ingrid Dows.

"Lady and gentlemen, the President of the United States!"

On the announcement by a Secret Service agent guarding the entrance door of the Situation Room, all present rose from their seats as George W. Bush walked in the room, closely followed by a very young and very beautiful woman in military uniform. Sherman, like the other NSC members, knew that this 'young woman' was in reality 76 years-old, a fact further affirmed by the impressive number of military medal ribbons covering the upper left chest of her Space Corps going-out uniform, medals which denoted a long and very distinguished military career. George Bush sat down in his presidential chair at one end of the table, then had an aide bring forward a spare chair, so that Ingrid could sit next to him, to his right. The NSC members didn't miss the significance of that move by itself, as it clearly indicated the degree of confidence the President had in Ingrid Dows. Bush, his expression most serious, then started speaking to the NSC members sitting around the table.

"Lady and gentlemen, I called this unscheduled meeting of the National Security Council so that General Dows, freshly returned from Afghanistan, could brief us all on

the present situation there. Please note that, prior to this meeting, I was personally debriefed by General Dows in the Oval Office and discussed with her the results and findings from Operation AFGHAN EXORCISM. General Dows will now debrief you on that subject. General Dows...”

‘Shit! This means that whatever Dows will say now will have been already approved by the President.’ thought Sherman. From the facial reactions of others around him, he was probably not the only one to come to that conclusion, with a few apparently not being pleased by that. Ingrid, who had connected a small flash drive stick to the computer terminal facing her seat while Bush had introduced her, then started speaking in her melodious voice, which sounded like that of a teenage college girl.

“Lady and gentlemen, what you now see on the main video display screen of this room is a map of Afghanistan showing the new tribal and provincial borders of the country. I said ‘country’ but, as of now, Afghanistan is no longer a single country under a single government. It is from now on going to be known as a loose confederation of three distinct entities: the Northern Alliance Federation, which governs the northern half of the country and which is itself formed of a patchwork of eight ethnocentric provinces; The Baloch Southern Province, which runs along the southern border with Iran and Pakistan; and the Pashtun Territories, occupying the center and the East of the country bordering Pakistan. Acting as a figurehead and arbiter for these three new entities is King Zahir Shah, whose job will be to help reconcile any dispute or problems which could arise between the entities. Please note that the Pashtun Territories, which were the birthplace of the Taliban and where we encountered the most armed resistance, will have no central government of their own and will consist of separate, autonomous tribal areas loosely connected together. This was meant to prevent the return in force of the surviving Taliban forces still sheltering in Pakistan. If the Taliban, with or without Pakistani support, try in the future to retake control of the Pashtun Territories, then the Northern Alliance and the Baloch Southern Province will intervene militarily and block them from reestablishing themselves in the country. To further prevent any return in force of the Taliban, our forces conducted a wide and thorough search of the Pashtun Territories before they departed the country, in order to find and destroy all the weapons of war in those territories. Furthermore, the eastern border crossing points with Pakistan will be guarded by non-Pashto units who will ensure that no new weapons could be infiltrated from Pakistan in the future. Only legitimate hunting-style weapons, like

shotguns and bolt-action rifles, will be allowed to be sold or imported inside the Pashtun Territories.”

“And what if Pakistan decides to try again to interfere with the internal affairs of Afghanistan, General?” asked Condoleezza Rice, the President’s National Security Advisor. That question brought a thin smile to Ingrid’s face.

“I doubt that the Pakistanis will even try to interfere again in Afghanistan or to openly support the remnants of the Taliban sheltering inside Pakistan, Miss Rice. We have already destroyed their whole nuclear arsenal and their nuclear research and weapons production center, most of their air force and over half of their military bases and naval facilities. What is left of the Pakistani military is now concentrated along their eastern border with India, nervously fearing that the Indians will use this golden opportunity to bring the hammer down on Pakistan. However, I already spoke by telephone with the Prime Minister of India and with the Chief of Staff of the Indian Armed Forces, who promised me that, while they will keep a strong presence along their western border, they will not attack Pakistan unless attacked by the Pakistanis.”

That last sentence from Ingrid nearly made Secretary of State Colin Powell jump out of his seat with indignation.

“By what right did you make such arrangements with the Indian government without consulting first my department, General? Foreign affairs is the business of the State Department, not that of the Department of Defense.”

Apparently not impressed or deterred by Powell’s angry outburst, Ingrid threw a cold stare at him while replying in a firm, strong voice.

“Secretary Powell, please remember that I was named by the President as commander of the Afghan Theater of Operations, which included the countries surrounding Afghanistan, with full plenipotentiary powers, both diplomatic, military and political. Unity of command and swiftness in decision-making and execution was key to the success of our operation in Afghanistan. Waiting for your State Department to ‘study’ and ‘discuss’ what to do about Pakistan would have cost us precious weeks, if not months, a delay that would have cost us many more American lives in an already difficult and bloody campaign.”

