

## PROLOGUE

Thieves find any and every reason to justify theft. You name it, and it's already been pulled. But you already knew that. During the Viet Nam War the over twenty million-dollar military payroll on Okinawa was paid in cash. It was delivered from base to base...on a single helicopter. Okay, you probably didn't know that.



## CHAPTER ONE

*Near Khe Sanh, South Viet Nam April 7, 1971*

The Viet Cong sniper checked the sun's position. He didn't need the sun to tell him what he already knew. He'd been hiding for more than a couple of hours. He searched through the scope because he wanted a pilot, but in flight suits they all looked the same. *There—three standing beside one of the two helicopters.* He followed them inside. One was getting into the cockpit. He almost chuckled. *A pilot for sure. Three shots and three dead Marines.* He wiped his brow and carefully pushed off the safety. He ignored the sweat burning his eyes; the insects feeding on him, the cramped legs patiently put aside, and he put his finger on the trigger. The mortar attack would commence as soon as he fired. If they could destroy one of the huge helicopters, it would be a great victory. He closed his eyes, inhaled, relaxed, and opened his eye on the scope. He placed the crosshairs on the one in the cockpit.

“Smile, you can do it. Relax.” Jack winked at the kid in the copilot's seat as he held the guy's Kodak Instamatic camera. The new lance corporal had arrived fresh out of

aviation mechanics school, an FNG. He looked like a new guy, eager, asking too many questions. Jack thought it wouldn't take him long before he discovered this war wasn't about protecting anything American. It was all about survival and not letting some incompetent senior officer get you killed. Assholes—every last one of them.

“Hey, Thompson, come on, man; smile. You could even tell your girlfriend you're thinking about becoming a pilot.” Jack cleared his mind, and took the kid's picture. He told Thompson his girl would be impressed, handed Thompson's new Kodak back, and then walked outside.

In the shade of the huge helo, Todd, his copilot, sat reading a letter. He held up a picture.

Jack looked at the picture. The cute blonde smiled back at him.

“This tour, she stays right here.” Todd pointed to his left upper pocket. “My good-luck charm right by my heart. I'll never fly without her.” Jack could tell she gave Toddy hope, because, among other things, on this tour Todd always looked forward to getting his mail.

Jack wished he had someone waiting for him. “You know you're one lucky bastard.”

Toddy looked beyond him concentrating on the hills. “Yeah, I know it. But, those slimy bastards are out there. Probably scoping us out.”

“Screw this war.” Sergeant Pogany, the crew chief, said, walking from the back of the aircraft.

“Hey, Pogy, what's the matter?” Jack asked.

“This war sucks! Being stuck in the Corps sucks!” Pog stuffed the letter in his pocket, and leaned against the stub wing fuel tank. “My mom's taking out a mortgage on the house, ever since Pop's death—well, she needs to pay off all of his business loans. This lousy two hundred bucks a month I get now—”

“Hey, Pogy, I've saved a few bucks—”

“Thanks, Jack, but I need a bunch.” Pog cleared his

throat and looked away.

Suddenly, a tingle shot down Jack's spine. He had felt the impact before he heard the sniper from the hills. The first round went into the cockpit. Jack hit the ground, and rolled. His left shoulder burned. The second round exploded next to where he'd been standing.

Both he and Todd ran for the cockpit. Pog lifted the injured kid out of the seat. "Stay back here with Pog! I'll get it turning." Jack yelled as he shot into the right seat.

"Bullshit," Todd said as he jumped into the bloody left seat. Now they were both easy marks.

A mortar exploded nearby. "Jeez! That's way too close!" Toddy screamed. "As per the brief, let's beat feet!"

Jack's hands flew as he went into the emergency mode. His heart pounded as he turned on the ignition and shoved the start T-handle forward to the auxiliary power plant, the A.P.P. The small jet whined as it lit off and quickly accelerated to a hundred percent. Simultaneously, Todd flipped on the generator switches as Jack depressed the number one engine start button. Slowly the big GE turbine spooled up, at twenty percent. He shoved the engine-control handle forward to the *on* position. Fuel flowed, and finally the engine began to accelerate. And as soon as the starter dropped out, he depressed the number two engine start. *Come on, baby*, he begged. Quickly, at a hundred percent, and with the head spinning, they were good to go. Another mortar impacted too close. Dirt and debris hit Todd's window.

The big airframe shook as the next mortar exploded on Jack's side. He depressed the radio transmit button and said, "Dimmer Six, the double deuce is ready to lift, and—"

Debris from the close impacts quickly mixed in the rotor wash and obscured everything. The dust cleared. The lead helo took off, lifting out of the zone, and left two crewmen wounded on the ground. Jack saw about six or seven Marines running to reach the commanding officer's

departing aircraft. A mortar exploded, knocking several of them down while their commanding officer was already airborne. The next mortar exploded, blowing two of them into the air as if they were rag dolls.

*God damn it! There's at least a couple more to add to the list of Bedford's killed Marines. You chicken shit.*

“Pog, when we get over there, get all of them on board! I’ll be damned if we’re leaving anybody behind.” Jack quickly taxied to the wounded Marines. The red clay pulverized by the mortars made a fine powdery dust that smelled like gun-smoke as the silt infiltrated the cockpit.

Pog and the two remaining crewmen helped the wounded. Jack glanced down at a wounded Marine with a missing leg on a stretcher. His throat burned. Jack’s eyes watered behind his sunglasses, because the wounded Marine looked just like Jack’s brother. *Those poor Marines were slaughtered. Wasted for nothing. Bedford, you bastard, you’re going to pay for this.*

“All right, Jack, we got `em all! You’re good to lift,” Pog shouted as the aircraft shook from a mortar exploding too close to the helo.

Jack added power and departed the zone as he transmitted on the radio, “Dimmer Six, this is the double deuce. Come in, over.”

“Dimmer two two, I’ve warned you for the last time not to use that call sign.”

Jack raised his sunglasses, looked at Todd and mouthed, *I don’t care.*

“Ah, Roger, six. We’ve cleared the zone. You left several wounded Marines.” Jack shot back.

“Two two, come up squadron common, over,” Bedford barked.

Jack double-clicked the mic, acknowledging the last transmission. That radio frequency was for their squadron only, not for the public to hear.

“Two two, are you up?” Bedford demanded.

“Jack, cool it! Be careful,” Todd pleaded. Jack just shook his head.

“Yes, sir, we’re up. You left several wounded behind.”

“Two two, that’ll be enough. Do you hear me?” Bedford yelled.

“Yes sir, but we stayed ... until we ‘evaced all of them.”

“Captain, are you questioning *my* loyalty to the troops?”

“Loyalty? Facts remain—, we have two KIAs that were your crew, and seven wounded, three severely. And they were running toward your aircraft. You ran off without them.”

“That’s enough, Higgins,” Bedford barked. “Not another word. Join up and follow me back to the base.”

“Sir, be advised. We’re going direct to the Sanctuary with the casualties, *over*,” Jack snapped back, flipping Bedford the bird, even though there was no way he could see it.

The silence lasted a lengthy five seconds. “Dimmer two two, this is the last of your insubordination. When you get back to the Marbles, *you* and Captain Emmitt will *immediately* report to my office. Do you understand me?”

“Sir, we understand. As soon as we return to Marble Mountain Air Station, we are to report to your office, suh.” Jack slurred.

Todd glared in disbelief at Jack. Todd raised his visor saying, “Jack, you didn’t have to go there. He knows what he did. He ran.”

“I don’t give a damn, Toddy. This time is too much. We both know what he did in ’68.”

“Jesus Christ, Jack, we both saw him do the same shit back then. But he’ll lie, dance his way around, and we’ll get fucked. Just like he did before. And anybody on squadron common heard you two,” Todd pointed his finger at Jack.

“We’ve got KIA’ed and wounded. He flat-assed ran. He can go to hell; this is the proverbial straw ... .” The aircraft shuddered and bounced around from air turbulence.

“Hang on! Listen—, Jack. I’m on your side. But we’ve got to think this one through. We can’t go off half-cocked. You know how he is.”

Jack exhaled through pursed lips and shook his head. “But, he killed Herb. And what about John and Dennis? Their military disability checks are a disgrace. We both know they aren’t making enough to get by. And,” Jack nodded toward the cabin, “what about today? What will we say to their families?”

“I’m with you a hundred percent, but he can still screw us royally. Cathy and I are getting married. Plus I’ve been accepted to fly for American Air. I’m just saying there’s nothing we can do. Jack, come on; it won’t be just you. He’ll screw us both, and I got a future.”

“Man, don’t worry. It won’t involve you. This’ll just be me.” Jack pointed to his chest.

“Jack, you know better. He’ll swing the axe and we’ll both catch shit.”

“I promise. It won’t. Let’s get these causalities to the boat. I’ll contact Da Nang. I can see the bay up there. Hey, Pog, how are they doing?”

“They’re hangin’ in there, but our new guy, Thompson—, he’s lost a lot of blood.”

“I’ve got her redlined.” Jack answered, noting that the airspeed hovered over the limit.

“Hey, Jack you’re bleeding.” Todd exclaimed.

“Damn, Jack,” Pogy said, entering the cockpit. “I saw we took a hit in the fuel sponson where you were standing. Shit, the sniper must’ve nicked you on your shoulder. Damn.” He leaned closer and smiled, “Just grazed you. My hero. You’ll get another Purple Heart.”

“Who cares?” Jack sighed as he inhaled. “Toddy, you got her.” He gave the controls to Todd.

Jack called Da Nang, and got clearance direct to the helo pad on the *U.S.S. Sanctuary*. They landed and the medevacs were quickly unloaded. Toddy lifted. They were less than

three minutes to the runway at Marble Mountain Air Station, Da Nang, and the confrontation with Bedford.

The deck was stacked against them, and Jack knew it.

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