“You still could have informed us of your plan first, General. The State Department is not the only one in Washington to have been taken by surprise by your initiatives.” said Karl Rove, the senior political advisor for President Bush, jumping into the fray. “It is the business of the Executive Branch to take such decisions, as it was

elected to do so. You, on the other hand, were never elected by the American people and should have let the Executive take such weighty decisions, General.”

Ingrid had a hard time not to let her contempt show up then but she managed to respond in a measured voice to Rove.

“You are correct in that I was never elected to any official position by the American people, Mister Rove. Instead, I was selected and put in command by a succession of American presidents, and this since the end of World War 2. If I ever chose to present myself as a candidate for an elected office, I am pretty sure that the American people will not hesitate to vote me in whatever office I choose to run for. The only exception would be the presidency since, as a foreign-born person, I would be constitutionally ineligible for that post. However, I am not interested in running for any political office and never will be: I am plenty satisfied in serving to defend American citizens, the United States and its constitution from its enemies. That is what I did with maximum effect and success while commanding in Afghanistan. If you have a bone with that, then feel free to take that subject to the President. He is our Commander in Chief and the head of the Executive Branch and he agreed with my initiatives.”

That retort and the quiet way President Bush seemed to agree with it killed at once any other attempted protestations about Ingrid’s initiatives in Afghanistan, something that allowed her to continue to give her briefing without further interruptions. Twenty minutes later, at the end of her exposé, President Bush declared the meeting open to questions and discussions. The first question asked then came from the Vice-President, Dick Cheney.

“General, how many American troops are still left in Afghanistan today?”

Ingrid smiled and formed a ‘zero’ with her left hand.

“None, Mister Vice-President! I was the last American to leave Afghanistan, flying out of Kabul Airport in our last transport plane. While many of our troops also flew out of Afghanistan, most of them heading west to refuel in Germany, Iran helped tremendously our withdrawal by allowing our heavy land equipment and artillery pieces to roll out of Afghanistan and to drive through Iranian territory, heading for the Iranian naval base in Bandar Abbas, in the Strait of Ormuz, where our land units will reembark aboard our amphibious landing ships and transports. I was similarly the last American to leave Korea during the First Korean War of 1947, following our defeat there at the hands of the Chinese and North Koreans.”

Cheney nodded at those words, satisfied with her answer. While he had no time for Ingrid's avowed social views, he did appreciate her decisiveness and directness in military operations and planning. A few more questions followed, all asked in a benign tone, before President Bush declared the meeting over. However, before the participants could get up and leave, he added quickly a final directive.

"General Sherman and General Moss, please stay for a moment more: I want to discuss something with you."

Harold Sherman, who had somewhat relaxed on seeing that Ingrid had not mentioned him once during her briefing, felt his nervousness come back at once, while General Peter Moss, the Chief of Staff of the Space Corps, felt confusion and surprise at that unexpected request concerning him. Moss didn't miss the fact that Ingrid Dows also stayed inside the Situation Room, still sitting next to the President. Soon, with all the other participants gone and the door closed, Bush looked coldly at Sherman, who was now sweating.

"General Sherman, I asked you and General Moss to stay because I needed to take care of a major problem in our military chain of command: namely, yourself! You were named as our National Combined Combat Commander, with the rank of General of the Army, in order to replace General Dows when she retired from the military service after 58 years of distinguished service. Your avowed job was to continue to provide our forces with a single, unified voice and direction, in order to maximise our combat efficiency in advance of and during any future war involving our nation. Unfortunately, you repeatedly failed in that goal in my opinion and basically let our higher command revert to the old ways of decisions by committee, which the position of General of the Army and NC3 was meant to prevent. We were successful in Afghanistan because you simply applied an operations plan created years ago by General Dows. However, you nearly soured up that plan by naming the wrong man for the job as Theater Commander, namely Lieutenant General Brubaker. That eventually forced me to recall to service General Dows and to name her as our new Theater Commander in Afghanistan. All this, along with your marked lack of demonstrated initiative, is now forcing me to relieve you of both your position and of your rank of General of the Army. I will thus ask you to retire from the service by tomorrow at the latest."

His face becoming pale and with cold sweat on his forehead, Sherman needed a couple of seconds before he could respond to that.

"But, Mister President, who will replace me? General Dows?"

"No! I promised to General Dows that I would let her return to civilian life after this, unless I encounter problems in finding a replacement for you, in which case she agreed to stay on until your position is occupied again."

Bush then looked straight at Moss, who suddenly understood why he had been asked to stay in the Situation Room.

"General Moss, General Dows warmly recommended you as a replacement for General Sherman. Do you accept to become our new National Combined Combat Commander, with the associated rank of General of the Army?"

With blood rushing to his brain and feeling suddenly hot, Moss took a second before answering the President in a firm voice.

"I accept, Mister President! Thank you for having selected me for such a position."

"Thank General Dows instead, General Moss: she was the one who convinced me to name you to this post. Congratulations, General of the Army Peter Moss. General Sherman, you may now leave."

The catastrophed Sherman saluted Bush at attention, then walked out of the Situation Room, leaving Moss alone with Ingrid and the President. Ingrid then uttered a curt order.

"General Moss, Atten...tion!"

She then took out of the belt purse of her female Space Corps uniform a small box and opened it before presenting it to Bush, who took out of it a five-star rank insignia of General of the Army. Moss stayed at rigid attention as Bush replaced his current four-star insignia with the new insignia and then replaced as well the insignia on his other shoulder pad. At the end of the process, Bush offered his right hand to Moss, who firmly shook it.

"Thank you again for your confidence in me, Mister President."

"It was my pleasure, General Moss."

Next, Ingrid shook hands as well with Moss while smiling widely to him.

"It couldn't happen to a nicer guy, Peter. I will be able to sleep in peace now, with you at the top of the Pentagon. I would gladly have gone to the mess with you to celebrate this with a cold beer but I need to fly back home to Port Angeles this afternoon."

"But, you will be a passenger then, no?"

“Not for that flight, Peter. President Bush decided to thank me with a last gift on this, and hopefully final, retirement: I will get to fly myself to Port Angeles in a twin-seater F-95 supersonic fighter-bomber. Honestly, I prefer that to any new medal he could give me.”

That brought a smirk on the President’s face as he threw an amused look at her.

“And what tells you that I was not planning to add a medal to that parting gift, Ingrid? You will get what was coming to you, my valorous friend.”

CHAPTER 24 – ON A NEW PATH

14:10 (East Coast Time)

Monday, December 10, 2001 ‘C’

**Office of the battalion commander, First Battalion of Sixth Marine Regiment
Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, U.S.A.**

Greta Visby felt nervous as she was introduced into the office of her battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Walters: she was guessing that this had to do with her requested choice of studies program, which she needed to follow and complete in order to formalize her new status as a commissioned officer. Her nervousness increased when she saw that the regimental career managing officer, Major Rhonda Myers, was present in the office, sitting in an easy chair set to one side of Walters' desk. Stopping three paces in front of her commander's desk, she then saluted him at attention while announcing herself.

“Second Lieutenant Greta Visby, reporting as ordered, sir!”

“At ease, Lieutenant!” replied Walters after returning her salute. “I believe that you already know Major Myers, right?”

“Correct, sir!”

“Then, you must be guessing that you were called in about your choice of bachelor degree program and school you presented to Major Myers for approval?”

“Yes, sir! Is it approved, sir?”

Walters smiled to her before answering, visibly making her wonder for a moment more.

“It has been approved, Lieutenant. I myself judged your choice of academics to be most relevant for a young officer's career, as it should bring very useful skills to the Corps. As for choosing to study at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, I am happy that you found a place to study where you will feel truly at home in every sense. Your family home is in Nome, Alaska, if I remember well.”

“Correct, sir! It is on the coast of Alaska, at about the same latitude where Fairbanks is located. Before that, I was born and lived in Northern Sweden, so the Arctic is my natural home, sir.”

“Good for you, Lieutenant. Again, your choice of a Major in Security and Emergency Management, complemented by a Minor in Military Security Studies, was an excellent choice of academics for a bachelor’s degree. Of course, the Corps will cover the costs of your studies, while continuing to pay your military salary, so you won’t feel any undue financial hardship because of your studies program. There is however one thing that I need to take care of before I let you go on your well-earned pre-studies leave period. CAPTAIN GOMER, YOU MAY COME IN NOW!”

From feeling on the top of the World, Greta suddenly felt anxiety fill her as her company commander walked in the office: what could now possibly happen concerning her? The answer came when Walters got up from behind his desk and walked around it, to stop one pace in front of her. Captain Gomer then presented to him a small, opened box, in which Greta saw the small silver bars of the rank insignias of a first lieutenant. Walters next move was to remove the old golden bars of second lieutenant from her uniform’s collar. Then, he started pinning on her the silver bars while talking to her.

“Lieutenant Greta Visby, you had to take over from your former platoon commander on the very first day of your arrival in Afghanistan. Then, you led your platoon in combat for nearly four months and in difficult conditions, demonstrating courage, resourcefulness, initiative and a high level of leadership skills. Your performance in combat in Afghanistan has convinced me and our regimental commander to do what has been rarely done in the past in the Marine Corps. While you will permanently become a qualified commissioned officer only once you complete your studies and will have received your bachelor’s degree, we could not ignore your valorous service and demonstrated level of leadership and competence shown by you in the field. You will thus be going to study in Fairbanks as a first lieutenant, rather than as a simple second lieutenant. Your pay scale will reflect your new rank level as of today. Congratulations, First Lieutenant Visby!”

Once the two insignias were pinned in place, Walters took one step back and saluted her, imitated by Captain Gomer and Major Myers. Greta saluted back at attention as a fresh rush of blood went to her brain.

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